

CAN YOU FEEL IT?

Talking to water, letters to loved ones, keeping a journal... the activities on Sony Europe's senior development programme may be unorthodox but they're all geared towards creating more emotionally aware leaders

BY REBECCA JOHNSON

Senior managers at Sony Europe are learning how to talk to water as part of their management training. "If you talk to water and then make ice crystals you can see a difference," explains Barend Ezechiels, sales director for Sony Netherlands. "If you talk in a friendly way, you get smooth crystals with no edges. If you talk angrily the crystals change colour and are irregular and broken, and if you talk with compassion then there is also a different structure. It is really strange. I am quite a down-to-earth guy but these things really touched me."

Why, in one of the world's largest and most innovative electronics firms, is an esoteric activity such as talking to water making such waves? Is it Sony's latest approach to electronic game development? Or perhaps some new social network cyber-cult? In fact, this revelation comes as part of a ground-breaking emotional intelligence-based leadership development programme. The initiative, tailor-made for the European electronics business by Swan Consulting Services, is helping some of its most talented managers to understand how their behaviour and beliefs affect their teams.

"If you are thinking negatively when you are in front of the group and you don't

believe something yourself, this will radiate to the others," explains Ezechiels, of the lessons drawn from the ice-crystal exercise. "It helps you to understand your own feelings and use them in a professional way."

In addition, participants keep journals, draw lifelines of significant emotional events, find symbols to represent their beliefs and attitudes to leadership, learn to listen to and coach their colleagues, and undergo in-depth scrutiny of their careers and motivations. The course is personal and revealing, and helps to build a strong network of close relationships among senior managers across Europe – and, as they move around other parts of the business, across the world.

SONY FACTBOX

- Sony Corporation recorded global annual sales of €55.83 billion (£37.97 billion) in the year ending March 31 2007.
- Sony Europe, based at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, is responsible for the company's European electronics business, which reported sales for 2006-07 of €9.12 billion.
- Global staff numbers are 163,000. Staff at the European electronics business number 9,000, of whom 1,500 are based in the UK.

Some of the results from the first year of the programme have been as unexpected as its methods. Already, participants returning to their business divisions have demanded of HR that emotional intelligence be introduced not only to recruitment processes at senior level but to graduate programmes too. Plus, in a company renowned for its "addiction to activity", laptops (for continuous email access) are being banned from meetings to encourage more listening and genuine attention. The intention is to change Sony's culture from within, and from the top. So far, it seems to be working.

Four years ago, Sony Europe recognised that it needed to think more carefully about leadership and succession planning for top management jobs. At that point management training was solely country- or function-based, rather than targeted towards building the skills Sony needed to move its managers across the business. Most senior leaders had not had access to development for many years and identifying future leaders was proving difficult.

The company responded by launching a new talent strategy, of which the senior leadership development programme (SLDP) is one among four strands. The others

“
We never seemed to get much buy-in for traditional management development – it didn't feel right
”

Sarah Henbrey, divisional director of people and organisational development at Sony Europe

“
Bringing your whole self to the leadership role really is the key to inspiring others
 ”

are a programme for the executive team, a European graduate programme for a handful of talented graduates with language skills and a year of previous business experience, and a leadership development programme for junior and middle managers with Europe-wide ambitions. The SLDP targets managers at MD-minus-one level: the direct potential successors to the executive top team.

To back the talent strategy, Sony created what it calls its “3C” leadership model, coupled with “hugely more robust” assessment and selection. The Cs stand for competence, confidence and courage, defined by seven core competencies.

Competence includes analytical and intellectual qualities. Courage covers drive, responsibility and risk-taking. However, assessment uncovered gaps in the area of confidence: that is, the ability to interact with and influence others, and develop people.

Sarah Henbrey, divisional director of people and organisational development, reveals that Sony looked at traditional generic management development, “but we never seemed to get much buy-in for it – it didn’t feel right”. It was felt a deeper focus on emotional intelligence was needed. The SLDP grew “almost by chance” out of a conversation with Swan, a small company that already provided coaching to Sony. “It was a bit of a leap of faith but it has worked well,” Henbrey says.

Swan’s values-driven perspective and its ability to provide associate coaches throughout Europe provided the support Sony needed. “We see it as multidimensional, not only to develop their leaders in authentic leadership but also through them – it’s a systemic approach – to change the culture,” explains Alexandra Smith, managing director of



Swan. “Sony Europe’s president, Fujio Nishida, is expecting return on investment in terms of leaders looking, sounding and feeling different to others in the organisation so that they become the catalyst for change. It is one of the ways the programme is being evaluated.”

The SLDP, launched in July last year, involves three modules spread over around eight months. The first, entitled “Visionary

leadership”, focuses on the individual’s motivation, life values and career path. As well as the “lifeline”, it involves using appreciative inquiry techniques to explore their understanding of “peak” leadership performance so they can understand what great leadership looks and feels like to them.

The second module, “Leading with emotional intelligence”, requires participants to keep a journal for a week to track their

DEVELOPMENT FOR GROWN-UPS

“I’ve been a leader for 10 years. But I realised I didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up,” says Nicolas Babin, the Berlin-based director of corporate communications at Sony Europe. “What I had not realised was that everything is in my head and I’m in control. I am going to become what I want to become, not what the company wants me to be.”

Babin describes the leadership development programme’s methods as “really powerful”. One of the most challenging tasks for him was to select a symbol to represent himself and his leadership values. “I did a lot of work with my coach and discovered the tree of life as my symbol because deep roots are really important to me and there is the spiritual angle too.”

In his role as a “buffer” between the US and Japanese sides of the corporation, Babin especially valued learning how to digest information and restrain his reactions – sometimes even to sleep on issues. “The Japanese take more time and want everyone’s understanding and approval. The Americans are totally the opposite. I am lucky, I understand the two cultures, but often my staff don’t. So it can be frustrating. I say, ‘Hang on’ now. I am really using emotional intelligence everywhere I can and I’m much calmer. I used to have high blood pressure and that has lowered. Even my wife says: ‘Wow, what a change!’”

For Tatsuya “Ted” Akashi, the Paris-based vice-president of Recording Media and Energy, Europe, everything about the SLDP, which he completed earlier this year, was a novelty. “It was very tough,” he admits. “We are used to discussing business issues, strategy, tools and so on. You can judge mathematically. But this took some time to get used to. The hardest part was to share such a journey with other people.”

Each participant’s team has also noticed the change. Akashi takes more time to meet and listen to people. Barend Ezechiels, sales director for Sony Netherlands, who was affected most by the water experiment and by a task involving writing letters to loved ones, is embedding his learning in the culture change process taking place in Sony Netherlands through open questioning and agreeing core values.

Babin now has monthly coaching sessions with employees. “I have totally changed my management style,” he says. And the feedback from his staff? “They all ask: ‘Can I go on this course too?’” he laughs.

“
There are no ‘happy sheets’ – we evaluate experience and return on investment in a different way
 ”

emotional processes at work and at home. “It can be very illuminating if they realise they have been angry or frustrated for three-quarters of the week,” Smith points out. Participants explore using the energy of their emotions in ways that are helpful rather than destructive. The third module, “Coaching for potential,” involves coaching each other to learn how to use open questioning techniques.

Each module is preceded by a tele-conference to introduce the themes that will be covered, while between the modules participants work with their own individual coaches to consolidate the learning and integrate it into their daily work. The course ends with a showcase presentation to the president. “Twelve people put together their vision of future leadership and executives are invited to come and hear what they will personally be taking forward. There are no ‘happy sheets’ – we evaluate experience and return on investment in a different way,” explains Smith.

While respecting confidentiality, coaches feed back to the business the cultural dynamics and other emerging themes, so that the organisation benefits from a “double-loop learning” effect – both from the coaches and the participants themselves in the showcase presentation. “It’s a unique way for the organisation to get feedback,” Smith says.

The course has earned the nickname “the inside-out programme”, from the idea that leadership is not about “objects” or models but about subjects: the people themselves.

“Traditional management development looks at strategy and structure and so on. We turned it on its head,” explains Henbrey. “We believe what makes a difference is learning to have better quality conversations, to make better quality decisions and be secure enough to take risks.”

The programme looks not only at work-based behaviour but the qualities and purpose from people’s lives that they bring to the task of motivating others. It is so unlike traditional management development that participants are warned beforehand that the style will be different. “It is much slower and more reflective and that has been a bit of a shock to people,” according to Henbrey. “For many it has been transformational,” Smith adds. “Bringing your whole self to the leadership role really is the key to inspiring others.”

Henbrey admits it is early days – only 44 leaders have been through the programme so far – but the results have been encouraging. So much so that she is considering extending the eligible target population to the next management level down. Evaluation is based in part on the employee survey, and in part on 360-degree feedback six months after the course has ended, to see what is emerging in terms of changed behaviour. But for Henbrey and Smith, the proof will be whether Sony can fill key positions more quickly and effectively and the opinion of the top team.

“We have a forum called the HR and organisational committee that is chaired by the president. That’s our steering group and we plan to check back with them about what they are seeing that is different,” Henbrey says.

“If participants are modelling values and emotional intelligence then that is what is going to show up in the system,” Smith adds. “They create a vibration in the organisation from every action.”

Smith is full of praise for Sony’s courage in embarking on such a challenging programme and focusing on releasing potential without being prescriptive.

“Not all organisations are ready for what we offer,” she says. “There’s a yearning in organisations for something that is going to help them leap forward. But reorganising the system is not going to do that. Our approach is about leaders creating a vision for themselves. It is a totally different energy.” ■