

Air Malta

Air Malta is the foremost airline serving the Maltese Islands – Malta, Gozo and Comino. It flies to several major cities across Europe and the wider Mediterranean, and works with partner airlines to connect with many other destinations. Air Malta springs from the heart of the Maltese Islands, differentiating itself from competitors with its experience working with Maltese people, culture and places.



Project background

Air Malta is 98% government-owned, and for many years enjoyed a monopoly on flights in and out of Malta. But when the service opened up to competition, the airline began to struggle. Radical organisational changes were needed, the problem underlined by losses in 2010 of €30 million and a bail-out by the Maltese government.

Some of the more obvious operational issues were addressed immediately, but more work was needed to make the business competitive. As part of the restructure, the company head-count was slashed from 1,400 to 850. Peter Davies, a man renowned for troubleshooting airlines, was brought in as the new CEO, spearheading a revitalised culture

of commercial know-how.

It was at this point that OPP was brought in, to provide structure for the key issue of leadership development. Air Malta had built up a strong relationship with OPP during the scoping phases of the project, and asked for their assistance in delivering the initial development phase.

Many of the Air Malta managers had been with the company for several years, and equipping them to lead the business through times of change was a priority. The decision was also made to recruit a new Senior Leadership Team.

The solution

“You have to realise that as an airline you’re on public show all the time”, comments Peter Davies,

TRAVEL AND LEISURE SECTOR

Business needs

- Leadership development
- Organisational change
- Development budgeting
- Future-proofing

Benefits

- Increased efficiency and profit
- Enhanced understanding of customer needs and expectations
- Greater self-awareness and assessment of abilities
- Insight into people issues and cultural attitudes

Psychometric tools used

- 16PF



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CEO, Air Malta. “The customer sees the nuts and bolts of it when they take a flight – the fuel being loaded, the luggage going in, the security process, and so on. This means we are very exposed as an organisation. Unless a manager understands this customer perspective, it’s impossible for them to relay priorities to staff.”

In the light of this, OPP’s first task was to develop an assessment process for the 34 members of the wider leadership team. The emphasis was on people driving their own development journeys, with each manager making an honest assessment of their strengths, expectations and skills gaps.

Most of the participants had never been through any process like this before. Complete transparency and trust were essential.

OPP created a one-day development centre, involving a mix of written, role-play and group exercises, plus a competency-based interview using the 16PF. Tailored reports were generated for each participant, combining themes from the exercises, plus personality data. These reports were sent to the individuals, and the onus was on them to share the information with line managers and L&D. The reports were followed up with a one-hour coaching call. An Organisational Report was put together too, giving the combined leadership team an overview of the trends identified and making recommendations for next steps.

Peter was the first to go through the process, and it was then cascaded down the leadership teams. It was a very collaborative process, with OPP involved at all stages, from initial groundwork to implementation.

Results

Peter describes the development work at the heart of the airline as nothing less than “a revolution”.

“Our development work with OPP has helped managers to realise where their own faults are, and to help them correct them”, he comments. “It’s a bit like standing in front of mirror with no clothes on and being able to look yourself in the eye and make an honest judgement. This helps you be a good manager, by being true to yourself. This, in turn, creates a better environment, where we have the right conditions to succeed.

“The assessment process the leaders went through provides a framework and point of reference for discussion about individual performance. It’s the foundation of a mentoring structure – a rational, specific, proactive framework for ongoing coaching. We’re now using the reports to work individually on

PDPs. It has become a blueprint for how we manage people in the future.”

Feedback was very positive, and the 16PF reports, administered online, made a great impact. People engaged with the process and were happy to share information with managers, and to ask “what’s next?”

“The organisational report was exactly what we wanted”, says Jane-Claire Dennis, the new head of L&D at Air Malta. “I read it from beginning to end, which is something I wouldn’t normally do. The information was pertinent and relevant, and a really good basis for planning – I am now writing a management development programme for this community of managers to plug the cultural gaps identified in the report.”

The company has achieved its initial goals of consolidation and general redevelopment, but is keen to keep up the momentum. It is now in a position from which it can look at long-term approaches rather than putting together short-term solutions.

“We’ve caught most of the low-hanging fruit”, says Peter Davies, “but now we need to work on stamina. It’s the subtle factors we have to think about, such as root causes of cultural attitudes in the company.”

The change has been radical, and the development programme has been successful, but there is still work to be done to build on Air Malta’s profitability. The early signs are encouraging: the business looks set to break even in the financial year 2013-14, a massive turnaround from the earlier losses, and a great vindication of the process so far.



Established in Oxford in 1989, OPP is one of Europe’s largest providers of business psychology solutions. Its products and services are used by private and public sector organisations in more than 25 countries. OPP develops the 16PF personality assessment and also distributes many of the world’s leading psychometric instruments, including the MBTI, FIRO and TKI tools.

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