

case study

Costain: building project management for the future

Costain Group is one of the UK's leading construction companies. As a company, it has a well-defined culture with strong values and a strategy of 'Being Number One' that is designed to ensure a successful future. But that success is, in part, dependant on the skill set of its people.

Whilst migrant workers will provide certain skills needed across Costain and the construction industry in general, it is unlikely that this workforce can provide either the forecasted 88,000 recruits into the sector per year that the '*Blueprint for UK Construction 2006-2010*⁴ report highlights or the skills needed for the middle to senior management roles. This becomes a significant challenge for companies such as Costain.

Jeremy Galpin, Group Learning and Development Manager, comments, "There is a global shortage of people capable of managing complex integrated projects. The construction industry is unlike others, projects are planned to run for many years and require a strong project management team that can get the best out of various diverse stakeholders - in fact strong project management can be the strongest influence as to whether the project is a success or not."

Creating an Academy

Together with Crelos and other partners, Costain tackled this challenge by designing and implementing a Project Management Academy. This facilitates learning, skill development and behavioural change to progress their career within Costain.

With membership of the Academy aimed at all levels of project management staff – from graduate to project director – it is backed by the board: a strong indicator of the importance it is given internally.

The design of the Academy made use of Crelos' five-stage model of behavioural change. This ensures that the Academy members both develop the skills, and the behaviours needed to make the necessary changes.

Stage one – examining the current position

This initial stage of the Crelos model considers the status quo and defines the current situation. During this stage within the Costain project, some of its industry-leading project managers were profiled using a combination of psychometric tests and questionnaires, technical skill assessments and observation. This enabled the Academy designers to clarify and understand the precise combination of knowledge, competence and behaviours that leads to success.

With this 'excellence' as a more precise, tangible, accessible profile, all staff became aware of the goal, what they can do to progress towards it and the contribution that 'excellence' in project management makes to the overall business strategy. And the communication of this was key. Joining the Academy programme requires both nomination and board support, again underlining the importance of the role of the Academy for the future.

Stage two – building awareness of what needs to happen

Upon entering the Academy, members undergo an initial evaluation of their career aspirations, current technical abilities and project management knowledge and experience. Rigorous assessment against the newly-defined role profile helps to provides insight into current capabilities as well as identifying the development and learning needs.

As part of the assessment process within Costain, an innovative development centre is carried out to assess behaviour: it makes use of a fast-moving civil emergency simulation.

¹ ConstructionSkills

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Stage three – preparing to change

A highly personalised development plan is then created to map out progression. This not only outlines the actions that will be taken, but also considers extensively the mental preparation that is needed to begin on the journey. Specific attention is paid to helping the Academy members understand their current mental model, what will need to change to support their development and how success will be measured – whether this is through obtaining professional qualifications, 360 degree feedback or project level metrics.

Stage four – taking action

The fourth, action stage is, by its nature, unique for each member and can include a range of interventions including specific on-the-job assignments, coaching, and off-site development workshops.

Stage five – maintaining the change

Sustaining the behavioural change is crucial to the success of the Academy member. This is supported through continued celebration of success, measurement of outcomes and recognition of achievements. Support from other Academy members is via their own forum and indeed, some of the Academy's first project managers are now acting as mentors for the next enrolment.

The results

The Costain Academy was set up to address a key business need by developing skills and driving change through effective engagement – and, whilst still early days, the program has met expectations internally. Other Academy programs run by Crelos have demonstrated that those individuals who develop the fastest outperform their peers by as much as 20 percent.

As well as internal recognition of the success of the Academy, ConstructionSkills has described it as “a model of best practice project management development in construction.”