

BREAK ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE...

Generating leadership capability at a leading software services company



*A Case-Study from the
iDiscoveri 'Crucible' Leadership Project*





In December 2004, a learning partnership was forged between Star Software Solutions* and iDiscoveri Education. It was called the 'iDiscoveri Crucible Leadership Project' -designed to transform 24 of Star's senior-most managers into 'people and business' leaders.

The iDiscoveri Crucible Leadership Project is a nine-month integrated leadership development project that blends leadership skills enhancement, personal executive coaching, outbound developmental experiences, and action learning. Star Software Solutions had been saddled with problems such as an attrition rate far higher than the industry average, a slowdown in growth and a lack of optimism around its future. It was felt that for the business and the organization to change, its leaders needed to change themselves and with this in mind, the Crucible was launched.

Client:

Large Indian IT services company

Audience:

24 senior managers of Star Software Solutions

Organisational context:

Poor skills in leading people, inability to think systemically, lack of team work leading to attrition, disempowerment and unclear business vision

Our approach:

A 9-month leadership school ('Crucible') involving shifts in mindsets ('Boil') sustained by coaching and skill building ('Simmer')

Results:

Visible change as testified by participants:

- "We have injected Hope back into this workplace"
- "Now I know how to Relate to my people and to touch their hearts"
- "We are able to Ask precise questions about the Whys, Hows and So Whats of our business"
- "We now share a clear vision of where our business can go..."

The Crucible unfolded through an outbound program that gave participants the opportunity for intense reflection and dialogue around their own roles as leaders, their vision for Star and issues confronting the organization such as the need for greater teamwork. This was followed by a series of on-site capability enhancement workshops where participants honed leadership skills such as those of communicating, thinking strategically and systemically and ideating. They also chose real organizational projects as testing beds to apply their learnings and formulated action plans. The iDiscoveri facilitators stayed with them as coaches during the Crucible, providing challenge, support and reinforcement.

The winds of change have started blowing over Star. As direct outcomes of the Crucible, Star has moved a low-value business relationship up on the value chain, successfully initiated steps to stem associates' attrition and forged a culture of teamwork across organizational levels and boundaries. Star leaders are equipped with the ability to manage complex problems in an ever-changing environment and this in turn, is helping to position Star for a transformation.

**Note: All names in this case study, including that of the client, have been changed to maintain confidentiality.*

1. Voice of Star

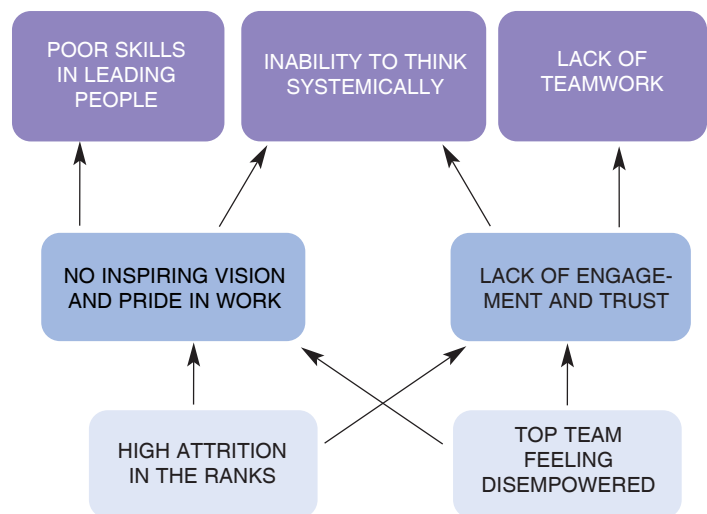


“I am Star and I miss the glory days. I miss the passion and the entrepreneurial 'can-do' spirit which you brought to work every day in the old days. I miss the triple digit growth, the long lists of new, global clients and the high profitability. And yes, I miss a clear direction which can rally all of us together. But most of all, I miss seeing you having fun at work.”

This is when Star Software Solutions reached out to iDiscoveri Education. The result was a partnership which took a group of 24 senior managers on a nine-month journey of unleashing human potential. It was called the iDiscoveri 'Crucible' Leadership Project; a trial by fire for the rediscovery of leadership capability within the participants and the organization.

Star Software Solutions is one of the country's largest IT services companies with a focus on the Financial Services vertical. In December 2004, we got a call from Mohit Khanna, Vice-President of Human Resources at Star. Mohit sounded concerned - attrition at Star was at an all-time high of 50%, associates' morale was low, business numbers were looking grim and finally, the senior leadership team was unable to come together and bring Star back on course. Mohit as well as Manoj Kappu, the strategic head of business, felt that for the business and the organization to change, its leaders needed to change themselves and with this in mind, the Crucible for Leadership was launched.

A series of diagnostic interviews with the Crucible participants yielded insights into the issues at Star. With the rapid growth of the company, senior technical managers had fast-tracked into leadership positions for which they were unprepared in terms of skills and mindsets. They lacked a sense of pride and empowerment due to the nature of the business at Star - one driven by 'body-shopping' with little real value being created through projects and products. They were unable to provide a clear and compelling vision for the business which further resulted in the associates' lack of engagement with their jobs. Finally, the senior leadership team was not a cohesive group, mostly working towards individual goals and rarely sharing resources. An analysis of all these issues revealed three underlying causes. (see right)





CASE STUDY

The path ahead in the next nine months therefore, entailed intense work on three key fronts:

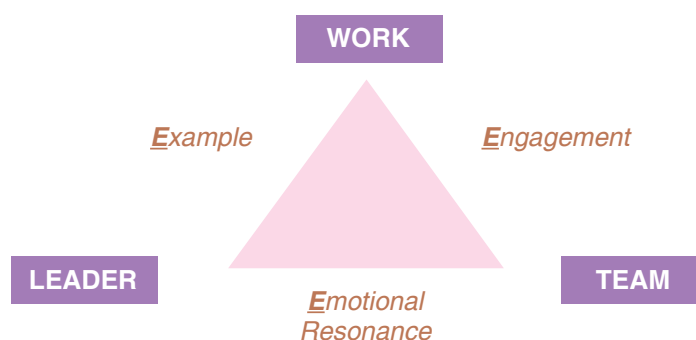
- *To shift the mindset of the senior management team from technical problem-solving to exercising leadership of people*
- *To equip them with skills to think systemically and with a view to finding lasting solutions*
- *To get the top team to come together and generate hope and optimism for the organization*

A detailed description of the process which was followed to accomplish the above objectives is given below.

2. From Managing to Leading - The 'BOIL'

The Crucible started with a learning retreat. Participants were thrown into an unfamiliar environment which combined tough physical challenges, deep personal reflection, and emotionally intense group dialogue. The entire process was called a 'Boil', to evoke the metaphor of bringing ingredients in a vessel to a 'boil'; an intense, reflective process that is often transformative. A critical part of the 'Boil' involved exposing participants to situations which required them to deal with complexity and uncertainty, share scarce resources, resolve conflicts and stay engaged with tasks even in the face of failure. In short, these situations were very similar to the complex and adaptive challenges which they had to confront in the course of their work lives.

The 'Boil' experience helped the Star leaders uncover some of their deeply held beliefs about each other and about their workplace. It also led them to understand the differences between managing and leading; that the former was about responding to technical challenges while the latter was about dealing with adaptive challenges. In this context, a simple but actionable framework (the '3E' model) was provided, to conceptualize what it may mean to exercise leadership. Leadership is understood to be a nurturing act in which a leader, through a strong emotional bond of trust and by the setting of an example, nurtures his/her team-mates to engage with their work, howsoever challenging it might be.





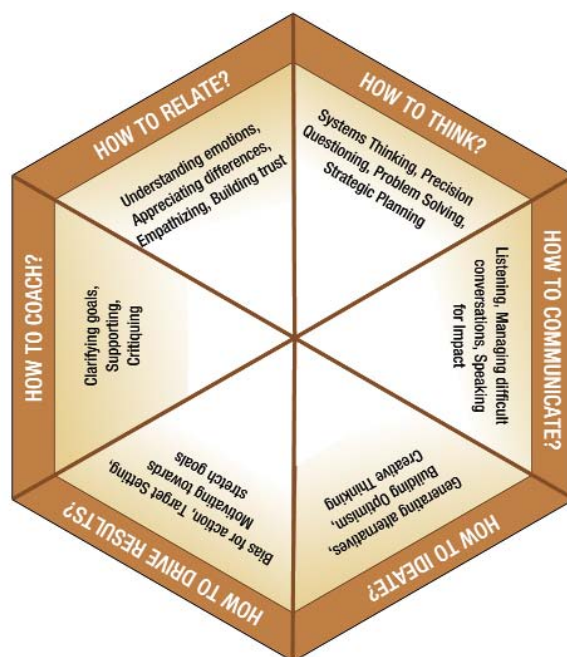
CASE STUDY

3. From Learning to Doing - The 'SIMMER'



The 'Boil' led the Star team to some significant breakthroughs. For the first time, conversations of possibility and optimism about the future of Star, began to be heard. However, to sustain this change, more than just a 'Boil' was needed. Participants had to stay with their realizations, and develop skills to lead people; the next step was to augment their leadership capabilities through targeted 'Simmer' labs. These labs were structured as two-day interactive learning sessions where participants were exposed to the conceptual bases of various skills needed to lead people. They also practiced these skills through simulations, role plays and reflective observations.

ONE - ON - ONE COACHING



ACTION LEARNING PROJECTS

Six such 'simmer' labs were held, with personal executive coaching taking place in between the 'simmers'. iDiscoveri faculty spent one-on-one personal time with the participants, coaching them in difficult areas and helping them to apply their learnings.



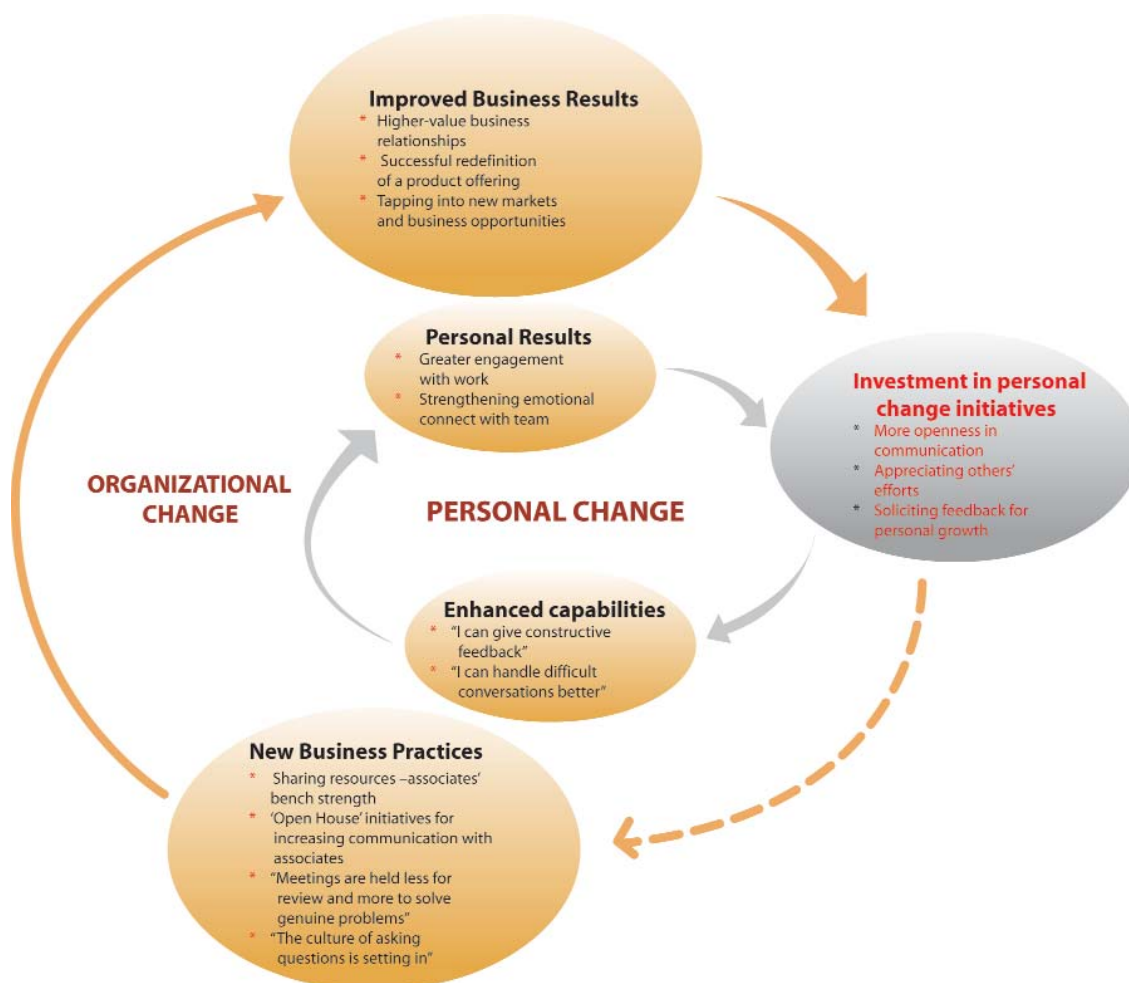
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4. The new 'I' and the new 'We'- What's different at Star today



The iDiscoveri 'Crucible' Leadership Project at Star, was a leadership development program which was not just different; it helped in 'making' a difference. Its impact has been felt in the two realms of individual growth and organization level outcomes. In terms of individual growth, participants have demonstrated visible improvement in setting and achieving goals, particularly stretch goals. It has also led to an increase in self-awareness and an understanding of personal strengths and limitations. The organizational impact has been seen in the form of new business practices leading to improved business results.

The model of personal and organizational change at Star can be presented diagrammatically as under:





CASE STUDY

A new way to do Business..

- A project manager shared how he stemmed large scale attrition of associates by moving Star from being a resource augmentation vendor for a client to becoming the end-to-end project solutions provider for the same client. This not only created meaningful long-term engagement for the associates, it also converted the low-value business relationship into a high-value one. The project manager attributed his success to a belief in stretching his potential and his desire to create engagement for his people by giving them challenging roles.
- The Internal IT (Information Technology) Services manager reported an improvement in the service level of his team. The service level metric which he was tracking went up from 94% to 98%, implying quicker and more effective response by his team to IT queries or problems faced by associates at Star. He found that this improvement was linked to changes in the way he was leading his team which included giving specific feedback, clarifying goals, and being more appreciative.
- One of the unit heads recalled how he had been facing a shortage of associates to staff a high value project. In the past, such a situation would have meant losing the project. This time, he got 'talking' with another unit head, also a participant, who had associates on the bench. They were able to share resources optimally and raise the organizational outcome.

To continue the process of organizational change at Star, participants have identified and started work on action-learning projects across the organization, such as:

- Proposal for the setting up of a Star university - a learning and teaching centre for associates which will continuously invest in associates' development
- Instituting a task force with the objective of improving communication to new associates and implementation of the recommendations
- Creating a system of public recognition for significant achievements, through e-notice boards

Through the learning engagement at Star, participants have forged themselves into a dynamic team, committed to each other's success. By working on real learning projects, they have gained tangible leadership experience.

Star is poised to take off...



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About iDiscoveri Education

Founded in 1996 by a group of XLRI graduates, we are now a team of over 45 exciting people - alumni of Harvard, INSEAD, IIMs and XLRI amongst others, with expertise in pedagogy, curriculum and change management. The iDiscoveri team includes a family of scholars and practitioners who are drawn from diverse realms such as behavioral sciences, education, and management sciences.

Over 20,000 individuals have been through the iDiscoveri experience and speak very highly of our work.

About the iDiscoveri 'Crucible' Leadership Project

The goal of 'Crucible' is to **help draw out leadership capability** in individuals. 'Crucible' is not just a series of programs spread over a few months, rather, it is a **sustained learning effort** designed and linked around specific **leadership challenges** for the participants.

The Approach

- 1) A long-term **PARTNERSHIP** with the CEO/Business Head and HR team around talent and culture
- 2) A 9-12 month long **LEADERSHIP SCHOOL** ('Crucible') for key managers
- 3) Shift in **MINDSET** from **manager** to **leader**
- 4) Visible improvement of **SKILLS** in key domains

The Content

On-site interventions for:

- 1) **Vision**
To bring a sense of purpose to work, make personal meaning and create a shared compelling vision for the future
- 2) **Skills**
Customized modules created around a 'workout' format which emphasize cognitive understanding of tools, practice on simulated problems and transfer to real-world problems
- 3) **Coaching**
Team of facilitators provide one-on-one coaching to each participant to check progress, offer alternatives to tried approaches and create an environment of challenge and support
- 4) **Action Learning Projects**
Throughout the journey participants identify an organizational project as a test bed which stretches the boundaries of their defined role and requires enrolment of others

To know more about 'Crucible' and what we can do for you, please email: amit.desai@idiscoveri.com