

Enabling a Collaborative Approach to Organization Restructuring

Challenge

Staples is a globally recognized office supply retailer with more than 34,000 employees. Over the course of 35+ years, Staples has navigated changing markets and a competitive landscape to establish itself as a multinational industry leader. In 2013, Staples announced a massive organization restructuring of its European operations, launching what was possibly the largest transformation endeavor in their industry. The changes involved were tremendous in scope and difficulty, including large-scale layoffs and significant revisions of roles and responsibilities. The employees of Staples' European division faced intense pressure and substantial uncertainty, a combination that fueled the buildup of tremendous negative tension within the company. One senior vice president described how he allowed the challenging situation to detrimentally impact his leadership: "I had reverted to my own instincts, was short with my teams, really not patient with them, just wanting to get things done." As a result, he saw that "the teams were getting quieter and quieter, and I was getting less and less feedback." The strain became so pronounced between different locations and operational functions that the president of Staples Europe described it as being virtually "a state of warfare...where people were constantly barraging one another." Under these deteriorating conditions, very little business was being accomplished.

For many Staples' employees, the proposed changes were so far-

reaching that they were difficult to accept. There were high levels of resistance that prohibited real change from taking place. Recognizing that their carefully conceived plan for organization restructuring was doomed to fail without proactive intervention, Staples Europe leadership turned to Arbinger for assistance. They needed a fundamental shift in mindset to cultivate greater collaboration between team members and to inspire employee dedication to a new vision for the company's future.

Solution

Arbinger consultants carefully gathered relevant contextual details to inform their efforts and support Staples' organization restructuring. This information was utilized to design customized workshop sessions for the senior levels of Staples Europe leadership. Arbinger facilitators met with the leadership team every three to six months from June 2013 to January 2015. This format provided flexible, ongoing support adapted to the evolving needs of the transitioning division. Every work session was carefully crafted to support a specific stage of the restructuring process. Subsequent meetings supported implementation efforts, and provided the opportunity for reflection, clarification, and further application refinement.

Arbinger provided the leadership team with an overarching structural framework and workable vocabulary to facilitate a transformation in mindset. Team members learned to magnify their influence by taking greater responsibility for the impact of their work on various constituents. They were also equipped with tools to invite greater collaboration and sustain synergy, thereby becoming better capable of resolving the specific challenges of each restructuring phase. Rather than providing an externally mandated and ultimately unsustainable change in policy or procedure, Arbinger worked to unlock the capabilities that were already within the Staples Europe team but were curtailed by stress and high

levels of uncertainty.

Results

Because of their work with Arbinger over the course of several months, Staples Europe was able to better execute the multiple intricate components of their monumental organization restructuring. By focusing attention on the mindset that underlies productive behaviors, senior leadership was able to strengthen their working relationships. The president of Staples Europe described the change in this way: “I think the Arbinger Principles are very powerful really because they change your philosophy. They change the way you’re thinking about business. Instead of blaming each other, which has been our historical approach, we started asking ‘how can we help one another?’” He went on to describe how that adjustment, which can sound simplistic on the surface, helped create tangible impacts: “Just that simple shift in mindset has made an enormous difference in the quality of communications, the quality of our understanding, and our cooperation between units and locations.” Improving understanding, communication, and cooperation were crucial elements for their successful restructuring effort.

This change in the leadership team helped to spread an atmosphere of collaboration throughout the transitioning organization, helping to temper what had previously been runaway levels of stress and negative tension. The managing director of Staples’ retail operations in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, credited the new mindset among employees as an important contributing factor to the division’s success. Without a strategic and sustained shift in mindset, navigating the complexity inherent in a restructuring enterprise of such scope would have been exponentially more difficult. One senior vice president praised the Arbinger framework for offering “a neutral way of bringing up the issues” that had been inhibiting effective professional

relationships, one that allowed teams to be “far more collaborative.” Arbinger was able to help the Staples Europe leadership team unleash the latent talent and cooperation waiting within their workforce.

Staples has better results thanks to the new mindset of all the players within the company.

Roland Laschet – Managing Director | Staples Retail Benelux