

Peeling Away the Layers

AMERICAN
EXPRESS

The Situation

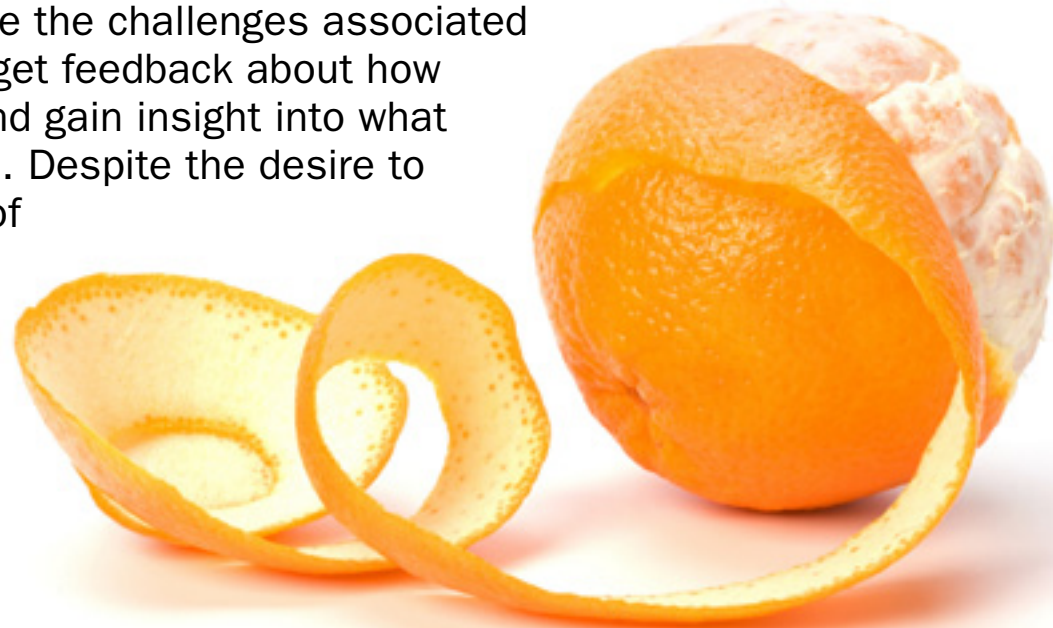
A large, international division within American Express had been losing an unacceptable number of its most talented leaders over a three-year period. Despite initiatives focused on employee engagement, organization redesign and selection enhancements, the resignations continued to mount. A SWAT team, consisting of leaders from within the division as well as practice specialists from American Express Human Resources was mobilized.

The SWAT team engaged one of our organizational psychologists, a turnaround specialist and an experienced coach in top leader behavior. Our role was to independently collect data related to the turnover problem, present our findings to the SWAT team for joint analysis and diagnosis and co-design a solution that was a clear fit with AmEx's budgetary and cultural expectations.

What We Did

We conducted interviews, which included key leaders who had chosen to leave, and poured over surveys, reports, performance data and practices related to the problem. At the end of our data review, we discovered three themes. First, both past and present key leaders started their leadership roles with one clear set of expectations only to discover, once on the job, that expectations were significantly different. This disconnect created an underlying trust issue that permeated many other aspects of the work.

Next, independent of the reasons for the trust breakdown was a generational expectation that their managers were ill equipped to observe or address. This generational expectation was anchored in the fact that most of the key leaders, in their late twenties and early thirties, had flourished in academic, internship and early career roles where frequent two-way discussions with professors and bosses were the norm. In these discussions, they were able to freely share the challenges associated with their leader roles, get feedback about how they were performing and gain insight into what was needed to succeed. Despite the desire to engage in these kinds of discussions at AmEx, dramatic increases in workloads and razor thin staffing levels meant that key leaders were working less collaboratively. These same key leaders were choosing to say nothing about their feelings of isolation because of the trust issue linked to different expectations during the interview and onboarding stages. In a nutshell, no one wanted to complain about what they desperately needed to succeed, and yet were not getting.



Finally, our findings revealed that both of the previous conditions described were leading to faulty reporting about the turnover trend. Key leaders were choosing to report that everything was fine, since they neither trusted those who would need to take steps to make needed changes nor did they want to risk their careers by speaking out.

The SWAT team spent several weeks with us satisfying their curiosity about the meaning of the findings as well as the implications for the division and the overall organization. Once everyone was on the same page, we facilitated a process to design a solution that would address all three issues.

Over a period of several months, and after involving a broader set of stakeholders along the way, we implemented a simple and powerful plan that began with key leaders validating the findings. Once we gained more of their trust, we engaged them in communication processes to dramatically improve the alignment of the key messages during the selection process with onboarding key messages. We also engaged these leaders in the development of a mentoring program and set up several ways to measure improvements in satisfaction as well as the forums to discuss progress. Powerful reinforcement for the initiative came in the form of the executive team's decision to revisit organization wide norms and leader commitment to overall AmEx values.

Impact

When results were measured at the 6 month, one year and 18 month marks, the SWAT team reported that turnover had been reversed and that divisional goals were being achieved as per plan. Further evidence of success was that the work was showcased elsewhere to help leaders be more conscious of how human dynamics can effect large group performance.

About Chelsea C-Suite Solutions

We are a premier organizational development firm focused on helping members of the C-Suite and leadership teams build strong and admired organizations.

We help our clients articulate clear strategies and align their organizations, people and cultures to drive extraordinary results.

We provide coaching, consulting and learning opportunities that solve complex problems that are often reflected elsewhere in the organization, but are ultimately anchored in the C-Suite.

Our team brings deep expertise as consultants, psychologists, coaches, and former executives to ensure that every leadership team we work with is aligned on strategic imperatives and working at its highest potential.

Contact us

Chelsea C-Suite Solutions
420 W 23rd Street, Suite 10b
New York, NY 10011
t 212-352-0890
info@chelseacsuite.com
ChelseaCSuite.com