

## **BRIDGESTONE UK**

### ***Achieving quality and customer focus through employee involvement***

#### **What does this case study demonstrate?**

Bridgestone UK aims to achieve customer focus and quality by emphasising team work, employee participation and involvement, competency-led appraisals and an open door policy as part of its approach to innovation and continuous improvement. While reflecting core values (“The Bridgestone Essence”) these practices have developed further in response to recent changes in the corporate management structure which give greater autonomy and discretion to the company’s European division.

**Workplace innovation elements:** cross functional teams, learning and development, continuous improvement, employee voice, open culture.

**Context:** Bridgestone UK is part of Bridgestone Europe (BSEU), a key regional subsidiary of Tokyo-based Bridgestone Corporation, the world’s largest manufacturer of tyres and other rubber products. Bridgestone Corporation and its subsidiaries employ over 140.000 people around the world, operate 178 plants in 25 nations and sell products in more than 150 countries. “Serving Society with Superior Quality” has been the company’s mission since Shojiro Ishibashi founded Bridgestone in 1931.

The recent change in corporate structure has enabled an approach to management which is more European in its focus. Employee voice lies at its heart, from representative participation in the Works Council to direct participation in improvement and innovation: “it’s not an area where people have to just conform, if they disagree and they want to say what they think, there is a channel to do that” (Paul Lawrie, Bridgestone UK HR Director).

#### **Employee voice in strategic decision-making**

According to the HR Director “Any project, any initiative, any type of change has to be driven through Works Council . . . so many projects go that route first” and it is often used to test ideas at an early stage.

Employee-led meetings are held to enable Works Council representatives to provide feedback and seek views on company-wide developments. They also help representatives to identify issues of concern that can be taken to the Works Council.

Since the reorganisation the corporate directors including the CEO and Senior Vice-Presidents have begun to take part in Town Hall meetings designed to present the company’s priorities and challenges and to engage with employees in question and answer sessions. Employees are strongly encouraged to raise questions and to express their ideas freely. Many are gradually gaining the confidence to do so and appreciate the greater visibility of the senior team: “they’ve made the employees aware that they are humans and they are approachable . . . That’s good, I think it’s really, really, good” (Employee Representative).

## **Continuous improvement through cross functional teams**

Collaborative working between management and employees stimulates two-way dialogue and drives innovation and improvement. Employees “challenge how we have always done it this way” and Bridgestone is open to experimentation. If a suggestion doesn’t work at first then “if it will improve let’s improve it. We go through this continuous improvement cycle lots of times for product innovations, systems changes, new system tools to help sales teams . . . we are continually going through this dynamic of change. So when it comes to something new, it isn’t ‘oh change, we don’t do that’. We continually do that” (HR Director).

Cross functional “Kaizen teams” have a specific role in continuous improvement and foster innovation and creativity throughout the company. Through “Kaizen” activities, employees from different parts of the business meet to discuss and resolve business issues, taking ownership of their work and decisions as well as improving understanding of the factors which influence business efficiency and quality: “often it’s the guys in the field who . . . bring it back into us and say ‘well this is how x, y and z customers want it (so) why aren’t we doing that with other customers?’”. Kaizen also brings people together across divisions, creating “an understanding of . . . where your connectivity is within the organisation . . . It broke down barriers and (now) there are probably still one or two but they are diminished” (HR Director).

These practices are facilitated by a conscious attempt to create open culture where silos and walls are broken down. Managers at all levels are both visible and accessible: “It’s a friendly sort of atmosphere, everyone is approachable . . . You can just walk in to see the MD or the Financial Director or whoever. It is a definite open door policy” (Employee Representative).

Likewise employee appraisals go well beyond mere formality, playing a key role in setting individual and team objectives aligned with strategic business goals. Appraisals focus on competency development and involve two-way interaction in which staff articulate their needs in terms of skills development, performance improvement and support.

## **Who benefits?**

The development of a new management culture at European level has led to win-win outcomes for employees and the company. Employees are increasingly empowered to participate and contribute to business issues through the monthly employee meetings, “Town Hall” events and Kaizen projects, leading to enhanced job quality and satisfaction. Even though strategic decisions remain at a high level employees have a considerable input towards achieving product quality, customer focus, business efficiency, sustainability and profitability through innovation and continuous improvement. In turn, employee initiative and self-organisation makes a significant contribution to Bridgestone’s competitive success.

## **Prognosis**

Bridgestone UK is creating an enabling culture in which employee voice plays a central role in competitive strategy. This transformation is still “work in progress” but Bridgestone UK firmly recognises the importance of orienting employees and managers to the new ways of working, placing considerable emphasis on communication, direct participation in innovation and improvement, and the role of the Works Council in ensuring that employee voice contributes to better decision-making.