

Virtual team uses FIRO tool to improve the quality of its interactions

A remote workforce in an expanding business brings new challenges for a credit ratings provider. How can it help its employees to feel connected to each other and the organization?

Many of the company's managers had 'grown up' with the business, excelling as technical specialists, and were used to working in an efficient, small and close-knit team. With the advent of global expansion, managers were being asked to work in a less synchronous way, and had to find new ways of connecting with colleagues in different locations and time zones. Remote working creates its own special traps and needs, especially when it comes to open and fluid communication.

Additionally, leaders at the top of the organization wanted to find new ways to inspire a more diverse working population, represent the company in a worldwide arena, and ensure that the different work units didn't split off into silos.

To meet these challenges, Daniel Snowden, Assistant VP of Global Operations responsible for talent management, wanted to support staff by giving them tools that would make global and cross-cultural working more fluent. He combined this with a long-term view, encouraging people to start thinking about their interpersonal behaviours from an early stage in their careers, nurturing a future management tier that was fully equipped to continue the company's great success to date.

Business Challenges

- Communication for virtual teams and remote workers
- Cross-cultural differences

Company Profile

DBRS is a leading independent credit ratings provider. The company's ratings and opinions give investors objective information with which to make informed investment decisions. Founded in 1976 in Canada, DBRS has seen great and rapid success, expanding from a small family business to a major global player in a tough global industry. They have offices in Toronto, New York, Chicago, London, and Mexico City.

DBRS

Solution

The FIRO® instrument was the tool of choice when creating a solution. Having used the FIRO framework in a previous role at the Foreign Office, he knew it was an accessible way to introduce the concept of behavioural flexibility – with its examination of the behaviour a person displays as well as what they want in return.

“I encourage participants to explore whether they are consistent in the messages they send out, and whether they have control over how others receive these messages,” Snowden explains. “With the FIRO approach, people can instantly recognize why certain interactions are less fulfilling than they should be, and see how to make them better.”

He uses a great metaphor to describe how behaviour can be received where people are working together virtually and across oceans. Behaviour that people give out is experienced as if it were a signal from a lighthouse: clearly visible to those at a distance, increasingly so as the ‘light’ spreads out. Others can see the extremes of your behaviour, but not the shades of grey, leading to a tendency to caricature colleagues, or to fill in the gaps with assumptions – magnifying things that go wrong and sowing the seeds of distrust.

To counter this effect, Snowden ran a FIRO-based session for each of the four city teams. This included a discussion about the benefits and barriers of working as a network group, asking “What gets you really annoyed?” They could quickly list very practical barriers – for example, not seeing progress on projects, not being able to get hold of people, not knowing when they will follow up.

Using the FIRO-B language and concepts, he then encouraged them to explore the impact of the barriers on a deeper level – relating surface irritations to deeper needs. For example, someone who says, “I just want to see their face and make sure what I’m saying is being received and understood” might have a high Wanted need for FIRO-B Affection. Formalizing their perceptions in this way brought them out into the open, allowing a discussion about how to remove the barriers and work better together.

Solution

- FIRO training for teams in different cities

“ With the FIRO approach, people can instantly recognize why certain interactions are less fulfilling than they should be, and see how to make them better. ”

Daniel Snowden,
Assistant Vice President
of Global Operations. DBRS

Snowden also facilitated a discussion about how each team thought they were perceived by the wider organization. The FIRO information helped the participants plan greater efforts to build relationships outside their immediate team, for example through the use of FIRO-B Expressed Inclusion. Action plans were made that focused on practical things they could change to build better relationships.

Results

Snowden found that as well as addressing personality differences, the FIRO concepts helped the participants understand cross-cultural issues. For example, the New York team were much more comfortable with showing emotion (Expressed Affection in FIRO-B terms). Conversely, the UK group were more formal (Expressed Control). This led the US team to see them as distant and detached, whilst the UK counterparts saw their US colleagues as cliquy, a result of the US team having strong personal bonds and a long history together. These revelations started open conversations about what people's real intentions were, beyond the stereotypes.

On the impact of the development, Snowden elaborates: "Usually, when you're imagining how others see you, you start from the inside out, and assume that people see your intention; but with others, you judge them by what comes out, without necessarily thinking about what they meant. The FIRO approach makes people see that others can't always see their intention, and that it's up to them to make sure their outgoing and desired behaviours are consistent."

Since the work, he says that people have learned how to flex, adapting their behaviour to get better results from working with others. There is more interaction across business units, and more proactive communication. Crucially, people now use the FIRO approach to actively bring their performance up to a level where they might be considered for promotion. "People have begun to recognize that there's an inherent value in reflecting on your own performance in a considered and long-term way."

Results

- In-depth understanding of team needs and different personalities
- Better understanding of cross-cultural differences, leading to improved communications
- Learning how to adapt behaviour to get better results from working interactions at work



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