

CONFERENCES THAT CONNECT STRATEGY TO LEADERSHIP

A FTSE 100 company wanted to run its first global leadership conference after the appointment of a new CEO. The main board and the wider leadership team were fragmented and the delivery of the group strategy was being thwarted by individual businesses working in their own interests. At the briefing stage there was anxiety and some scepticism about whether anything could really be done to create a change.

The challenge that most of our clients face is getting large groups of senior leaders to not only understand the strategic direction of the company but also to engage with the strategy in such a way that they can enrol the rest of the organisation. For those few senior leaders who have had a real hand in developing the strategic direction of the organisation, their full engagement is almost guaranteed. They support what they create. Most organisations appear to forget this key insight and produce senior leadership conferences that are based on telling and showing. Rapidly followed by the obligatory questions and answers. In large fora this can only ever be a superficial activity.

In this case, we began with aligning the board around what they were trying to cause by having this conference. We encouraged them to have conversations at a sufficient depth so that hidden difficulties were surfaced. The conversations exposed how the difficulties within the most senior team were manifesting themselves further out into the business.

We invited the board to participate in the conference design at this stage and used the World Café process as the method. Before, during and after the event we met regularly with the board to encourage them to host the conference effectively, shape the event and provide leadership in moments of difficulty.

The World Café design enabled the board to engage with 100 leaders at one time in a rich conversation about:

- the strategy of the business
- the implications for priorities and mindsets
- the leadership approaches that would be required to create success

Feedback from the conference was outstanding. It generated a level of shared meaning about the future that had been missing to that point.

Some very important decisions were taken about the culture and “spirit” of the organisation. Critical issues were resolved live in the conference rather than waiting for post conference action and plans were put in place by each leader to change behaviour and increase collaboration across the group.

Six months later the next conference was organised with leadership from within the wider global leadership team and more emphasis is being placed on building on the success of the previous six months. It is widely acknowledged that the conference was a turning point.