

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOUR BUSINESS WAS IN DECLINE?

Would you continue to do as you've always done? Or would you look to challenge the status quo? Doing something previously unheard of in your market place in an effort to turnaround your failing business?

Any astute leader would of course opt for the latter; though sadly this common-sense decision is often not the reality. Instead, and particularly so in large corporations, the business chooses to remaining firmly rooted in its industrial ways. Sticking to process, systems and transactions; repackaging old interventions as new which, again, fail to make any real difference to business performance.

For the vast majority, change is an uncomfortable experience. And so rather than stand up and do things differently, it's often easier to avoid the situation, sticking within our comfort zones and carrying on as we have always done. Though how long is this sustainable?

The answer, of course, is not as long as we believe.

To survive long-term, businesses must do something different. They must challenge the market as they know it. Which is exactly what one international pharmaceutical company did when they faced continued decline within a competitive market.



“The CEO of the parent company thought that there might be some benefit in exploring a joint venture in order to get the most out of the declining businesses. By pulling resources and collaborating on some of the projects that were in the pipeline, it was agreed that the new business could be successful if it was given the opportunity. It would have focus, rather than competition”, said the Vice President of the new brand.

AS PART OF THE NEWLY FORMED EXECUTIVE TEAM, YOU MUST HAVE FACED SOME VERY TOUGH BUSINESS ISSUES?

When I joined the organisation in February 2011, there were wide operational challenges within the business. Performance was not where it needed to be and staff engagement and morale were not high. Although we had brought in a new leadership team, there was a historical lack of trust in the top leadership of the business, and a culture of ‘keep your head down and make sure you operate under the radar’.

There were a lot of processes still reminiscent of when the business was smaller, more than 10 years previously. These were no longer appropriate for a company that was getting a lot bigger, with a European outlook. The organisation really needed to grow up and at this point in time, many of the leaders within the functions across the organisation were not as engaged as they should be. As such, leadership and management training were critical yet had not been high up on the priorities for the business.

“The Challenger Spirit was very much the sort of culture that I wanted to inject into the business. I wanted us to be ambitious even when we were successful. I wanted our people to challenge the status quo without fear of repercussions. And I wanted to make sure that as a team we could cope with being in the ‘success limelight’ and not become lazy with success.”



COLLABORATE OR COMPETE

Rather than bury their heads in the sand, this global organisation chose to collaborate with its nearest competitors, who were also experiencing a downturn, and create a new organisation that would open up additional sources of revenue.

To drive this success, the new business recognised it needed to become a completely different type of organisation. Fundamentally, it had to become connected; with high levels of staff engagement who were resolutely committed to the purpose of the business.

“The whole concept of a ‘Challenger’ has been a big thing for the team here. They are high achievers who beat themselves up if it goes wrong. Therefore, we’ve had to really push them; push them to fail and then learn from it. It’s been uncomfortable and did get very intense because they are so passionate about what we do and really care about doing things properly.”

“Yet it worked because Relume were there with kindness, compassion and heart. So even when our people were being really challenged and having to hold very difficult conversations, they were supported. And that support was really appreciated.”

THE CHALLENGER SPIRIT

A Challenger brand, however, is one that keeps a foot inside the current way of working and a foot outside. It uses innovation and creativity to make enhancements to the status quo. Typically, they are neither completely disconnected from the status quo but also not swallowed up entirely by established ways of working.

One of the most powerful elements in a Challenger Spirit is purposeful

instability; deliberately cultivating a degree of challenge and change which puts the organisation and its individuals into a growth zone, somewhere between chaos and the status quo. It is the reaction, and relationship, to this instability which defines a successful challenger from one who is unlikely to progress.

“We want to hold onto this new culture and way of working and so we have appointed Challenger Champions all around the world. They are in different functions, at different levels and are there to keep our culture alive, to keep challenging us and to define how we want to evolve.”



“We went from a declining business to growing very rapidly and becoming very successful within a short space of time. With this, we gained a huge responsibility for delivery of that success and so received far greater attention from our stakeholders as a result. Our people were working every hour to maintain this speed. And so we needed to talk to them about wellbeing and resilience, making sure they could be fully engaged and not burn out. It was important that we pushed people to look at and deal with things a little differently otherwise it could all come crashing down.”

CHALLENGER INTERVENTIONS

When businesses and its leaders are challenged, often it creates a ‘wake up’ within the organisation which ripples out and gathers energy, as people start to relate differently to each other around work issues.

This increased awareness spurs a personal learning journey, where habitual patterns of avoidance of conflict, avoidance of challenge or avoidance of taking empowered action are explored and challenged.

Following this exploration, the pace of change typically intensifies as the Challenger Spirit gathers momentum and conversation is turned into action and action becomes success for the business. Though this can bring its own challenges:

One of the major elements for success, especially when moving people into a completely alien space, is safety. People need to feel safe to experiment, play and try things out. While this environment is created at the point of time the facilitation is taking place, it’s important that once the coaches have left the business this security, openness and new culture remains.

“This wasn’t and couldn’t just be about bettering business performance. We also wanted to better ourselves and make sure our people got a tremendous amount out of it personally.”

For this business, while financially the results have been significant – moving from a single digit profit contribution to the parent company to a 35% contribution, with a forecast of 50% within the next five years – it is the impact upon their people which has been the greatest success:

Some of our people had real profound moments of change in terms of how they saw things, how they responded – both at work and in the real world too. This has universally caught everyone, capturing their imagination. Our people really value the things that Relume has helped them with – we’ve gained far more than we invested.”