

The Leadership Circle Profile: Business Success Story

Company: Accent Energy

Location: Dublin, Ohio

The Challenge

For a typical executive, it may be hard to find anything negative about growing from **\$3 million to \$400 million** in sales over two years, but Dana Saucier is not typical.

“I have learned that success can come crashing down with ferocity if you are not constantly evolving and innovating to address new challenges,” says the executive of Ohio-based Accent Energy, the fastest growing domestic independent energy marketer.

Accent’s explosive growth from 2003 to 2005 had taken its toll on Saucier and his team of sales and operations pros. Taxed from the torrid pace and the rapid addition of new employees the team had fallen into bad habits of communication in the office. People were not listening to each other, collaborating or participating in new idea discussions. Many team members had become defensive to criticism.

At the office, Saucier’s team meetings became predictable and uninspired: the sales team’s bravado dominated conversations and decision-making, while operations staff were timid to speak up if they disagreed with a strategy — content to bite their tongues and complain in private.

Despite proven talent and exceptional skill level the group’s “in-fighting” was causing the team to not maximize million-dollar business promotions. For example, the sales team developed a special promotion to reward customer loyalty. A central component to carry out the promotion belonged to the operations team. They needed to identify, track and report on thousands of customers’ different billing cycles. The information was paramount for the Customer Service Group to accurately reward customers on the front line. However, there was disconnect between sales and operations about the level of detail needed on the back-end to carry out the promotion. Customer service needed detailed information on the billing cycles to qualify customers for the promotion based on continuous. The promo launched and without the proper information from operations the customer service group felt they were out on an island alone.

Saucier explains, “The lifeblood of an energy company is the ability to develop and quickly deliver innovative solutions. A breakdown in strategic idea generation and collaboration between sales and operations can be the demise of a company’s competitive advantage and new business.

If the rift continued to develop, the team — and company — risked losing millions of dollars in sales opportunities.

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The Setup

A do-it-yourself person, Saucier wanted to analyze his impact on the situation. Could he improve it with stronger leadership, management and communication?

He recruited Steve Anderson, president of Integrated Leadership Systems LLC., to help him answer these questions and lay the ground rules to manage the team's growth.

Leadership Transformational Tool

In a decision that would ultimately impact every aspect of Saucier's life, Anderson suggested using The Leadership Circle Profile (TLCP) – a transformational assessment tool to measure his leadership strengths. This survey elicited feedback from over 20 people in direct contact with Saucier, including his wife. TLCP zeroed in on the two primary leadership domains: creative competencies and reactive tendencies. TLCP also revealed Saucier's personal operating system: the internal beliefs or assumptions that ran his behavior and impacted others and his ability to lead.

“I think the biggest thing that was surprising was the difference between how you view yourself and how others view you,” said Saucier. The biggest disconnect was in the authenticity/integrity category. Saucier discovered that many people perceived him as being guarded and not always saying what was really on his mind. He had always focused on praising people for the good stuff, but found out that people also wanted to hear the negative feedback.”

Using the analysis, Saucier and Anderson created a personal development plan to help him become a more effective leader and communicator. It required him to practice a list of behaviors and self-awareness activities every day — using The Leadership Circle Profile as a roadmap.

What began as an exercise to improve his professional effectiveness, quickly spilled over into his personal life.

“My wife started commenting on subtle changes in my behavior at home,” explains Saucier. “That's when I knew I wanted to extend this program to my entire team.”

The Solution

With the help of Anderson, each member of Saucier's team used the same TLCP survey. Employees came face-to-face with the reality of how other team members view their behavior and their impact on communication and productivity.

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“That was the real eye-opener for our team,” said Saucier. “Regardless of whether a person agrees with the assessment, the survey is taken by a large swath of people so it is hard to believe that everyone is wrong.”

The survey provided Anderson with a window into each employee’s inner workings.

“Using the information, I could develop a plan for individual change based on actual triggers of behavior,” adds Anderson. “While difficult at first, true change does not happen unless the cause and result of a behavior is clearly identified.”

Anderson started the program with an offsite meeting to expose and discuss every profile. Sharing the results with everyone was necessary to create an even playing field. The team was able to speak openly with their peers and ask questions about why their behavior impacted group communication and productivity.

Leaving that offsite, everyone felt empowered to change the group’s communication with personal development. Anderson created a development plan for each member — just as he did for Saucier. But the big “ah-ha” moments would happen during a bi-weekly team meeting — moderated by Anderson. These would be the true test to see if the individual transformation work would translate into improved team performance.

The Result

By the first meeting, The Leadership Circle Profile and Anderson were emphatically deemed a success.

“You could really tell people were more self-aware and interested in being better communicators,” said Saucier. “It was amazing to see the sales team step back and the operations team step up. We generated more innovative ideas in that meeting than any in recent memory because everyone contributed.”

In the year following that first meeting, Anderson’s work with the sales and operations team continued to provide impact through meaningful collaboration

Saucier identifies employees that have emerged as superstar performers because of the program. And each member of the team keeps their individual TLCP evaluation on their desk to use as a check and balance throughout their day.

One of the most important changes has been the interaction between sales and operations. The TLCP survey revealed the perception that the sales team didn’t recognize the process or work that was involved with completing sales. Many of the operations staff felt that once the sales team did something, they were the ones expected to deliver on it even though they had little input on the decision. Furthermore, outside of the group, the customer support team felt there would be less errors, quicker execution and higher customer satisfaction if they were involved in the process earlier on.

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In one of the meetings, the group set some goals for better internal collaboration and to involve the support staff earlier. As a result they were able to resolve the things they do that make their jobs tougher and create profitable promotions. For example, sales, operations and support all worked together to create and implement a Summer gift card promotion to improve customer retention. The cost to start a customer's energy flow is extremely high, so retention is of primary importance. Sales created gift cards as a reward for loyalty. Operations delivered the gift cards and monitored customers. The customer support team – involved from the beginning – was prepared to field and process requests for renewals. Due to the successful implementation, customer turnover was cut in half from previous years and the company earned millions in recurring revenue.

Perhaps the most vivid indication of improved communication and productivity is the organic growth of the program within the company.

“Without saying a word, other divisions in the company have approached me because they notice a remarkable change in my team's productivity, creativity and overall satisfaction,” remarks Saucier. “Everyone is having fun again and we're doing amazing work.”

In fact, Anderson is implementing The Leadership Circle Profile and the leadership development program to the entire accounting and finance division at Accent Energy. Saucier believes it is only a matter of time before TLCP is implemented throughout the company.

For Saucier, it's no small accomplishment to grow company sales from \$3 million to \$400 million in two years and be recognized — along with Accent Energy's executives — as Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year in 2006. Yet he knows that an accomplishment of equal value is being able to enjoy a renewed richness in his personal life. Saucier has sat down with his wife to review some of The Leadership Circle Profile findings and she's noticed the same positive changes at home that TLCP has brought about at work.

“Most executives find their home life takes an enormous hit when the company grows,” says a smiling Saucier. “But my home life and relationship with my wife has only gotten better and stronger...it is truly the best of both worlds.”