

How innovative leadership is helping a chemical manufacturer take on its toughest test

A chemical manufacturer, supported by Made Smarter, has embraced a new approach to leadership during the coronavirus crisis.

Forced to close or reduce operations in factories and offices, owners and senior managers involved in the North West digital technology adoption pilot faced their toughest test as they figured out how to restart, reassure their uncertain workforce and customers, and recover.

Now a business leader from Actikem, based in Warrington, has revealed that changing their approach to the new needs of their workforce and business is helping them navigate the impact of the pandemic.

Agile leadership, flexibility, transparency, open communications and being receptive to learning from others have proved vital new tools for the future.

Andrew Mooney, Managing Director of Actikem, said transparency through regular and open communications was a critical factor.



“We focused on getting the communication right across the business, keeping in regular contact when employees work from home, so they do not feel isolated,” he said. “We have been very open with personnel about COVID-19 impacts on the business and they have appreciated that.”

Mooney is part of the second cohort on the Made Smarter Leadership Programme, which had to switch online with virtual tutorials to give leaders a strategic view to support the adoption of hi-tech and digitally-based manufacturing techniques into their own production processes.

“COVID-19 has also made me think more about what our strategy should be as we come out of this pandemic,” he said. “It has cemented my thoughts of moving our IT infrastructure to a completely cloud based solution. The benefits of home working deliver improvements in productivity, better utilisation of office space and value improvements to staff in time and money in the pocket. It also gives us challenges about hardware at home, IT security, mental health and communication and collaboration.”

Donna Edwards, Made Smarter programme director, said: “From the start of the pandemic Made Smarter has been in regular contact with leaders across the region offering support and advice. Our conversations revealed some striking

changes in the traditional norms, attitudes and behaviours that guide leaders.

“They have demonstrated agility and adapted to an unprecedented and emerging situation to ensure people and plants have remained functional. New flexible approaches have helped individuals and teams cope with the intense challenges to their daily and working lives. In many cases they have used the pain to change longstanding practices and find better ways of doing things. At the heart of this need for change is technology, which has proved invaluable in allowing manufacturers to work remotely to maintain operations and communications and prompted SMEs to accelerate and broaden their adoption of digital tools.”

It isn't just SME leaders who have experienced lightbulb moments during the pandemic.

Glyn Jones, chair of Made Smarter's North West adoption steering group and BAE Systems' delivery director for the Tempest programme, said Covid-19 challenged long-standing paradigms in his business.

He said: “Covid brought a huge amount of focus, energy and some amazing innovation to get the business back on its feet.

“Things we previously thought impossible were achieved in the space of weeks and whilst it was challenging both personally and professionally for a lot of people, we saw some amazing things happen.

“In the past 25 years I have led many different teams and I have never experienced anything like this, but it is often at times of great adversity that people's leadership skills come to the fore. I am sure many of us have seen that in the past few months.

“There is no leadership book on how we deal with a situation like this, so being open to learning from each other adjusting our approach is vital.

“We will continue to face challenges for a long while yet, but we must find a way to harness some of positive changes, embrace this new attitude and new ways of working rather than simply going back to the way things used to be.”

Registration for the next Leadership Programme starting in October is now open.

For more information or to apply for your place visit www.lancaster.ac.uk/lums/madesmarter or alternatively: email madesmarter@lancaster.ac.uk or call 01524 593 881