

Coke Consolidated Transition Thrives Under Journey to Newland

When Journey to Newland (J2N) creator Bill Poole first met Kevin Henry, Chief Human Resources Officer and Assistant to the President for Coke Consolidated, he had what both men thought was a great idea – a system to help organizations deal with change through an extended metaphor that included animal characters and a journey. A series of conversations and brainstorming sessions later, J2N was born.

What initially attracted Henry to Poole’s concept was its application to diversity and its focus on valuing differences and viewing diversity as an opportunity, not as a problem to be dealt with. In Henry’s prior HR experience, diversity discussions “came with a lot of baggage, and most of it was compliance-based, instead of commitment-based, and that’s where J2N is different,” said Henry.

“I told Bill that if we could link his ideas about leveraging opportunities by valuing differences with successfully working through transformational change, this could be really special,” Henry said. Poole took those conversations and created an experience for employees that “grabs their head, heart, and ultimately their hands,” Henry said. This began the ongoing collaboration between Coke Consolidated and J2N.

Coke Consolidated is the second largest franchise bottler for Coca Cola and was founded in 1902. The company pays a franchise fee to Coca Cola to purchase concentrate, manufacture product and distribute it in the southeastern United States. In the first almost 100 years of its existence, business (aside from the mode of transportation) didn’t change very much. But in the last decade, changes in consumer taste, the beverage industry and the American business landscape have given Coke Consolidated a change mandate.

Its 6,000 employees vary widely in age, job duties, and levels of sophistication, making the common language of J2N ideal. “We needed to communicate in a way that would resonate with everyone,” said Henry. “The J2N extended metaphor has become our mantra for change and enabled us to begin coaching, teaching, and training our employees to think about change in a positive way. The journey from Oldland to Newland is exactly where we are.”

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In the early 2000s Coke Consolidated ran a number of pilot programs using J2N, refining the experience and assessing where and how to best use the system. This fine-tuning led to the first official phase of the J2N “culturalization,” which launched in 2006 and encompassed the training of 120+ leaders via two workshops. The first was a day and a half session that began with a game based on the system, a viewing of the J2N DVD, and a review of the storybook. The session also covered character tendencies, preparing for the journey, surveying the territory and setting the guidelines. The second full day session dealt with gathering the team, choosing the path, navigating the terrain, making the transition and crossing the border.

“We used a cascading rollout approach, as opposed to a ‘big bang’ rollout,” Henry said. “We identified the leaders and parts of the organization that would benefit the most from the learning and started from there – building capacity within those leaders to successfully navigate this transformational change we were experiencing.” In addition to training about 300 managers, Coke Consolidated certified some of their own employees in J2N through Poole and LifeLead International to help support the process.

“The experience has been tremendous thus far,” Henry said. “We’ve received overwhelmingly positive feedback and are seeing real behavioral change and greater levels of collaboration – including cross-functional collaboration.”

Other benefits include the “light bulbs” that go on in participants – that moment of discovery. “Participants see themselves in the characters and their tendencies, and that provides a tremendous opportunity for personal learning,” Henry said. “J2N does a great job of explaining why it is important to identify those tendencies, and then walks you through what to do about them.”

To measure the effectiveness of J2N, Coke Consolidated has created a comprehensive assessment plan, including qualitative and quantitative measures in each of the “Big 5” core capabilities – optimizing communication, leading change, developing leaders, building teams, and valuing differences. Since there are areas that have yet to experience the full J2N process, it is difficult to gather comprehensive business results, but Henry and his staff have been able to compare the sectors that have been trained with those that haven’t, and have observed measurable differences in work environment, as well as productivity.

“J2N really is transformational,” Henry said. “Unlike some training courses – this one connects on a really personal and emotional level. The information has sticking power. We are building capabilities in people that will benefit them at work, but are also transferable – making them better people, more effective community leaders and/or teammates – whether they work for us for their entire career or end up working somewhere else.”

One participant wrote, “I was so impressed with this process that I had my wife read the book so we could have the common language. We laugh about our animal characteristics and share work-related experiences and identify who we are dealing with (what animal).”

The second phase includes a series of five follow-up workshops designed on the J2N model, each covering one of the Big 5. “The Big 5 core capabilities are where you really want to build muscle,” Henry said. “In phase one, we introduced the ideas and began the socialization of our organization into the extended metaphor. This phase is about going deeper.” The next phase for J2N includes formal, but shorter, sessions for non-managers. Henry appreciates the customizable, scalable content of Journey to Newland, enabling Coke Consolidated to meet employees at their respective levels and give them what they need to participate.

“While we continue to look at the ROI of J2N,” Henry said, “preliminary results indicate it is significantly and positively impacting our ability to be successful.”

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