

Creating a Coaching Culture at Union Energy

“ If we could roll back the clock – we wouldn’t do it any other way.”

– Paul Slinger, VP of Rental Operations

Background

Union Energy Inc. (now called Reliance Home Comfort) was established in January of 1999 following the deregulation of Ontario’s energy industry. Currently serving 1 million customers and employing 790, Union Energy’s core business lies in the rental and maintenance of water heaters, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment. Financing operations also account for a sizable portion of its business.

As a newly competitive company still employing individuals used to the certainties of working under monopoly conditions, Union faced unique human resources challenges. Union’s executive team, including VP of Human Resources and Labour Relations Linda Morgan, recognized the tremendous importance of good customer relationships to the company’s success. In order to ensure great customer service, it was imperative that Union’s front-line employees were committed to exceeding customer expectations in every call. Having reached the conclusion that inspiring commitment to service excellence was not compatible with the current command-and-control management culture, Linda began searching for a management training program that would address Union’s needs.

Phase 1 – Coaching for High Performance

As she searched for solutions, a colleague of Linda’s from Union’s parent company mentioned that PCI’s **Coaching for High Performance (CHP)** workshop could help address Union’s specific needs. In particular, the program could help managers see how to successfully break from a command-and-control style of management, and work towards developing commitment in their people.

Linda arranged to attend a half-day CHP overview session with a colleague – and was impressed with the PCI approach. “A lot of programs aren’t as adaptable” she explains, “They’re too complex, and not as easy to put into practice. Performance Coaching’s programs really make personal implementation easy”. Excited by the prospects of the program, Linda arranged a 2-day workshop for Union’s executives and senior managers.

“ The information was very easy to understand, easy to remember, and easy to apply.”

– Niven Peterson, UE Manager

Phase 1 – Coaching for High Performance (continued)

The executive team emerged from the program convinced that CHP could form a key component of Union's drive to service excellence. Committed to a true cultural shift in the organization, the executive team made the decision to become certified through PCI's **Coaching for High Performance Certification** program – and to deliver CHP internally themselves. Explains Linda: “we really needed our managers to see this as a ‘come-from-the-top’ initiative. We didn’t want this to be perceived as an HR lead program, but as part of a shift in the way we do business”. Through the certification process, the executive team learned the key components of program delivery done ‘the PCI way’: infusing content with personal anecdotes, teaching through the power of story, and the art of ‘gravity through levity’ – communicating profound concepts in a light-hearted way. The process was easier than many had thought it would be: “the logic of the model makes it easy as a trainer – you can really picture it and communicate it” says Rob Jutras, VP of HVAC. “The personal stories really tie the whole thing together” explains Paul Slinger, VP of Rental Operations, “Peggy [Baumgartner, PCI's director of training] was phenomenal, she was amazingly good and was really good at helping us find our own stories and a personal way of communicating the concepts”.

After becoming certified, the freshly minted coaches rolled out the CHP program to over 100 managers and supervisors throughout the company. The program was a resounding success. In an impact survey done 6 months after the course, 100% of participants reported that they were still using the skills, with 96% indicating a positive impact on performance. Buoyed by the success of the program, and eager to build on the momentum, the coaches listened to the 72% of participants who wanted further development and came to PCI looking for next steps.

Phase 2 – Coaching Milestone

Through the same process employed to deliver the CHP program, Union's coaches attended, became certified in, and subsequently rolled out PCI's **Coaching Milestone** program, a follow-on program that focuses on confronting, and the power of team coaching. The benefits from the CHP program increased exponentially as managers saw the depth of the executive team's commitment to a coaching culture, and as their understanding of coaching fundamentals grew. The benefits not only accrued to the participants, but to the coaches as well. “There has been a huge benefit as a coach for me – in first understanding the model, then being able to articulate the model, and finally to live the model” explains Amandio Contreiras, District GM.

Key Outcomes

Walking through Union's offices, you can literally hear the difference PCI's programs have made. “There's a different tone to the language we use” says Linda “we really understand the implications for the receiver of negative communication”. Explains Amanda McWha, Rental HVAC Program Manager “you hear people using almost a new vocabulary – talking about ‘getting clarity’ and ‘giving recognition’ – and you know people have truly benefited from the workshops”. The difference is also visible, with managers using coaching tools such as the GROW process to work through coaching interactions, and applying PCI's coaching model in their own staff training.

“**We've had to hire a lot of new people lately, and in the past when we did training our stats would drop for that month. Now, even in the months where we do training our stats stay the same or improve.**”

– Kerri Bowen, UE Manager

Overall, morale has improved, communications are enhanced, and there is increased teamwork. All of these outcomes have resulted in a closer connection between managers and the front-line employees serving customers. In the end, explains Paul, it boils down to the fact that “we're constantly asking our managers for higher levels of performance – some do a better job of working through that, and those that are better are using coaching skills.”