



spandex

Turning Around a Troubled Leadership Team and Resolving Long-Standing Conflicts



ORGANIZATION

Spandex



INDUSTRY

Specialty Printing/Graphics



ABOUT

Spandex, a Gerber Scientific Products Company, is a world leader in the development and manufacture of computerized sign making and specialty graphics systems that provide sign shops and graphics professionals with comprehensive engineered solutions for durable digital color printing.

CHALLENGE

The leadership team of Spandex, the European subsidiary of an American multinational company, had become highly dysfunctional. The team members had become preoccupied with internal politics, stopped listening to each other, and become dishonest in their dealings with each other. According to Spandex President Rod Larson, things deteriorated to the point that the team became totally unproductive, leading to an inability to capitalize on business opportunities or solve organizational problems.

Rod was familiar with Arbinger’s approach, but was a bit hesitant that it could work given that his multinational team consisted of members with diverse cultural backgrounds and business perspectives.

“Arbinger delivered immediate, tangible results. Where we were highly dysfunctional and totally unproductive, there is now honesty, individual accountability, and collaboration. I have no other word for it than ‘remarkable.’”

SOLUTION

Rod nevertheless engaged Arbinger to deliver a two-day workshop with the team, with a focus on building trust and cooperation within the team. Rod also had Arbinger provide a year of ongoing, post-workshop implementation support to help the team members embed Arbinger’s workplace strategies in their day-to-day work.

ROD LARSON
CEO | Spandex

According to Rod, the workshop had an immediate and tangible impact on the dynamics of the team, while the implementation support helped sustain that change and reinforced the impact of Arbinger’s approach on an individual level. Shortly after the implementation support began, Rod began hearing from team members who marveled at how the team had begun functioning. They began saying things like, “That was the best business meeting that I ever participated in,” and, “I’ve never been a member of a team that has worked so well together.” They even called the team the most productive and honest team they had ever seen.

In fact, in its due diligence conducted during the subsequent acquisition of Spandex’s corporate parent, the acquiring firm specifically mentioned the unusual cohesiveness and rapport they noticed within the Spandex leadership team. According to Rod, the implementation support ensured that the impact of the Arbinger training remained just as intense as it had been immediately after the session. Rod said the difference in his team after the Arbinger work was “like night and day” and credits Arbinger with producing “remarkable results.”

As part of its work with Spandex, Arbinger discovered that the company was embroiled in an adversarial relationship with a manufacturing division of the same multinational corporation. Not one nice thing was being said about the other division, and this sniping cut both ways. Ironically, the president of the manufacturing division had previously been president of Spandex. As a result of this ongoing feud, tremendous mistrust had built up between the two units, leading each unit to withhold important information—such as new product plans and market intelligence—that would have helped the other unit operate more effectively, better serve the company’s end-customers, and increase sales. Things got so bad that the divisions even began providing each other with misinformation.

As Arbinger has found to be the case in most conflicts, Spandex managers knew exactly what the other side was doing wrong, but were blind to how they were contributing to the problem themselves. In addition, as is typically the case, each side dug in unnecessarily, focused on tangential issues, and failed to seek solutions to the primary issues behind the conflict—even though the costs of the conflict were extremely high for both parties.

Through a combination of workshops, consulting, and executive coaching, Arbinger helped Spandex managers see that they were blinded to the true nature of the conflict and then see the situation in a totally new light.

RESULTS

As a result of this work, Spandex managers were able to see how they were contributing to the conflict and, much to their surprise, how they were unwittingly inviting the very behavior they said they hated in the sister division.

Spandex managers committed to changing themselves and the situation. Guided by Arbinger’s principles, these managers were able to quickly determine what they needed to do—and they did it. Some of the change was behavioral, but the core of the change was in the way they viewed themselves, the sister division, and the situation as a whole. This objective, blame-free way of seeing things led to even more effective behaviors. The transformation in the way that Spandex viewed and dealt with the sister division was so stark that the president of the sister division told Rod, “We don’t know what you’re doing over there, but whatever it is, it’s working.” The sister division quickly reciprocated, becoming open, honest, and helpful themselves. As a result, the overall relationship radically improved in both directions, even though Arbinger worked only with one party to the conflict. The change was so radical that executives within the parent company, who were not themselves directly involved in the conflict, were also able to feel the change and asked in wonder how it was that the two divisions had begun working so well together.

Rod summed up the changed relationship in one word: “remarkable.”