

Alternative approaches in Innovation Leadership



The Geoscience organization at ExxonMobil regularly takes to the mountains for its technical field schools. Recently, as part of one program, ExxonMobil incorporated a strong curriculum on leadership development - including the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile. The feedback has been outstanding and is helping to continue ExxonMobil's focus on innovation, inclusion and team results.

When it comes to getting out of the office, the experience of participants in the Geoscience Field School at ExxonMobil in the US must be outstanding. They enjoy the lakes and mountains of the Big Horn Basin, Wyoming while also discussing leadership topics including the Team Management Profile. This particular Geoscience Field School runs twice a year, and each week-long course comprises approximately 15 participants.

The unique location has proven to be more than just a 'nice to have', says Steve Hanson, HR Innovation Lead at ExxonMobil. "Being out of the office and in the wild creates a level of vulnerability that encourages people to open up more - even to themselves - and have richer conversations than they might otherwise do," he

explains. "They leave the course with a new commitment to influence innovation by harnessing different perspectives and approaches to work."

Participants include supervisor or technical leaders in the Geoscience business, but they come from a variety of organizational levels (from VPs to Technical Team Leaders) and countries - including Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, UK, Canada, and the US. "They are all very open about the challenges they face in their own areas, and learn from each other's cultural and business perspectives," says Steve. "There's a lot of transparency."

Felisha McCullum, Geoscience HR Advisor, points out that the Team Management Profile in itself

helps break down barriers: "You're already showing your vulnerability just by sharing your Profile and preferences with others," she says. "In addition to the alternative environment, the length of time together allows additional openness and insight."

“ the Profile helps break down barriers

The intent in merging technical learning and leadership was to stimulate innovation, explains Steve. "Ours is a complex business and we need innovation, not just in the field, but also back at the office. A significant proportion of these leaders' jobs is to create an inclusive culture

which will allow teams to bring all of their technical and innovation prowess to the table, not just some of it."

The way Steve and Felisha use the Team Management Profile is not so much to build teams; rather, it is "to help leaders be intentional about understanding their employees, so that employees have the freedom to add additional value and find enhanced satisfaction at work," explained Felisha.

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Additionally, says Felisha, the Team Management Profile really demonstrated to participants how they could "enhance or enlarge their perspective: everyone in the group wanted to use additional leadership/inclusion 'muscles' that they might not use every day, in order to build their leadership strength."

And how did participants respond to this innovative new approach to the Geoscience Field School?

It's a recipe for success, judging by the comments of Tyler Beatty, a supervisor at ExxonMobil Geoscience.

"Geoscientists like to share, and when in a familiar setting, such as around an outcropping of a rock formation, they open up and ideas flow freely as they discuss the history that the rocks and regional topography reveal. A tool like the Team Management Profile in that environment has a multiplying effect. With the group already in a creative mindset, introducing concepts like work preferences and interaction styles invites the teams to reflect on and relate these concepts to work situations. This group self-reflection is a unique opportunity for the team to relate these leadership concepts to real problem-solving situations. It's a chance to experiment with and grow our technical leadership skills and observe the impact of demonstrating traits like empathy and effective listening."

What's more, continues Tyler, the group self-reflection also provides the opportunity for people to share stories from their own business experiences, and discuss how elements of the Profile manifest themselves in their work environment. "In my opinion, these discussions were valuable takeaways and formed the basis of some really effective work relationships," he says.

Chief geoscientist Patty Walker was equally enthusiastic.

"The goal was to link the impact of behaviors (both positive and negative) to the business of identifying new opportunities in a geotechnical

environment," she says. "The Team Management Profile was a valuable tool to spark honest conversations about understanding yourself, your team, and the broader ExxonMobil population to encourage, rather than shut down, innovative thinking. It provided some great techniques to create an environment conducive to generating opportunities."

“ the Team Management Profile was a valuable tool to spark honest conversations

The fact that people who attended the Field School have asked Steve, Felisha, and other HR professionals at ExxonMobil to lead similar programs with their teams across the globe is further testimony to the success of the approach.

By increasing the team's awareness of work preferences, the Team Management Profile has helped ExxonMobil on its 'Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) journey', says Felisha. "We are a very diverse company, and we are working to rapidly expand inclusivity and enhance a work environment where people feel they can bring their whole self to work."



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