



**A L C H E M Y**  
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AT WORK

# Alchemy Training Case Study: Dairy Crest Group plc



## Corporate change drives training need

The foundation for the training created and delivered by Alchemy for Dairy Crest, the UK's largest chilled dairy foods company, was a project started by the company in 2007.

Simon Cumpsty, then in the Group's central HR department, was leading a business-wide project to develop and implement a single set of HR policies and procedures. These covered the key areas of grievance, attendance management, and disciplinary action. The project was conducted in partnership with the trade unions.

Dairy Crest wanted to move to a more values-based business. This was being driven by the new CEO who was appointed in January 2007, and he was passionate about improving the performance of the business, and making sure management treated their staff the way they would like to be treated themselves.



## Consistent policies and procedures

Across the Dairy Crest group, there were up to a dozen variations of each of the key policies, which caused confusion and inconsistent treatment. Some groups of staff felt they were being unfairly treated as a result.

Simon quotes an example where he and a National Officer from the UNITE union travelled to Hanworth in West London, to deal with a grievance which had escalated to a 5th level of appeal. The first 20 minutes were spent trying to determine which of two possible procedures was the right one: the site procedure or the driver's procedure. It was clearly a waste of resources to have two such senior people making what should have been a fairly straightforward decision.

It took Dairy Crest and the unions about 12 months to develop a single set of consistent policies and procedures. The second part of the project was the implementation. This required training to make sure managers were applying the new policies consistently, and working within the spirit of the new Values and the partnership style of relationships between the company, its staff and the unions. This would ensure all the

managers were able to deal with issues sensitively and in line with the new relationships.

## Liz Harris and Alchemy Training selected

As Simon's HR background was mainly in the area of employee relations, he worked closely with the Head of Learning and Development Sue Blight, to pull together a brief. This was put out to 6 training organisations which had previously worked with Dairy Crest, or were known to them as having the right skills for the task. Liz Harris and her company Alchemy Training were successful, helped in part by her track record and good reputation within Dairy Crest. Simon says of Liz,

*"What was apparent at the outset was her infectious enthusiasm in terms of the brief and opportunity, and wanting to do things slightly differently. She is obviously very knowledgeable, and her ideas were different."*

## A new take on role play

Role play is the obvious type of skills practice for this sort of training, but Simon was concerned this is often hackneyed and not taken seriously by the trainees. Liz came up with the idea of having some typical scenarios filmed using professional actors. Simon thought this was a fantastic idea, never having come across it before. For him, this was a real point of difference for Liz Harris and Alchemy Training.



Armed with a headline brief from Simon, Liz sketched out the scenes, briefed the actors and the production company, and shot all the footage needed during a single day.

*"Liz went off and put it together with minimal support, and turned out something that was superb in terms of the look and feel - very much in line with the business. The appearance of the actors, the language they used, and the whole tone of the clips was superb."*

Alchemy's task was to run 'train the trainer' 2-day workshops for Dairy Crest's HR team. They would then cascade the training out to the company's 600 line

managers. On the first day, the course was run as it would be delivered to the line managers. The second day was a review of the training, with each delegate taking on one part and delivering it to their peers.

### Training the trainers

On the first day in each session, there were 2 or 3 individuals who were not keen on delivering the training to the line managers. Liz picked up on it, and challenged them at the start of the second day, using an approach which was both positive and constructive. It was understandable they should have concerns as they are only 'occasional trainers'. Liz's skill in dealing with this meant she built the HR Team's confidence, helping them overcome their issues. These 'occasional trainers' have now gone on to successfully deliver the training to Dairy Crest's line managers. Simon was impressed that Liz achieved this just by having 'grown up conversations with them and the other delegates'.

*"Liz approached everything with enthusiasm and positivity, in the way she delivered and structured the sessions, even down to the packs for trainers which had flip charts mocked up for the training. It just made it a very simple process. All the props, prompts and speakers' notes were absolutely first class."*



Simon found Liz's approach refreshing, and appreciated her working in a very open and honest way. He has a copy of the DVD on his desk as a reminder and says he is very proud of what was achieved. It was badged internally as 'training for more effective employee interviews'.

*"It was a tremendous piece of work, which really helped us build on the very positive achievement of streamlining all the policies and procedures. It gave the line managers so much more than just learning how to deal with a difficult grievance or attendance management issue."*

### Corporate-wide impact

As well as delivering its primary purpose, the training has helped the organisation as it moves to a shared services centre model. The new structure means less HR support for line managers out in the field, so the training has provided a link with the larger strategic change in the organisation, and to the partnership arrangement with the trades unions.

The original 'train the trainer' workshops were delivered in August 2008, and the training rolled out to line managers over the next nine months. Not everyone has been through the training yet, as transitional training associated with the restructuring has been given priority.

As part of Dairy Crest's technological progress, the training videos and all the supporting notes and handouts have been put on the company's new intranet. These are available as a coaching aid for line managers, who are able to refer to the information before going into interview sessions with staff. This has proved to be very popular and effective.

### Enthusiastic feedback

Managers report the training days, which start with good energetic ice-breakers, as being positive, eventful and engaging. Sessions have a mix of managers and union representatives, helping provide employee perspectives. This has helped maintain the momentum of the joint partnership working throughout the company. For the managers, the training has given them the opportunity to learn new techniques and hone their skills in a safe and supportive environment. This is effective because the training revolves around the video scenes, bringing it to life in a way ordinary role play couldn't.



Summing up, Simon says the success of the training is down to Liz's approach. It put a different emphasis on what could have otherwise been a tired and lacklustre piece of training.

Liz delivered the training with enthusiasm, energy, humour and engagement. Simon liked her style which was very direct and challenging, without being in any way confrontational. She recognised there were issues to be addressed which she wasn't going to ignore.

*"Liz is highly creative in terms of the solution she identified and delivered. It was a cracking piece of work. She has real credibility within the HR community which is reflected in the additional work Dairy Crest and Alchemy continue to deliver."*

### Simon Cumpsty

**Senior HR Business Partner for Household Business**