

CASE STUDY: LEE BROTHERS

BACKGROUND

Lee Brothers is a family owned, Wolverhampton based business which sells a wide range of equipment including PPE, road traffic management, handtools and work place safety. The majority of their turnover is from construction clients such as main contractors and house builders.

As a medium sized business employing 44 people, the responsibility for sustainability rests with Chris Bate, the Quality, Environment and Health and Safety Manager as well as the Accounts Office Manager. Sustainability in its broadest sense is still a fairly new consideration for Lee Brothers, and up until autumn 2012 very little progress had been made in addressing the sustainability challenge. One of the main reasons for this was because it didn't seem to be a priority for many of their clients. The tender and pre-qualification processes were simple tick box exercises about the existence of policies rather than requests for more in-depth information.

Since joining the School in October 2012, Chris and his colleagues have noticed increasing emphasis being put on sustainability by their clients. The demands of their customers are changing and they recognise the need to adapt and be proactive in meeting these new requirements. The School is proving to be a key resource to help Lee Brothers meet these demands, and to help ensure continuous improvement in sustainability knowledge and competence.



INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Lee Brothers were invited to attend the Nottingham Supplier Day in October by Willmott Dixon, one of Lee Brothers' biggest clients. Chris attended the event, admittedly rather sceptical about the value of the day, however he found the event extremely enjoyable and worthwhile. Seeing the senior level commitment of the main contractors, and listening to the different speakers prompted Chris to recognise that this was a subject that needed to be taken seriously and that action was required if Lee Brothers wanted to remain competitive in the future.

After reporting back to management, Chris' colleagues were receptive to the idea of the School and about the need to start to develop sustainability knowledge and competence. With this essential management buy-in Chris then became an active member of the School and has since made significant progress in a short space of time.

SELF-ASSESSMENT & ACTION PLAN

Chris completed Lee Brothers' first self-assessment in October 2012, and has since worked steadily through five Action Plans and four re-assessments. Currently Chris is conducting the self-assessments alone (on behalf of the company), but is sharing the learning internally where possible. The Action Plans have resulted in Chris attending four regional workshops as follows: Embedding Sustainable Procurement, Selling Sustainability, Understanding Timber Chain of Custody and Carbon Footprinting.

Chris finds the self-assessment and Action Planning process simple and easy, and sees it as a key tool to help demystify an otherwise overwhelmingly complicated topic. Chris explains that, *"it allows Lee Brothers to work at our own pace in a systematic way, with the confidence of knowing that the recommendations in the Action Plans are in line with our clients' priorities"*.

IMPACT

As a direct result of engaging in the School, Lee Brothers has:

- ✓ **Started to embed sustainability into the procurement process** – due to the nature of their business, sustainable procurement is one of the biggest risk / opportunity areas for Lee Brothers. The procurement team now understand the need to consider the sustainability of the products they buy, and recognise that the sustainable option does not necessarily incur a cost premium.
- ✓ **Committed to only buying FSC timber** – after attending the TRADA Chain of Custody workshop about the new timber regulations published in March 2013, Lee Brothers recognised the need to ensure that their timber setting out pegs were all FSC certified.

- ✓ **Conducted a carbon footprint for the business** – after attending the Carbon Footprinting workshop Chris realised that it would be a straightforward process to conduct a carbon footprint of the company, taking into account utilities and transport. This is now monitored on a regular basis, with a view to setting targets once baseline data has been collected over a 12 month period.
- ✓ **A clearer understanding of how to communicate their sustainability credentials to customers** – after attending the Selling Sustainability workshop Chris and his colleagues in the sales team were better equipped to communicate the sustainability credentials of their company in a clear and concise manner. They also recognised the need to promote these credentials at every opportunity.
- ✓ **Future plans to:**
 - Re-write their sustainability policy to ensure that it is relevant and tailored to meet the needs of the business
 - Formally communicate their progress through the School to key clients.
 - Engage more Lee Brother employees in the sustainability agenda, using the e-learning modules as a key mechanism to help build knowledge.
 - Prioritise high spend / high risk suppliers and encourage them to join the School

BENEFITS

Increased competitive advantage – Lee Brothers are starting to be asked more and more about their sustainability credentials and are now better placed to respond to these questions. Recently they have been successful in joining two preferred supplier lists and Chris is convinced that this is partly reliant on them having submitted a thorough response to the sustainability questions.

Enhanced reputation – Three of their customers have been aware of their involvement in the School and have asked them about their progress. This reflects well on the company and is reflective of the widespread awareness of the School.

Reduced risk in the supply chain – through the efforts being placed on sustainable procurement, Lee Brothers are reducing the reputational risk in their supply chain. For example clients have recently asked for proof of FSC timber and also the use of sustainable palm oil – on both occasions Lee Brothers have been able to provide reassurance on these issues.

Networking opportunities – Meeting other suppliers and main contractors at School engagement events has helped Chris understand where Lee Brothers sit in the supply chain, and what the common issues / challenges are.

LESSONS LEARNED

Sustainable products should not automatically incur a cost premium - Before joining the School, Lee Brothers procurement teams had often overlooked the more sustainable product alternative on the assumption that this would cost more. They now realise that this is not necessarily the case, and that it is possible to source both sustainable and economically viable products.

It's OK to be at the start of the learning curve – After completing their first self-assessment Lee Brothers were overwhelmed by the breadth of the issues covered and were slightly despondent to be at 'beginner' level for lots of the questions. Having networked with a range of other suppliers at School engagement events they now realise that this is not unusual and that there are very few sustainability 'experts' out there.

Securing buy-in across a business can be slow, but momentum builds over a period of time – Lee Brothers still have the challenge of embedding sustainability throughout the company. Momentum is steadily building and there are pockets of good practice and some good success stories to share, but they recognise that there is a long journey ahead.

THE FUTURE

In order for the School to continue to be of benefit to Lee Brothers it is important to:

- ✓ Continue to run face to face training workshops – these are high impact and a great opportunity to network
- ✓ Secure new project partners
- ✓ Continue to develop high quality e-learning modules and interview footage that help to communicate the business benefits of sustainability and highlight the latest issues.
- ✓ Recognise and reward active and committed School Members.
- ✓ Consider securing house builders as partners to the School.