

UCB Manufacturing Ireland Ltd

Shannon, Ireland

Overview

UCB, formerly Schwarz Pharma, is a leading manufacturer of API pharma products mainly for the treatment of angina pectoris and related conditions. UCB Shannon is one of the leading global facilities in its product field. Schwarz Pharma including the Shannon site was bought by Belgian-owned UCB in 2007 and subsequently faced a difficult period of restructuring in which one half of the workforce was made redundant. The 124 staff who currently work at the Shannon (Ireland) site include process chemists, skilled production staff and highly qualified and experienced management and support professionals.

Since 2012 the emphasis has been on integrating the Shannon plant within UCB. This was supported by the arrival of John Clarke, the new HR Director who focused on strengthening employee engagement, collaboration amongst employees, partnership with SIPTU (the principal trade union) and the culture of continuous improvement.

Beyond the engagement survey

Annual engagement surveys are carried out by the company as part of the global 'UCB Voices' engagement initiative, with high levels of participation by employees. Survey results revealed several areas of concern, especially around processes, information and communication and recognition. After the first set of results had been communicated to the workforce the company identified several key actions but was also keen to engage employees in finding solutions. A workshop, open to all employees, used mind-maps and storytelling techniques to build a shared vision for change and improvement. Improved communication and organisational behaviour were amongst the desirable changes identified by this workshop.

Building an effective management culture

UCB's global 'Shared UCB' initiative is aimed at ensuring cultural consistency based on the company's values and principle behaviours. Positive two-way communication based on common values and behaviours is recognised as one of the principal enablers of employee engagement, strengthening both employment relations and the capacity for improvement and innovation.

Creating an effective management culture is still work in progress but important markers have been laid down for the future. In 2013/2014 the company invested in Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Initially managers and directors took part in a three day programme, one outcome of which was a greater emphasis on listening, clear and complete communication, open dialogue and common language at management meetings. There was also a commitment to ensuring that every colleague would benefit in some way either personally and or professionally from attending the *7 Habits* training.

The course made a significant impact and a further one day course was arranged for the entire workforce. According to one member of the production staff: “Individual self-awareness has improved and people are more aware of their own behaviours and what’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate”. Others point out that the new culture has yet to be fully embedded in interactions between management and employees. By providing a course for employees managers have set higher standards for themselves. According to a production worker: “Now that we know what *The Seven Habits* are, we know when we don’t see them engaging in them!”

UCB also reminds itself of the importance of its products for users, and has brought members of a local Parkinson’s support group to meet members of the management and production teams.

Workplace partnership

During the period of restructuring and its aftermath issues were brought formally to management by union representatives on a regular basis. In time a sense of mutual trust and understanding developed, allowing many problems to be resolved informally without recourse to formal procedures. Management is increasingly proactive, finding opportunities to discuss emerging issues with the union official at an early stage.

Embedding quality and improvement

A strong emphasis on quality control and regulatory compliance is vital in the pharmaceutical industry: “for the management team the most important thing is compliance, safety and quality”. However the company recognises the importance of moving beyond compliance. An active continuous improvement (CI) programme has been in place since 2007 and this has been steadily enhanced since 2011.

John Clarke is keen to find ways in people can use and develop their full range of knowledge and skills in the workplace: “so if you’re heading up a committee, coaching at a soccer club or rugby club or volunteering for search and rescue, these are skills you can use at work too and if you have got those skills we want to know about them and put them to use and get you more involved”. According to John there are several ways in which “people have the opportunity to say ‘this doesn’t really work, there is an opportunity here to improve’”, and cites several innovations which have been led by employees. Cross functional groups created to address specific issues typically involve employees at every level.

Led by a CI Engineer, a programme of voluntary training involves a substantial number of employees as Six Sigma Yellow, Green and Black Belts. One took part “Just to improve myself personally and for trouble shooting in the job as well just breaking down problems”. Six Sigma trained employees are encouraged to identify potential improvement or innovation projects and report on progress to a CI Steering Committee consisting of the senior management team. This provides people at all levels with opportunities to use and develop skills beyond their day-to-day functional tasks. The company will evaluate all ideas and always provide feedback: “They would sit down with the CI engineer and say, ‘look I have got a couple of ideas about projects’, and she might test them, making sure that they are valid, they will work. There are standard templates that they would go through and tools that they would use to evaluate whether or not the project was valuable and how to progress”.

The culture of improvement extends to team level. Regular *Toolbox Talks* review safety procedures, learn from incidents and address employee concerns about risk. Not all teams have yet introduced effective two-way communication at team meetings, but one employee described how: “We have a formal meeting

once a month, and then you can bring anything to the table. We have a little section at the end for tips and tricks. Somebody discovers something, an easy way to do something or just knowledge and things like that”.

Who Benefits?

The avoidance of conflict and proactive engagement of employees at all levels in improvement and innovation generates win-win outcomes for UCB and its workforce. John Clarke is clear about the benefits: “Quite clearly time in terms of productivity and efficiency, we’ve avoided a lot of conflict issues before they have happened because people are engaging earlier, having those discussions and those difficult conversations. Probably in the past they would have maybe said ‘I’ll wait until it becomes an issue and then we’ll deal with it’. So I think you are seeing a lot more time efficiency, productivity, improved communication, improved decision making”.

Prognosis

Sustaining the momentum towards culture change is always a challenge for companies, recognising that there is no quick fix and that critical reflection and renewal of effort are required on a regular basis. An unexpected indication of UCB’s commitment to embedding an enabling workplace culture came shortly after the case study visit. An email received from John Clarke explained that problems and concerns expressed in the group discussion were fed back to him by the participants, and the company was now working with them to find solutions. These include more work on embedding *The Seven Habits* behaviours and wider use of effective team meetings, now complemented with Ned Herrmann’s (HBDI) whole brain thinking model.