



Case study 2.2

Swiss Re putting HR front and centre

The people function can be an afterthought during times of upheaval, but the reinsurance giant decided purpose should start at home. A sprawling township in South Africa, where 70 per cent of the population live in shacks, and the 41-floor Gherkin building in the City of London, home to the UK head office of global reinsurance firm Swiss Re (and several others). The two seem worlds apart.

Yet the former is the subject of the video James Hartley, Swiss Re's managing director and regional head of HR EMEA, points to as demonstrating the power of the firm's #TellOurStory initiative, which launched at the beginning of 2019.

The video features Bongiwe Mncube, HR partner MEA, describing the transformative effects of Swiss Re's Middle East and Africa Underwriting Academy, not only on a business location beset by skills shortages, but also on the life of one particular 28-year-old South African township resident, who – before being taken on by Swiss Re – was “totally lost... hanging out on street corners”.

He says: ‘I now can afford my children's school fees, I can afford stationery, I can afford transport for them to go to school, I'm able to take care of my siblings and elderly mother,’ Mncube relates in the video. It's powerful stuff – and just one of many stories shared as part of an initiative designed to reconnect members of the 100-strong EMEA HR function with their individual purposes.

Given Swiss Re's wider context, it had become increasingly apparent, explains Hartley, that the function needed to provide a very particular kind of support, and role model certain key behaviours for the rest of the business.

Founded in 1863 and headquartered in Zurich, Swiss Re has 80 offices globally and 14,500 employees. It offers corporate solutions to mid-sized and multinational corporations and life capital insurance. But its largest income stream comes courtesy of its status as the world's second largest reinsurer, with the firm's B2B offering ranging from cutting-edge telematics-based products for the automotive sector, to insurance against crop failure for African farmers.

However, despite its size, the business is far from immune to challenging market conditions. ‘In reinsurance, margins have been squeezed, and we've had to come up with innovative ways of retaining revenue. Corporate solutions has had a tough couple of years so is in a turnaround phase,’ says Hartley.

‘So if we're going to have leaders adept at managing ambiguity and a changing landscape, we need an HR function that's courageous enough to push the boundaries.’

The first step was to get all leaders within EMEA HR to discuss with their teams what inspires them about what they do day to day. Then smaller groups were brought together to debate various behaviours identified as common themes, such as putting ‘purpose and pragmatism ahead of process and perfectionism’, combining ‘commercial and emotional impact’ and acting ‘with courage’.

‘I was talking about my own personal purpose, which broke the dam a little bit,’ says Hartley. ‘We held an HR-wide town hall event, which got people to start to tell their stories. Then there was a kick-off event where we ran masterclasses on telling stories.’

Colleagues sharing their stories via video on dedicated #TellOurStory calls, in team meetings and in town halls continued regularly throughout 2019 – as did storytelling training. An 'Our Little Book of Why' was also produced, including details of each member of the EMEA team's purpose. Stories include highly personal accounts – such as one colleague discovering that her smiling at a stranger had stopped them attempting suicide – and span across all levels.

'Historically, you find the most senior people get this kind of thing, but my litmus test was: does it resonate with a payroll adviser in Bratislava?' says Hartley. 'I wanted the business to experience something different from HR. This for me is where the storytelling element comes in. If we sit with the business and say "here's the process, here's the tick-box, here's the form", we will drive a certain reputation.'

'Inevitably there is a bias in HR to immediately go to the "what", sometimes the "how", but rarely the "why". But if we can start talking about a personal story or context, it just changes the dynamic.'

The business's shift to ratingless performance management to encourage quality conversations is an example of where HR has been able to role model the kinds of 'courageous' human conversations line managers should be having with direct reports. 'It just moves that whole thing from being a very corporate, left-brain, intellectual exercise, which can be the tendency in our sector,' says Hartley.

And a more energised, purpose-driven HR team has been critical to supporting Swiss Re's overall transformation and reorganisation agenda. Quickly creating HR project teams to support particular aspects of the change programme is much more effective where new

team members have already connected on a personal level, says Hartley.

The EMEA HR team also enjoys top quartile engagement scores, with this going up 17 points since 2015. Crucially, the function has maintained high levels of client satisfaction, up 32 points from 2015.

It will now be important to sustain the momentum, and to roll the initiative out more formally to the wider business. Regarding why #TellOurStory wasn't kicked off with non-HR colleagues, Hartley is adamant of the value of starting with HR – something many organisations fail to do, he says, with the function (ironically) something of an afterthought when it comes to change programmes or L&D, for example. 'It absolutely can't be HR for HR in an insular way. But I think there's real power in starting a movement within HR that can engage, inspire and challenge the business. I don't think the business has sole mandate on innovation and creativity,' he says.

'I do think we have an opportunity at group level. The group exec committee is now saying "do we need to connect more emotionally?"'

'We already have a wider cultural shift. Our CEO starts town halls, not with share price, but by saying: "We've helped rebuild communities devastated by hurricanes and wildfires. And in doing so we've fulfilled our purpose of making the world more resilient."'

- 1 To what extent does the 'why' come into HR professionals' dialogues, or not, as is the case?
- 2 The concept of HR professionals inspiring line managers can be a challenging one to say the least – but why is this the case?

SOURCE: Roper, J (2020) Why Swiss Re put HR front and centre of its change programme, *People Management*, 20 February