

# **DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP WITHIN A TEAM VIA OPEN AND HONEST CONVERSATIONS**



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# DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP WITHIN A TEAM VIA OPEN AND HONEST CONVERSATIONS

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## **ABSTRACT**

In February 2007, in an effort to improve the leadership and ownership (in other words the Culture) of the Central Operations and Maintenance team at Goulburn Valley Water (GVW), the team embarked on a Performance Improvement Program.

The Performance Improvement Program has greatly improved how the team feels about each other, how it is viewed by others both internally and externally and how it performs. It encompassed improved customer service, meeting its key performance indicators and provided clarity relating to staff performance through the establishment of a leadership group. This group undertakes regular peer assessment reviews and tracks altered behaviours as outcomes of the peer assessments.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Goulburn Valley Region Water Corporation is divided into four (4) operational districts; these are Northern, Central, South West and South East. The Central district, due to its size and density, is split into the specialised streams of Water Treatment, Operations & Maintenance and Wastewater Management Facilities, while the other three districts are multi functional.

The Central Operations and Maintenance (O&M) team based in Shepparton is responsible for the water distribution systems, sewer transfer and reticulation systems in seventeen (17) towns. The team consists of a manager, two works coordinators and seventeen (17) field staff.

In February 2007, the Central O&M team was described as a very good team which had a many strengths. These included strong work ethics, strong customer focus, good skills in operation and maintenance issues and the team was very stable in numbers. However, like all teams, we needed to improve our behaviours that were seen to be counterproductive. The team had a variety of skills, length of service, leadership qualities and ownership. While the total numbers of operators in 2011 is still 20, there has been a 45% turnover in staff since 2007.

In November 2007, we appointed a consultant, Ray McLean from Leading Teams, to work with the team using a Personnel Improvement program (PIP).

Since the inception of the program, improvement has occurred by encouraging open and honest conversation in a structured and safe environment, within the team as a group and between individuals. It has allowed team members to discuss issues that were previously “bagged” or “complained about” secretly but never face to face. The system allows all operators to find their voice and analyse themselves, other operators, management and team performance against agreed behavioural expectations. Individual performance gaps are able to be addressed promptly via shared responsibility rather than by management only at ad-hoc intervals.

The program is now driven by the team after great assistance, encouragement and guidance through the introduction of the “Leading Teams” Performance Improvement Program. This paper covers some of the journey, problems, pitfalls and successes the team has encountered from February 2007 to the present day.

## **1.1 Background History**

In February 2007, after more than 20 years of micro managing staff issues and behavioural concerns, I decided that our team needed a leadership team to deal with and organise these behavioural issues. I, as manager, appointed the most experienced staff to a leadership team to assist me to resolve and improve these issues.

As this leadership team failed to make an impression on most of these issues, it was decided to approach an external facilitator to assist the team with skills to make inroads on improving the team. In November 2007, we appointed a consultant, Ray McLean from Leading Teams, to work with the leadership team of six with the objective to improve the direction of the Central O&M team. The Leadership Team developed a trademark which consisted of a list of three words they wanted to be known as and a list of behaviours to explain how this trademark can be achieved.

In April 2008, Ray McLean returned to assist the Central O&M team to develop a trademark for the complete team which included behaviours that empowered team members to engage in open, honest and constructive dialogue. This meeting discussed and agreed on two very important issues:

1. The team accepted the Personnel Improvement Program (PIP) which involves using a tool which gives team members feedback via a Self Assessment form and a Peer Assessment form.
2. The team would elect the composition of the Leadership Team, not the manager.

An annual review of the program was conducted with Ray McLean as the facilitator in March 2009 with good progression (refer to details later in the paper). This was followed by elections for the new leadership team using an open and honest method of voting, i.e. stand and deliver approach.

At the end of April 2009, GVW embarked on the journey of Sustainable Excellence (Business Excellence) for the whole Corporation. The PIP system compliments the Sustainable Excellence (SE) journey extremely well and simplifies the SE system to assist the staff to understand and implement the principles of SE.

The PIP system has continued with an annual review process completed in May 2010. In October 2010, GVW’s Manager Operations, after seeing the progress made with the Central O&M team, instructed all the operational team to use the same PIP system to assist their teams develop and improve in line with the SE program.

In March 2011 the current leadership team was elected. It was recognized that we needed to put some additional leadership skills into the leadership team and in late March, Ray conducted a session to assist the leadership team with this task.

In June 2011 Ray facilitated a full team annual review. This review further supported the view that the leadership team needed assistance to develop as leaders and the staff needed to continue to be open and honest in their conversations. This was an ongoing issue as staff turnover continued.

## **2.0 DISCUSSION ON PROGRESS**

### **2.1 Why is a Leadership Team Required?**

It was agreed that leadership consists of four main components:

- Management
- Control
- Guidance
- Direction

A Leadership Team is required to assist and improve the strength of the team in many areas including:

- The work ethic and professionalism of the team
- To encourage individuals to accept responsibility of their actions and for the plant & equipment
- To pay greater attention to their workplace and conditions
- To be committed to Service Excellence to the customers.

A typical work team contains employees in three categories. These are:

1. Natural Leaders
2. Followers
3. Some Need To Improve

It was decided that a Leadership Team is required to further develop the natural leaders, assist the followers to follow the natural leaders and reduce the number of individuals that needed to improve. This is possible if the natural leaders were in the field on a regular basis and smaller issues can be resolved on site without having to report to supervisors or managers. The Leadership Team's main objective is to monitor, investigate and offer suggestions to improve the performance of the team and individuals.

### **2.2 Choosing a Leadership Team**

The original leadership framework for our team was selected by the manager and based on years of experience. This method was not the preferred way of selecting a leadership team as it may or may not capture the "centre of influence" for the team (i.e. the movers and shakers within the team). The team needs to elect their own leaders to get a greater ownership and acceptance for the role.

Elections were carried out via a stand and deliver system however it was perceived as a bit of a copy cat system i.e. some followed votes of others instead of being fully accountable.

We have since elected our leaders annually via a stand and a partner delivers the votes. This system has been used for two years; it fits our team very well and has proven to be the best way to elect our leadership team.

### **2.3 Composition of Leadership Team**

A leadership team without official leaders (i.e. District Manager and works coordinators), will not receive official authority that is required to make structural or procedural improvements.

The composition of our leadership team is as follows:

- District Manager
- Works Co-Ordinator–Water
- Works Co-Ordinator– Sewerage
- Field Operator
- Field Operator
- Field Operator

This composition provides balance with management and field staff to ensure that timeframes, regular meetings and direction are followed.

### **3.0 IMPROVEMENT IN CONSERVATION AND ATTITUDE**

Since introduction of the PIP system, there has been a vast improvement in conversation and attitude within the team. This system relies on open and honest conversations in a safe environment and has several “tools” that can be used. Some of these can be intimidating, until all parties are comfortable in this safe environment.

#### **3.1 How does the PIP system work in our team?**

The PIP system starts by asking two questions:

1. What’s working (things the team is doing well and must continue doing)
2. What’s not working (opportunities for improvement within the team).

This formulated the acceptable behaviours for our team which are included in our trademark (if you use the Leading Teams words) or “I” statement (if using the Sustainable or Business Excellence words). Either way, they became the non negotiable behaviours for our team. The individual is then assessed on the behaviour as part of the individual’s annual review. This same system is used to assess new employees as part of their one month, three and six monthly performance assessment.

The PIP system uses a simple “tool” called a Peer Assessment form and Self Assessment form. The leadership team meets with the individual and the Peer Assessment form is completed by the leadership team (with feedback from the complete team) while the individual completes the Self Assessment form. During this meeting they compare the two forms and agree on any outcomes. The discussions are open and honest and are based on the agreed behaviours; they do not become personal or humorous. This creates a safe environment for all parties.

The feedback is constructive and to the point and, if done honestly, there is very few surprises or disagreements. This method is used by our team biannually as part of the Personnel Appraisal Coaching Program (PACP). The outcome determines if the individual is meeting the behaviours and in turn determines if they are considered for a pay increase. This process has eliminated comments about the relationship between the manager and individual verses possible pay increases. The system is very open and honest and easy to understand.

The system is at first intimidating for all parties because the team has to make comment on their peers while still working together in the field. This feeling is overcome when the system is working well which does take a few sessions of learning and listening to each other.

We have found that the system was not fully accepted by all individuals in the team at first; however they see the benefit of the open and honest discussion.

As part of the annual team assessment they are required to use three words to describe the team. Below is a list of words used by the Central O&M in March 2009 compared to May 2010:

<u>March 2009</u>	<u>May 2010</u>
Easy Going	Innovative
Capable	Efficient
Reliable (three times)	Willing
Moral on lower side (twice)	Good Communication Skills (twice)
Confident	Cooperative
Good workers	Friendly
Punctual (twice)	Inclusive
Highly strung	Honest (twice)
Evolving/mixed bag	Helpful
Negative	Learning
Enthusiastic	Knowledgeable
Helpful	
Motivated (twice)	
Dedicated (three times)	
Passionate	
Dependable & trustworthy	
Productive	

Based on the above words the team believes we are travelling in a much better space than we were in the 12 months previous. The negative, highly strung and low moral comments have disappeared and have been replaced with more positive words. The discussions during the Peer and Self Assessment forms is now more honest and acceptable to all the staff as they are now more comfortable with the system.

We also use a relationship form which deals with the type of relationship I expect of you and then a 360 review where I state the type of relationship I think you expect of me; this is a good one on one “tool” or a team on team “tool”. Of course as with all systems, the normal discipline system is available and the PIP system gives greater support to the discipline system if required.

### **3.2 Learning’s while using the PIP system**

Below are several of the team’s learning’s while using this system.

- How the delivery of the Peer Assessment forms is conducted, as this can create further issues if delivered incorrectly or in an aggressive manner.
- Working with individuals who are not in favour of the system.
- The importance of having non negotiable team behaviours.
- The importance of conducting Self and Peer Assessments at least twice per year.
- The process you use to select your leadership team.
- How to conduct your leadership meetings and ensure you meet regularly.
- Feedback from the leadership team meetings to the team.
- The importance of conducting annual reviews and using an external facilitator to conduct the annual reviews.

### **3.3 Positives in using the PIP system**

The team has found the following issues as huge positives for the PIP system:

- The team is empowered to set the non negotiable behaviours and their willingness to be assessed against these behaviours.
- Assists in the development of operators in leadership roles.
- Assists the manager and individual to gain a fairer assessment of an individual during the PACP process, thus making it less stressful for both parties.
- Assists with open and honest conversations in the field.
- It gives the team empowerment i.e. allows the operators to have a say in how the team operates as individuals and to have a say in the purchase of plant and equipment.
- It enables the team to have facilitated annual team and leadership team reviews, which are able to be tracked for progress.

#### **4.0 WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

The where to from here is to continue to develop leaders and to manage and improve individual and team performance within the team using the PIP system. There is no end to developing improved leadership and ownership within a team as the bar is continually raised as you improve. In our experience, these expectations can only be achieved using safe, open and honest communication.

#### **5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks to the Central O&M team and the Leadership Team for their work and support of the program. Thanks to the Goulburn Valley Water management team for allowing the program to commence and continue annually. Thanks to Leading Teams, especially Ray McLean, for setting up the program and his continued support to the Central O&M team.