

MINING FOR LEADERS

Sherritt Coal, is one of the world's largest producers of nickel from lateritic sources with operations in Canada, Cuba and Madagascar.

But if the prospects for nickel are Sherritt's biggest opportunity, its biggest challenge may be developing the leaders it needs to stay on top, says Shawn Bakker, a psychologist with Psychometrics Canada. Bakker has been involved as a facilitator for the company's leadership development program, "The Leader Within."

The program, which draws participants who work everywhere from head office to mine sites, is aimed at employees moving from initial-level supervisory roles to more strategic roles that emphasize the relational side rather than the operational side, says Bakker.

"Some of the participants are people who have grown up in mines," he says. "They're completely comfortable when it comes to the operational side of the business - reading plans or knowing how equipment works together. But leading human beings shifts gears for them. Some find themselves in a management or leadership role with no formal learning on how to do it well."

Loretta Miiller, Director of Human Resources with Sherritt, says that learning gap was a challenge the company was aware of. "We wanted to address the employee perception—and sometimes the reality—that training wasn't being provided to help them in their jobs. The training we had been providing was seen as ad hoc. We wanted something more purposeful, more aligned with the person's career progression."

"We also wanted a consistent level of training available, so whether you were an intermediate leader at one mine site in Alberta or another site in Saskatchewan, you'd have the opportunity for the exact same training—and an opportunity to meet colleagues and build relationships."

As Bakker points out, the gear shift for these leaders has to happen smoothly for Sherritt, a major player in an industry where failure is felt quickly on the bottom line. "The transition is difficult—and it's pretty hard to move people backwards. This program is an investment by the organization in helping people shift and succeed at it."

That investment includes allotting two full days for the program. "It's a big commitment to take people who have key roles day to day and pulling them out for two days," says Bakker, adding that senior executives drop by in the morning and at lunch to emphasize the value of learning, talk about what they've gained from it and show their commitment to improvement.

"The program is essentially 'leadership 101,' teaching people about themselves," says Bakker. "What are their strengths and skills? What are their blind spots? How do they solve problems and have conversations? What works to engage and manage people, and what doesn't?"

To help participants answer these questions about themselves, the program uses a variety of tools from Psychometrics. Focusing on assessing personality traits, values and situational judgment, the program is tailored for each session based on the evolving literature on leadership and to what Sherritt has identified as desired competencies.

"Each assessment in itself is not the thing," he explains. "The combination gives people a good understanding of their preferences, skills and values."

Along with the assessments, participants get a 360-degree review from their supervisors, colleagues and direct reports. Bakker says this helps them come to the table with real-life situations that are problematic, and with areas in which they could develop or adjust.

The idea, he adds, is to help fledgling leaders adapt to the idea of "living in the human system of the organization that thrives in conversations, rather than the lines of the org chart."



Bakker says Psychometrics strives to make the program practical, because anything too abstract or theoretical might have participants questioning its relevance. “We make it concrete, concise and relevant,” he says. “We narrow it down to one or two goals to work on, so it becomes easier to keep their attention focused and evaluate as they move forward.”

The program’s real-world focus is earning praise from participants.

“People like the assessment feedback portion best,” says Bakker. “The feedback is linked with actual workplace situations and performance, and they say they are learning about themselves and that it does relate to their work.

Miller says Sherritt also reaps benefits from investing in its people for the long term, including low turnover. “The training is cost-effective, and it allows senior executives to interact with up-and-coming managers in one place, rather than travelling to the different mine sites she adds.

To make sure the program remains valuable for both employees and employer, Psychometrics evaluates it in several ways, from post-surveys after every workshop to discussions with Sherritt’s HR and leadership development teams.

“Because we’re tweaking it based on competencies, the program never stays the same,” Bakker says. “But many of its main themes don’t change—understand yourself, be aware of how you engage people and how they communicate with you, and you’ll be able to succeed in that grey area of managing relationships.”

Written by Sean Townsend

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