ACHIEVING BREAKTHROUGH BUSINESS RESULTS THROUGH PERSONAL CHANGE

B Y   K A L I   S A P O S N I C K

In 1997 Rick Fox, asset leader on Ursa, Shell Oil's largest deepwater project in the Gulf of Mexico, faced a quandary: Oil drilling problems had set back construction of the $1.45 billion oil and gas platform by six months and cost the company $25 million. Fox knew that failing to overcome the ongoing challenges could seriously hurt his career and the careers of others, and that he needed to set a bold goal for his operations team. Uncertain how to recover the project, he and some of his team leaders decided to attend a leadership development program over the course of a year run by the consulting company Learning as Leadership (LAL) starting with a personal mastery workshop. There, they uncovered barriers that were hindering their chances of success and discovered how to achieve breakthrough business results.

Uncovering Assumptions That Block Success

A four-time recipient of Shell leadership awards with a stellar track record, Fox was a well-liked leader who had earned his team's loyalty. Like many others, he had survived in Shell's high-stakes culture either by negotiating with senior management for low-risk goals or by justifying to them why he and his staff couldn't achieve high-risk ones. But he felt overwhelmed in the face of the magnitude of Ursa's setbacks. For the first time, none of his leadership skills seemed sufficient to motivate his troops.

At the personal mastery workshop, Fox became painfully aware of how his mental models had contributed to his team's difficulties: Consumed by the desire to preserve his image as a hero and avoid criticism, he struggled to level with his team about the gravity of the situation. "Rather than take the risk of speaking frankly, I had an excuse ready when things didn't go well," says Fox. Entrenched in self-protection, he didn't push himself or his troops past their comfort zone. He also realized why he and his crew negotiated easily achievable goals: They believed they could control only their particular assignment; setting goals to support tasks beyond their personal responsibility scared them. Once Fox let go of these reactive dynamics and connected to what he cared about, he was able to commit fully to the Ursa project.

Fox put his learning into action when he had to convince his team to support Shell's decision to move the platform's assembly to Curaçao, 200 miles north of Venezuela. The site would be safe during hurricane season, but Curaçao's grueling living and working conditions concerned the group. In addition, they felt unclear about their responsibilities and feared they'd be blamed if things went wrong. With newfound courage, Fox asked his operations team to take ownership for the entire project. He also asked them and two other teams working on the project to accelerate the schedule by more than four months. Everyone agreed.

How was Fox able to convince crewmembers to buy into a four-month acceleration? First, he got his team leaders on board. Based on previously established trust, he spoke openly and confidently to them, and they believed in his good intentions.

"I offered them a possibility and let go of the outcome," says Fox. "I took away the mental model of 'I'll do my part. I need a goal I can meet or my career will be hurt.'" He also shared his personal vision for an organization of honest, respectful, and constructive relationships, where each team member made sure everyone was successful and achieved high performance.

Finally, he gave team leaders a basis for believing the goal might be achievable. By radically brainstorming with the team responsible for the current delay, he figured out a way to compress their work schedule—and, in turn, everybody else's. Suddenly, the goal was farfetched but not impossible.

With the support of his team leaders, Fox presented the goal to the larger organization. After 15 minutes, Fox asked, "Guys, what's the chance you'd be willing to take this on?" For a moment the room was quiet. Then one person volunteered, "I think I can do this," and explained how. With her support, momentum started to build and, eventually, the group achieved their objective: The platform went into operation four months ahead of schedule.

Setting Goals to Achieve Breakthrough Results

By the end of 1999, the project experienced more tough challenges—the first well failed, and production volumes were minimal. Fox sent five more people to the personal mastery workshop in order to revitalize his team's spirit. Out of this training emerged a three-day goal-setting event

facilitated by LAL in which all operational team leaders participated. For two days, they detailed the business situation and discussed personal obstacles that limited their success. "By the third day, we hadn't even talked about goals, and people were getting nervous," recalls Fox. "Then in about three hours, we outlined five goals in a language everyone could relate to that we still follow today. Everyone was on board (see "Ursa Year 2000 Goals)."

Influenced by efforts to develop self-awareness and change their behaviors, the Ursa organization has achieved remarkable results over the last four years:

URSA YEAR 2000 GOALS

- No One Gets Hurt
- Every Drop of Oil A.S.A.P.
- Not a Dollar More Than It Takes
- Respect and Protect the Environment
- People Support Each Other

- Their four-month acceleration in the construction schedule saved Shell an estimated $40 million.
- They decreased operating costs by more than 50 percent from the business plan.
- They achieved "Best in Class" uptime performance of 99 percent.
- They dramatically improved 2000 production performance by 12 million barrels (a 43 percent increase).
- They've had outstanding safety performance.
- They're ahead of their targets and on the path to achieving aggressive environmental goals.
- They have high morale among personnel and a high rate of skill acquisition and advancement.

Awareness of each others' personal barriers to success has been a powerful tool for team leaders to support each other in sticking to goals and handling pushback from their crews. "We hold each other accountable for commitments with compassion," Fox explains. "We coach each other, and once we're aware of an inner obstacle, we can shift in the moment and get back on track." The operations team also makes certain decisions through unanimous agreement. "If we're making an important decision, everybody has to say 'yes' without hesitation, or we go back and find out why someone feels uncomfortable," says Fox.

Today Fox's team continually finds ways to sustain their achievements. They communicate regularly, including daily one-on-one team check-ins and biweekly group communications. Fox and other team leaders continue to attend personal mastery trainings and receive coaching. Reflecting on the profound change he's undergone, Fox hopes his experience can give other business leaders hope. The internal changes he achieved catalyzed a dramatic shift in the entire organization, allowing team members to realize their potential and perform beyond everyone's expectations. He believes that "one voice can make a difference. Especially if you're in a position of power or leadership, your leverage is huge." ◘

Kali Saposnick is publications editor at Pegasus Communications.