Chapter 33

New Leader Transition and Acquisition Integration Using an Evidence–Based Action Learning Workshop Influenced by Appreciative Inquiry and Whole Group Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This reflective case history describes an evidence-based organization development intervention conducted for a new division head in a division made up of recently acquired companies. During the workshop, the teams revealed and shared success stories, developed a common evidence-based model of guiding characteristics for continued success, and described current state situations. In order to include the perspectives of all employees, a brief survey focusing on point-of-work needs was sent to every employee in the division. This leader-as-researcher method brought a new level of clarity to decision making, positively engaged the entire division in the process of change, created an enhanced level of transparency across the companies, and formed the basis for greater managerial commitment to evidence-based action.

INTRODUCTION

Underwriters Laboratories (UL) was born from the need for ensuring electrical safety at the Chicago Columbia Exposition of 1893. From the early focus on electrical and fire safety in the United States, the company has grown to a global organization working for a safer world in numerous technologies and applications. UL today has divisions that provide testing, certification, standards development and scientific investigations in all aspects of the product development lifecycle and supply chain stages. On any given day,

employees at UL are testing online gaming performance, credit card transaction security, textiles, chemicals, life jackets, furniture, large appliances, industrial equipment and holiday lighting. They are also engaged in anti-counterfeiting investigations, writing new standards for emerging technologies, and promoting safety for children in schools around the world as Safety Smart ambassadors.

The vision for UL has grown, particularly in the last ten years, through the leadership of CEO Keith Williams, his senior team, and the Board as they have worked to prepare the organization for a more dynamic and increasingly diverse future. One aspect of this change was the creation of a for-profit organization from a more than 100 year old non-profit. While UL is wholly owned by its non-profit parent, the need to be able to react to the rapid changes in the market and to ensure continued business viability required a new operating model, significantly expanded services, and a world-class focus on leadership and employee development.

A significant aspect of the management approach brought to UL by Mr. Williams, who had held senior global roles at General Electric and Medtronic, was his strong focus on leadership development. In 2006, UL established UL University (ULU) as a corporate function directly reporting to the CEO through a Chief Learning Officer (CLO), Patrick Boyle, and embarked upon a significant agenda of leadership development, technical training, and Lean/Sigma continuous improvement.

One of the early programs implemented by Mr. Williams and the ULU team was a four week Global Leader Program (GLP) held in four countries on three continents over the period of approximately eight months. That program, established as a primary organization development intervention, built a cohesive and engaged extended leadership team with the skills and behaviors needed to define and execute on the visionary strategy for future growth. Subsequently a partnership with Yale University created the Executive Leader Program (ELP), a six-week long advanced action-learning based program. These programs and others resulting in ULU being recognized by the Association for Talent Development as a 2016 Best Award winner.

Organization Development at UL starts at the top. For example, conversations about implementing appreciative inquiry included the CEO and CLO. Business leaders are often directly referred by the CEO and senior team to seek support from ULU. Organization Development interventions are delivered typically through regional ULU staff in Asia, North America or Europe/Africa/Middle East and Latin America, although thought leadership for organization development (OD) and the strong link to evidence-based approaches is the responsibility of the Director of Organization Development and Continuous Improvement (OD & CI group) (myself) and a group that includes Lean Sigma Master Black Belts, Ph.D.'s in Learning/OD, and an expert in hazard-based safety engineering.

I joined the team in my role approximately one year prior to the intervention described in this reflective case history. As the leader of the OD & CI group, my role is to grow and develop the global practice of OD at UL and support internal consulting projects as needed. As a long-term adjunct professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has taught OD courses, I am influenced by many OD theorists and practitioners. Included as references are treasured resources I have used for many years. My practice, while always reflecting my training as a researcher and teacher, has become a flexible combination of models and components much more than an example of following a rubric or template. I like to think of it as the art and science of OD. A constant foundation in data and evidence, expressed in a way that works for people and specific contexts. This reflective case history is an example of that approach.

The specific context for this case history was a business unit comprised of four recently acquired software-based companies. There had been limited integration efforts and the previous division head had purposely maintained a somewhat hands-off approach to continue the entrepreneurial energy and not impede positive trajectories. When this leader left the organization, she was replaced by a new President who had held increasingly more complex and responsible positions at UL and attended both the GLP and ELP

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