

NZ Rugby Head of People: Vulnerability is Urgently Needed in Leadership

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For 125 years, rugby has been the sporting backbone of NZ culture, a sport celebrated for its focus on teamwork, respect and promoting a fun and healthy lifestyle. However, In 2016 [New Zealand Rugby found itself in the spotlight](#) for all the wrong reasons: an end of season stripper scandal, a sexual misconduct charge, and an assault on a group of four civilians. New Zealand Rugby was heavily criticised at the time for

its handling of the incidents as well as its lack of transparency.

Richard Gilhooly, Head of People & Development at New Zealand Rugby is part of the team that continues to work hard to rebuild the organisation and sport that had suffered immensely from the fallout of these scandals.

He'll be sharing his story at [HR Innovation & Tech Fest](#) in Sydney this November. Here, he tells us about the critical relationship between the Head of People and the CEO, and why showing vulnerability is a powerful way for leadership to unite people.

Changing the Culture of Rugby from the Inside Out

The back end of 2016 was challenging for New Zealand Rugby and a very demanding period for our leadership and people. The off field issues called the culture of our sport into question. We were criticised for our handling of the investigations and it really hurt the organisation and our people.

After a full review around the culture of our sport, including New Zealand Rugby as an organization, we received the "Respect and Responsibility" report which included 91 recommendations for us to implement. While this was not an insignificant undertaking, it really did allow us to consider how we could make rugby a better sport for all involved and how we might take a leadership role in some of society's more pressing issues. We have subsequently taken ownership of all 91 recommendations with close to 30 completed and a similar number underway.

In a lot of ways, the report provided a relief for our people; a way forward. But it was also quite confronting: What did this mean for them? How would it change their organization? There was a generally feeling that we were all here for rugby, so what's all this other stuff? Actually, working through all that was quite challenging.

The review really shone a spotlight on the current state of our organisation: were we structured in the right way to be able to bring about the change that was required for NZ Rugby to be successful moving forward? It became quite clear that there were some aspects of our organisation that needed to look different in order to do things in a really different way, and in 2018 we went through a significant re-structure. For the first time in a long time, we

made the incredibly difficult decision to disestablish roles which had serious impacts for some of our people.

The Power of Vulnerability in Leadership

The organisational change we went through really hurt many of our people – some mentioned that they felt like the 'safety net' they had was gone. They lost a lot of trust in the organization and some of that was directed towards our CEO, Steve Tew. That was quite a big moment for us. We needed to figure out how to move people forward and regain that trust.

Ahead of our annual staff get together, we asked our people for some real and unfettered feedback as to how they were feeling and how the change had impacted them. Some of the feedback we received was incredibly raw, and quite direct. To be honest it was very challenging to read.

When sharing it with Steve, you could see the impact it had and allowed him to make a decision to be more vulnerable with our people which ultimately really helped the healing process.

At the annual staff get together, Steve made an incredibly open and honest speech where he shared with the staff how much the change and resulting impact on the organisation had hurt him too. While doing that, he reiterated the reasons why it was important and how leadership sometimes requires really tough decisions. The air in the room changed at that moment and for a lot of people, it was enough to allow a conversation about how we could move forward.

That moment when our CEO stood up and showed his vulnerability actually helped us heal more than anything else we've done since.

For the next hour we actually just got to the nub of it, figuring out what the organization needed to do to regain trust, and by lunch on that first day you could just see the weight lift off people's shoulders. They felt like they had a chance to share their real feelings, and we started to get a clear picture about how to move forward. So that was incredibly powerful and a great reminder that vulnerability is so important in leadership.

HR's Crucial Role in Culture Change

Steve's a person who deeply cares about his people, but like many CEOs he can be quite guarded by nature, especially in a high-profile sport like rugby and in New Zealand even more so. So sometimes just encouraging that vulnerability is a really important thing to do.

I think the most important thing HR leaders can do for their CEO is encourage them to be brave and courageous.

We were faced with some really hard decisions about where we needed to go and what we needed to do to get there. These decisions were going to have a real impact on many people, but ultimately, they still needed to be made. So that's where I think the relationship between the Head of People and the CEO is so critical because you can take away that emotion a little bit and present different options and challenge their thinking.

Be Courageous in Order to Rewrite your Culture

For those organisations who are faced with similar challenges to us, or are looking at a big culture change, I think the best starting point is actually acknowledging the need for change.

Often, organizations feel compelled to go through culture change or feel like it's the thing that they have to do rather than want to do. I think it needs to be incredibly well understood and well lead from the top right from the get go, otherwise it will struggle for traction.

I also think having that ability to be really bold and courageous is critical. When you're looking at your culture, look at it hard and don't be held back by anything. Ask yourself "If I had to rewrite the story, what would what would it look like?"

In HR we often talk about best practice, but at New Zealand Rugby we like to follow the All Blacks lead who talk about "next practice". You need to be looking forward to the things that aren't so obvious.

Finally, the ability to take your people with you is critical. Just because you think it's a good idea doesn't mean everybody else is going to. Make sure people are with you or at least understand why you are leading them down that particular path. That was one of our learnings in our culture change journey, we did a much better job of that once we made some of those hard decisions but we probably didn't do that enough early on. Tell the story really well and tell it often.

Hear more from Richard Gilhooly, Head of People & Development at New Zealand Rugby, at [HR Innovation & Tech Fest](#), 18-19 November 2019, ICC, Sydney