

Food retailing chain

The art of bringing change to 115,000 employees

in a process of change

How does one go about engaging 115,000 people in a process of change? That was the question that Sainsbury's – UK's largest food retailer – had to answer as 1993 drew to a close. A series of surveys showed that shoppers were satisfied with Sainsbury's products, but that customer service wasn't rated as highly as might be desired.

Mr. David Sainsbury, CEO, J Sainsbury Plc, UK

“The message that came over loud and clear was that the staff were so busy running the stores that they couldn't find enough time for the customers,” said CEO David Sainsbury in an interview with The Financial Times.

The decision was made to improve Sainsbury's competitive profile through a dramatic improvement in service. That's when Sainsbury's turned to Celemi's UK office.

Celemi's teaching methods are based on Klas Mellander's belief that if you personally experience the reasoning behind a suggested change there is a much better chance you will

arrive at the same conclusions. Mellander calls it “real—life learning.” In contrast to traditional classroom learning, this pedagogical principle can affect large groups of employees in a very short time. The basic concept behind the program that Celemi conducted with Sainsbury's was to encourage each employee to see the store and his or her own job from the perspective of the customer. Sainsbury's customer surveys were “translated” into language that everybody could understand and incorporated into WorkMats simulating different working situations in the stores.

The WorkMat concept was developed by Klas Mellander, and has shown itself to be a highly effective pedagogical tool during the 20 years it has been in use.

Working in discussion groups, employees were encouraged to take the initiative on their own to improve customer service.

This approach has a number of advantages over traditional methods: real—life learning is fast,



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and it gives participants genuine experiences and the chance to arrive at their own conclusions – which means that the knowledge acquired “lives” longer for the learner. It is also a very cost effective approach as it enables large groups to be reached simultaneously and consistently.

With each step, Sainsbury’s employees were able to see that they could affect the company’s future, and their own futures, by taking a different view of their assignments and responsibilities, that is, the view from the customer’s perspective. They were able to see that relatively small changes had a dramatic impact on the level of customer service they provided.

Sainsbury’s today has the ability to maintain a service level that few retailers can match – all for the benefit of the customer.

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Kim Godley
kingodley@changeabilitygroup.com
202-686-6072
www.changeabilitygroup.com

