

How Do You Build Culture?

An Interview with Julie Snow and Sylvia Emson Canopus Managing Agents

In a constantly evolving environment, the challenge is to create a consistent culture that will support change. Julie Snow and Sylvia Emson explain how they are helping to build the culture at Canopus - one of Lloyds' most progressive managing agencies.

“Culture” is perhaps an overused word in business – what does it mean to you?

Julie Snow: Culture is how people behave. If you truly have a strong culture you should be able to ask anyone in the business what it means to work for that company, and they will be able to tell you. It's more than just a mission statement stuck on the wall in reception. You can say, “we invest in people”, but often this is no more than a thin veneer. It is just words, with no real impact on the people. Unless it affects how the people in the business behave, it's meaningless. A truly strong culture is a crucial part of your brand. It's something we've always tried to work on, and we are focusing more and more heavily on it now.

You mentioned investing in people – what is Canopus' approach to development and how does that help in creating the culture you are looking for?

Sylvia Emson: Our philosophy is to try to develop everyone in the business as much as possible. There are two sides to competency: the technical skills associated with our industry and the softer skills. Any successful insurance company caters very well for the technical side: if you are an underwriter or in claims for example, you have a career path mapped out in terms of professional qualifications, and you can progress through them in a step by step way. Canopus is no exception in this respect, but to be an

Canopus is a privately owned insurance and reinsurance group which writes a diversified portfolio of business from its operations at Lloyds and around the world.

Substantially the largest privately owned Lloyds insurance underwriting business, Canopus has achieved significant growth over the past seven years through a mix of organic expansion and acquisition.

The business fosters a culture of underwriting excellence, entrepreneurship and dedicated service provision.

all round success and to develop your career you need to have the softer skills too. Because of this we are always looking for what we can do for our people from both sides.

It's common to hear the complaint that softer skills training doesn't work, or that six months on delegates remember nothing of what they learned. What are your tips for others in the HR community on how to make training successful?

JS: It needs to be part of a strategy: for example in 2009 our then Operations Director - now Managing Director - Stephen Manning developed an Operations Plan in which point nine was to release the potential of the people in Canopus. Once development is part of a strategic initiative it's much easier to coordinate and deliver.

SE: Along with that, you need senior executive buy-in, this provides the additional weight to any programme. You may sometimes also need to drive things through. It helps to communicate how each individual programme relates to the strategy, and therefore why the people are there on that programme.

“To be an all round success and to develop your career you need to have the softer skills too”

JS: Isolate the three key areas that will make a difference to your business. We chose the creation of a common language, the adoption of strong meeting ethics, and persuasive presenting as the three elements that would help us create a cohesive culture. Once you have these

Interview: How do you Build Culture?

three, they are themes you can constantly refer back to.

SE: Identify the tangible benefits of the programme you choose - what will these people look like when they come out of the other end of this training? For this you should engage a training company that can deliver real behavioural change.

To create the culture you are looking for you need to tailor training to the needs of the target group. It's no good saying, "we've got a programme coming up in three weeks' time, who can we put on it? Oh, that'll suit you." It's important to deliver bespoke training that concentrates on creating the behaviour you want to promote in your people.

JS: Then make the development programme part of everyday life in the organisation – live and breathe it. HR should be very active in pushing it and supporting it. HR can have a huge influence on how successful a development programme can be. We work hard to ensure delegates' line managers are involved in supporting their efforts to create results from their participation on courses.

“Once development is part of a strategic initiative it's much easier to coordinate and deliver”

Often line managers don't realise how important they are or what they can do to contribute towards the success of a development project, so we do everything in our power to make them an active part of the process.

SE: Ask the people who have been through one programme for their feedback on what should be done next, who will benefit from it, and be flexible about what the next development initiative looks like*.

What results have you seen from the development initiatives you have pursued in this way?

JS: The first programme we did with Mitchell Phoenix was a pilot programme aimed at the operations side of the business. That group was tasked with exploring what we should do next to further develop the culture in the business, and working with their recommendations we created two further programmes, aimed at both the underwriting and operations groups, and we developed some powerful tools and synergies across the business from that.

SE: From a strategic perspective we want to develop everyone in the business equally, and in doing so avoid the possibility that two silos will develop (*between the Operations and Underwriting sides of the business*). To be able to run a programme where operations and underwriting could be

involved together was a great step forward. Beyond that, groups report that when you walk around the company you can see who has been on a Mitchell Phoenix programme and who hasn't.

They communicate more purposefully, they share the common language, their meetings are quicker, etc.

JS: We asked Mitchell Phoenix to develop and run a programme at departmental level, which everyone in a particular department attended. At the end of the programme each participant delivered a short presentation on the results they had developed. Now that department is recognised as delivering on time and in budget, and is getting praise from other parts of the business. They've brought that change about by their own behaviour, but their behaviour has been supported by the things we've been working on with them.

Seven Steps to Creating a Development Programme

1. Make it part of strategy
2. Get senior management buy-in
3. Identify tangible benefits
4. Tailor it to each group
5. Be active in supporting the development programme - make it part of everyday life in the organisation
6. Gather feedback and use this to inform what the next initiative looks like
7. Secure your own budget

* In leading Canopus' Management Development Programmes, Julie Snow and Sylvia Emson followed their own advice to the letter, showing unwavering commitment to creating the circumstances in which their projects could have real cultural impact.

Interview: How do you Build Culture?

What does the future hold for Canopus and how is this affecting what you are doing with the culture now?

JS: Our aim is to continue to make our brand distinguishable in the marketplace, so that when we are recruiting people they understand what it is they are coming to join, how they can work and what's expected of them in this organisation. You know you've got a really strong culture when people hear the name Canopus and know what it means.

SE: As part of that, we are keen to

develop a behavioural competency framework. What we want to try to develop are some key behaviours which we consider identify a Canopus person, and which are meaningful across the whole business for people at all levels.

JS: The challenge here is that the business is always changing. We make headway with creating a common culture, and then we acquire another business of over 100 people, and we have to integrate them into the company. We are currently running the Mitchell Phoenix Foundations of Management Programme specifically to help some of the managers from business Canopus has recently

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acquired to integrate with our culture.

It's because things change so fast at Canopus that we need clear communication, efficient meetings and everything that a common culture implies!



Julie Snow, FCIPD, Head of Human Resources, Canopus

Julie has 24 years experience working as a generalist HR professional in the financial sector, initially in banking and in 2001 joining Canopus as Head of HR.

She obtained her professional IPD qualification in 1991 and upgraded to fellowship status in 2005.

Julie heads up a growing team at Canopus that has responsibility for restructuring and change management, learning and development, recruitment, communication and employee relations, compensation and benefits, payroll and pension scheme administration.

The journey at Canopus from her joining in 2001 when the two entities of Chartwell, the Lloyds managing agent, and Trenwick, the corporate insurer, were in existence, through the MBO in December 2003, the subsequent creation of Canopus to become the diverse business of today has provided a myriad of HR challenges and development opportunities.

The story continues as Canopus grows and develops its business proposition into a variety of classes and the international arena, offering a wide spectrum of services to its clients.



Sylvia Emson, Assoc CIPD, Human Resources Manager, Canopus

Sylvia has 20 years HR experience, initially within the banking sector before moving to the insurance market.

Since joining Canopus she has seen significant changes in terms of the size and ownership of the Company which has provided many challenges from an HR perspective.

As part of her main responsibilities, Sylvia manages the Senior HR Officer and his team to ensure that a high level of professional support is provided to the company and its employees.

As well as the day to day business of being part of a generalist HR team, she has also had the opportunity to become involved in specific projects which have arisen as Canopus continues to develop and grow.

In her words, “one of the good things about working for Canopus is that there is always likely to be something new on the horizon – you never get the chance to become bored!”