



Brian Mason, Jennifer Elliott and Darryn Woolley

It's what's inside that counts: Leaders find the leader inside

Darryn Woolley and Brian Mason from Sanitarium and Jennifer Elliott from Integrity & Values are interviewed by Glenn Martin.

Leadership development at Sanitarium Health Food Company helps managers to "find the leader inside".

Editor Glenn Martin interviewed Sanitarium executives Darryn Woolley and Brian Mason at their Central Coast (NSW) headquarters along with Jennifer Elliott from Integrity and Values.

Sanitarium is a food manufacturer with an emphasis on health and well-being, an intent that goes right back to its beginnings in 1898. As one of Australia's best known food brands, its message is: "It's what's inside that counts". That philosophy extends to its approach to the management of its own workforce. Sanitarium invests solidly in leadership development and believes leaders have to lead from the inside out.

The commitment to leadership development at Sanitarium is a long-term one, with some managers having been associated for over ten years with the Leadership in Action program run by provider Integrity and Values. Managers who were initially participants in the program have later engaged Integrity and Values to run the program for their teams.

The positive results are clear, says Darryn Woolley, in the company's continuing strong performance in the market place, the high retention level of employees, and the

high level of workforce morale. As Darryn says, "We measure everything here".

■ A young manager embarks on leadership development

Darryn says that at the beginning, he was a new, young manager needing to implement changes in the workplace, and he needed to learn how to do that effectively. But he soon realised he was learning a new way of seeing himself and a new way of understanding what his role required. With it came a new language. Personally he found great value in what he was learning, but he also saw that the people around him did not have the same understanding and they needed to be able to share the language and the journey.

Gradually the program was introduced to groups and eventually to managers right across the company. In this way the concepts, the language and the values become a shared reality, and the improvements in relationships and functioning were dramatic.

Darryn says the benefits of the program were almost immediate. His business unit began to work more smoothly and

productively. That initial experience encouraged him to continue on the journey of self-development. He realised that his behaviour as a manager was not divorced from his behaviour in all areas of his life, and it was a product of all of his previous experience and beliefs.

At the risk of seeming "airy fairy", Darryn saw that if he was to develop, he had to "be real" with himself. He realised that he could not expect his team to change if he himself did not change. He found that the Leadership in Action process allowed everyone to address their own personal issues in a team environment. This didn't mean it was easy. Sometimes, says Darryn, "the truth about yourself can be unpalatable and you can be resistant to hearing it".

■ Learning confidence through self-awareness

At the beginning of the program, Darryn says he was lacking in confidence as a leader and he carried that attitude into his management style. The program helped him to see this and to change. "It's okay to feel fear; it doesn't mean I'm a bad leader. It doesn't mean I'm a fake." Jennifer Elliott, from Integrity and Values, remembers that

Darryn related strongly to the discussions in the program about personal courage.

Darryn found that in order to grow as a leader, he had to examine his relationship at home, and change things there first. And he did. His relationship with his wife and children improved enormously. What he learned through that process he was then able to apply at work in his management role.

Brian Mason, a younger manager who was appointed by Darryn, said his experience was also personal, but the highlights were different. He had to make the transition from being a manager to being a leader. He participated in the program as part of the widening of the leadership development initiative, but he experienced large strides in personal growth. Brian says, “I had to find the leader within myself. And I did.”

One of the key concepts he took from the program was “above the line / below the line”. This made him aware of the importance of the distinction between our overt behaviour and the unseen drivers of our behaviour. Not being aware of the unseen drivers tends to result in “unclean” interactions in teams. People are not sure what our intentions are or whether we respect them. Knowing when you are operating above or below the line is very powerful. Brian says that in itself transformed the working environment in his team.

Brian remembered events that occurred in his home life that signalled his personal growth. His family life improved as he learned to use language such as “clean communication”. And he learned to acknowledge his emotional side as well as his intellectual side.

■ A common language across the company

Darryn said that once some managers had been through the leadership program, it became apparent that the company would get much greater value from it if all managers and teams knew the same

language and worked according the same standards of behaviour. This was the next level for the company. Up until this point, business units within the company had operated competitively with each other. It was thought that this was the best way to get peak performance.

The executive began to realise that peak performance was coming from the people who had participated in the leadership program. Darryn says, “We found ourselves moving towards a ‘one team’ approach. As more people across the company participated in the leadership program, the common language and behavioural standards spread, and it became more important for the business units to work together than to compete with each other.”

Over time, and that’s over a period of around ten years, said Darryn, “we have seen the culture change and we are seeing the positive effect of this in the company’s performance. One of the measures of this is that we are extracting around 35% more revenue out of the same asset base we had 11 years ago. This is a saving of tens of millions of dollars in capital expenditure. We attribute a lot of that to the increased ability of our teams to put systems in place to achieve such results.”

■ Confidence boosts performance

Darryn said, “For example, as a manufacturer, refining our systems and processes is an ongoing endeavour. It is what makes our business successful. We



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now have more confidence in ourselves as leaders and as a company, and we are finding that our best innovations come from doing it ourselves, not from getting external parties to come in and redesign things for us.”

In one case they had spent around half a million dollars over two years on an externally supplied system. But they found that employees treated it as an add-on that they didn’t “own”. When they got employees involved in developing solutions themselves, the solutions “stuck”. Employees were committed to making them work.

“We take this back to the leadership program”, says Darryn. “One of its lessons was the ‘hard/easy’ rule. For us that meant it makes more sense for us to do the ‘hard’ work now, and spend money on developing our employees to be able to innovate, rather than taking the ‘easy’ path of relying on external parties to come in and fix systems for us – which leaves you dependent.

“Making that choice may be hard now, but it makes things easy later on. These are lessons that had a lasting effect on us. In fact, we still have some of the flip chart sheets on the wall in our training room. We still refer to them and remind ourselves of what we’ve learned.”

■ Leaders change and teams change

Darryn says he and Brian have learned to work deliberately at developing people. And as people develop, and become more confident, the relationship and communication issues do not necessarily go away! However, they say they have learned skills to help them handle situations confidently and cleanly, so there is no residue of ill-feeling. The managers who have taken on the leadership learning have developed strength and individuality. They are open communicators, trustworthy, and when they have difficulties they can articulate them and take responsibility for them.

“I am confident in my actions,” says Darryn. “knowing they will be supported by my boss whether I get them right or

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whether I get them wrong. I have the ability to then make decisions quickly and decisively. Knowing that I’ll have the support, I don’t need to keep checking my back, and therefore I treat my team accordingly.”

What the leaders have done, says Jennifer, is make the company’s vision and mission clear, and connect it with the “how” and the “what” of day-to-day work. This is “leading from the inside out”.

■ Looking at leadership now

What is Darryn’s view of leadership now? He thinks his view of leadership is maturing. He sees responsibility and accountability as the keys for managers to be effective. Managers have to exercise authority, but not in an autocratic way. They have to know what they need to deliver and make the decisions that are needed to get there.

The job of leaders is to create an environment where people can get the best out of themselves. This is an individual thing. The leader makes them comfortable and confident within their roles, making sure there are boundaries where they can act independently, and where they can make decisions with the leader’s knowledge.

Darryn says his role then backs off: “I’m actually there to deliver on corporate strategy, not to do managers’ work for them. If they’re not working it out, then first of all I have to go ‘what is it about my leadership style that’s not working?’ I challenge myself, and then if I can’t find anything I have to challenge them.”

Brian adds, “Another aspect that’s really strong within our company is respect. If I look at the influence the CEO has, it is based on his respect for his managers and the management team, and how they’re managing their side of the business. This cascades down through the structure. So in my interaction with Darryn there is very high respect.”

Knowing how to deal with your weaknesses and strengths is another aspect of leadership that Jennifer has emphasised. Darryn’s experience was: “I thought leaders had to be the best at everything. So for me to be respected as a leader within my team, I would have had to be better than Brian at everything he does, and if I’m not better than Brian at everything he does then why would he respect me as his leader?”

Darryn’s leadership journey was towards acceptance that this was not realistic; nor was it required. “I’m probably now self-aware enough to know there are things that I do better than other people, and that’s what I should really concentrate on, that’s what the company wants me to be doing. In the other areas, I surround myself with people who can fill in the gaps.”

For Jennifer, the satisfaction is seeing that people who participated in the program have effected permanent and continuing improvements in their performance as leaders and in their personal lives. Darryn says the learning on leadership has clearly benefited the company, but at a personal level it was a gift. As for running the program for other managers, his philosophy is “if I can help them be the best they can be, the corporate results will take care of themselves”. He says this approach is more constructive than the approach which says “the corporate results are king and we only do these things in order to actually get those results”. ■

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