

CASE STUDY

Learn about a teambuild for virtual workers centred on the FIRO tool

DBRS is a leading independent credit ratings provider, offering insight and transparency into over 1,000 different companies and single-purpose vehicles. The company's ratings and opinions give investors objective information with which to make informed investment decisions. They have offices in Toronto, New York, Chicago and London.

Project Background

Founded in 1976 in Canada, DBRS has seen great and rapid success, expanding from a small family business to a major global player in a tough global industry, with offices in Canada, the US and the UK.

Many of the company's managers had 'grown up' with the business, excelling as technical specialists, and used to working in an efficient, small and close-knit team. With the advent of global expansion, managers were being asked to work in a less synchronous way, and had to find new ways of connecting with colleagues in different physical locations and time zones. Remote working creates its own special traps and needs, especially when it comes to open and fluid communication.

Additionally, leaders at the top of the organisation wanted to find new ways to inspire a more diverse working population, represent the company in a worldwide arena, and ensure that the different work units didn't split off into silos.

To meet these challenges, Daniel Snowden, Assistant VP of Global Operations responsible for talent management, wanted to support staff by giving them tools that would make global and cross-cultural working more fluent. He combined this with a long-term view, encouraging people to start thinking about their interpersonal behaviours from an early stage in their careers, nurturing a future management tier that was fully equipped to continue the company's great success to date.

The Solution

The FIRO® instrument was Daniel's tool of choice when creating a solution. Having used the FIRO framework in a previous role at the Foreign Office, he knew it was an accessible way to introduce the concept of behavioural flexibility – with its examination of the behaviour a person gives off as well as what they want in return. *“I encourage participants to explore whether they are consistent in the messages they send out, and whether they have control over how others receive these messages,”* he explains. *“With the FIRO approach, people can instantly recognise why certain interactions are less fulfilling than they should be, and see how to make them better.”*

Daniel uses a great metaphor to describe how behaviour can be received where people are working together virtually and across oceans. Behaviour that people give out is experienced as if it were a signal from a lighthouse: clearly visible to those at a distance, increasingly so as the 'light' spreads out. Others can see the extremes of your behaviour,

but not the shades of grey, leading to a tendency to caricature colleagues, or to fill in the gaps with assumptions – magnifying things that go wrong and sowing the seeds of distrust.

To counter this effect, Daniel ran a FIRO-based session for each of the four city teams. This included a discussion about the benefits and barriers of working as a network group, asking *“What gets you really riled?”* They could quickly list very practical barriers – for example, not seeing progress on projects, not being able to get hold of people, not knowing when they will follow up.

Using the FIRO-B language and concepts, Daniel then encouraged them to explore the impact of the barriers on a deeper level – relating surface irritations to deeper needs. For example, someone who says *“I just want to see their face and make sure what I’m saying is being received and understood”* might have a high Wanted need for FIRO-B Affection. Formalising their perceptions in this way brought them out into the open, allowing a discussion about how to remove the barriers and work better together.

Daniel also facilitated a discussion about how each team thought they were perceived by the wider organisation. The FIRO information helped the participants plan greater efforts to build relationships outside their immediate team, for example through the use of FIRO-B Expressed Inclusion. Action plans were made that focused on practical things they could change to build better relationships.

The Results

Daniel found that as well as addressing personality differences, the FIRO concepts helped the participants understand cross-cultural issues. For example, the New York team were much more comfortable with showing emotion (Expressed Affection in FIRO-B terms). Conversely, the UK group were more formal (Expressed Control). This led the US team to see them as distant and detached, whilst the UK counterparts saw their US colleagues as ‘schmaltzy’ and cliquey, a result of the US team having strong personal bonds and a long history together. These revelations started open conversations about what people’s real intentions were, beyond the stereotypes.

On the impact of the development, Daniel elaborates: *“Usually, when you’re imagining how others see you, you start from the inside out, and assume that people see your intention; but with others, you judge them by what comes out, without necessarily thinking about what they meant. The FIRO approach makes people see that others can’t always see their intention, and that it’s up to them to make sure their outgoing and desired behaviours are consistent.”*

Since the work, Daniel says that people have learnt how to flex, adapting their behaviour to get better results from working with others. There is more interaction across business units, and more proactive communication. Crucially, people now use the FIRO approach to actively bring their

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performance up to a level where they might be considered for promotion. *“People have begun to recognise that there’s an inherent value in reflecting on your own performance in a considered and long-term way,”* enthuses Daniel.

In this sense, the FIRO work has been far-reaching. Daniel is now pooling the results from the separate sessions to come up with a holistic strategic action plan, encompassing coaching, a competence framework, structured performance management and workforce planning. He is confident that these initiatives will support the organisation in continuing to drive great results, far into the future.

Business Challenges

- Teambuilding
- Communication skills
- Virtual working
- Upskilling technical specialists with interpersonal and management skills
- Talent management

Tools used

- FIRO

Results

- In-depth understanding of team needs and different personalities
- Increased self-awareness and empathy
- Better understanding for each person of how they fit in to the whole structure