

## **Impact of SOLVE<sup>®</sup> as a Culture-building Intervention- An application of the Service Profit Chain concept at K-India Pvt Ltd**

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### **Abstract**

Culture eats strategy for breakfast. Most CEOs and leaders understand this, yet they are not able to improve organisational culture. In this case study, SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is used as a culture-building intervention within the sales organisation of a large electronics component manufacturer. This model is based on Heskett's service-profit chain.

**Purpose:** SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is a unique study targeted to bring about change in the culture. This intervention focuses on employee engagement (EE), which leads to customer engagement (CE), which in turn leads to overall ROI and productivity.

**Methodology:** This program involved an eight-day intervention by an external coach, spread over a year. The study involves an anonymous employee engagement survey, followed by multiple 1X1 coaching conversations, focus group discussions, and root cause analysis.

**Findings:** This programme showed the unique connection between EE, CE, and Productivity. This organisation had lower attrition levels and retained customers in difficult Covid times. They continued to deliver results while others in the market were suffering.

**Practical implications:** – Organizations can choose SOLVE<sup>®</sup> as a remedial intervention and thereby have a long-term solution for culture development, CE, and productivity. SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is a unique study targeted to bring about focused change in the culture of any organization.

**[Keywords:** Culture; Customer Employee Engagement; Engagement; Executive Coaching; Productivity].

## **1.0 Introduction**

An organization's culture can be thought of as its collective way of being, thinking, and behaving (Serpa, 2016). Over time, it is formed, communicated, learned, and modified. SOLVE<sup>®</sup> (George, 2019) is a unique culture-shaping initiative which focuses on employee engagement, customer engagement and ROI. Based on Service Profit Chain (Heskett et al., 1997), this program operates with a belief that if employees are engaged and committed, then the needs of the customers are better addressed. If the organisation has committed employees and engaged customers then ROI, profitability and growth are by-products. SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is an initiative designed by Stimulus Consulting (P) Ltd, built to bring about long-term change in organisations. They contend that any training or similar short-term program has a short-term lasting impact. SOLVE<sup>®</sup> (George, 2019), is an approach and methodology which is a long-term 'infinite' intervention (Sinek, 2020). Here we use an approach which was copyrighted in 2008. This initiative focuses on organisational culture building and contends that it brings about lasting change.

### **About K India**

Their products are widely used in the industrial electronics, home appliances, and energy sectors by practically all major players in these markets, including both Indian and multinational businesses. K India develops, produces, and sells a wide range of high-quality electronic systems and components, including essential components for PFC systems and APFC panels. The sales organisation for K Group is led by the MD, Mr. Shivashankar. He spent 35 years within the organisation in multiple roles. He was previously responsible for the larger India manufacturing organisation and has recently taken on the focused task of leading the sales organisation due to the criticality of the function. He wants to create a paradigm shift within the sales organisation.

SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is a five-step process that was applied in K corporation at distinct stages within the case study:

**S-Seek:** Information was gathered about the organisational metrics, customer engagement data, employee engagement scores, and all relevant data available.

**Observe and Outcome:** Based on the findings from the "Seek" stage and the data gathered, further observations and meetings were carried out to validate the data gathered. Objectives were co-created, and outcomes were defined along with senior leadership for the program.

**Listen:** Senior leaders, the coach, and the front line met, sometimes together, other times as a focus group discussion (FGD), to understand the real story. An effort is made to understand reality and the behaviours that contributed to the numbers gathered during the Seek stage.

**V: Value Add:** After listening to and understanding reality, solutions were co-created. Coaching and facilitation were key tools for building solutions. Action plans, accountability, and timelines are defined in the step "Value-add." The effort was to create insights in their minds and co-create answers from the stakeholders and front-liners. An attempt was made to generate newer solutions and define clear action plans. Structured meetings were scheduled multiple times across the year in this stage of value-add, and progress was monitored.

**E: Evaluate:** During the evaluate phase, progress was tracked, feedback was shared, and change was continuously supported. While the initial focus was on developing employee engagement levels, after the initial signs of change were noticed, the focus shifted further to customer engagement and monitoring productivity (Schein, 2010) using organizationally relevant metrics.

## **2.0 Theoretical perspectives on SOLVE<sup>®</sup> – The Literature Review**

The literature review includes peer-reviewed journal articles, official websites, books and other published resources relevant to Culture, Employee Engagement Surveys, Customer Engagement and Service Profit Chain (Heskett et al., 1997).

Although organisational culture is important, there are still considerable variations in its definition at various levels. (Dauber et al., 2012). Commonly, culture is thought of as a set of basic common beliefs that were learnt by a group and passed down to new members as the proper perspective, way to think, and way to feel inside the organisation (Schein, 2010). Culture was termed as a result of accumulated learning (Hofstede, G., 2001). According to him, organisational culture refers to "the collective programming" of the mind that sets one organization's members apart from those of another.

Employee engagement is the commitment employees have to organisational goals and has been defined differently by different authors (Clifton, D.O. & Harter, J.K., 2003; Harter, J. K. et al., 2002). Engagement is defined as the team members feeling of fulfilment and personal connect (Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W.B., & Leiter, M.P. 2001). Employees who are passionate about their work are fully devoted to it. They are devoted to advancing the objectives of their organisation. They identify with the goals and principles of their organisation and uphold them even when they are not officially on duty.

A group that has successfully handled its issues with outward adaptation and internal integration has developed a set of basic assumptions that are commonly held and are consequently taught to new members (Schein, 2010). Culture is a result of accumulated learning (Hofstede, G. 2001), considering that the collective mental programming that separates members of one organisation from those of another is referred to as Organisational Culture. An assessment of Employee engagement levels and getting their perspectives is the first key step in the culture-shaping SOLVE<sup>®</sup> process.

SOLVE<sup>®</sup> affirms that Managers are responsible for 70% of all factors which impact Employee Engagement (Krueger, J. & Killham, E. 2005). This was also stated in other studies of employee engagement (J. Harter & Adkins, 2015). A manager's style and his decision also have a strong influence on Employee engagement (Clifton, D.O. & Harter, J.K., 2003; Harter, J. K. et al., 2002). The leadership Styles of the sponsors also influence optimism, engagement and project performance (Amit, K et al., 2006; McColl Kennedy, J.R. & Anderson, R.D., 2002).

Krekel et al. (2019) identified a significant, high association between staff satisfaction, employee productivity, and customer loyalty. They also identified a strong negative correlation with attrition. High generalisability of correlations across studies has been demonstrated during past research. (J. Harter & Adkins, 2015). There are also other studies, which link engagement and productivity (Cohen, J. 1988; Fredrickson, B.L. 1998). Strauss (1968) stated way back that higher morale leads to higher productivity. Emotion Theory, which emerged more recently, claimed that workers' emotional states might influence and drive their performance (Staw et al., 1994). Amabile et al., (2005) concluded that creativity is preceded by positive affect.

Financial metrics including revenue or sales per person, revenue or sales growth over time, quantity per period, programme enrolments, labour hours, costs to the budget, cross-sells, or performance ratings were the most common ways to gauge employee productivity (Krekel et al., 2019). One piece of longitudinal evidence was cited by Harter (J. K. Harter et al., 2010). They investigated the connection between financial performance and employee engagement. They identified staff turnover and customer loyalty as key mediators in this connection Böckerman & Ilmakunnas, (2012) examined the relationship between worker satisfaction and business performance in Finnish manufacturing companies from 1996 to 2001. Among other researchers, Powell et al. (2014) examined the connections between staff members' experiences, those of their co-workers, and ultimate (patient and organisational) outcomes. All of this leads to the realisation that compared to the bottom 75% of organisations, the top 25% of organisations on the engagement index have a higher return on assets (ROA), profitability, etc. (Macey, W. H. et al. 2009). Therefore, the relevance of this case study.

### **3.0 Aims and Objectives:**

The following aims came as a result of 1X1 meetings and team meetings conducted with the MD, the VP, and his direct reports:

#### **3.1 Key problem areas cited:**

- K-India has a recent reputation for poor post-sale service. The annual customer satisfaction survey shows an 85% satisfaction score. However, escalations have been frequently reaching the MD, after which they get resolved.
- Competition is catching up, and K is not growing as well as others. K Group believes that K-India is not meeting its full potential in terms of revenue and productivity.
- Employees did not feel empowered. The managerial style is the "command and control" type. Attrition was noticed at 15%.
- Age debts (90+ days) are rising to beyond 14.6%. Sales continue to extend credit to aged debtors, while the collections team is quick to blacklist clients and partners.

#### **3.2 Program Objectives**

##### **SOLVE<sup>®</sup> Vision (for 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021) of the Leadership team included:**

- India Sales revenue: USD 74.7 million (previous year: USD 72.6 million). 10% > Goal defined by HQ (Owner: Alok Nath). This was the modified goal after the pandemic emerged.
- Redefine all sales processes and define KRAs so that there is shared ownership. Arrive at a consolidated scorecard (Owner: Pavan).
- Achieve customer satisfaction after moving to an NPS approach of > 90% (Owner: Ravindra).
- Achieve INR BIZ debtors 10% (current monthly average at 14.6%) (Owner: Ajit Singh). Create "K" as the best place to work with the employee motivation survey at 90% (past non-NPS rating at 85%). (Owner: Gaurav) Get the President's Award for India Territory (Owner: Ajit Singh).

#### **Approach and Methodology**

This case study included an employee engagement survey, the initiation of a customer engagement survey and its monitoring, multiple 1X1 coaching sessions, focus group discussions, action team meetings, and the reporting of bright spots (Chip Heath & Dan Heath, 2010). Support tools included a W-L sheet, a custom-built root cause analysis support tool, action planning sheets, individual coaching summaries, a follow-up coaching template etc.

#### **4.1 The Survey Instrument:**

The Employee Engagement Survey used a validated tool with a Net Promotor Scale, spanning seven focus areas, 42 questions, and three open questions. The seven focus areas included overall engagement, vision and values, teamwork, leadership, the right people for the right jobs, performance management, and accountability.

Eight leaders from this organisation were surveyed through a web-linked third-party survey. To protect anonymity, the survey links were password-protected using a third-party server outside the organisation. Anonymous employee engagement survey results were gathered from their direct reports. 90 responses were received, including four responses from Production Engineering, which coordinates regularly with the Sales Organization. The MD was not expected to take up the survey. The survey was validated through two team huddles facilitated by the coach.

**Table 4.1 - Reliability of the EES questionnaire**  
**Tool Reliability**

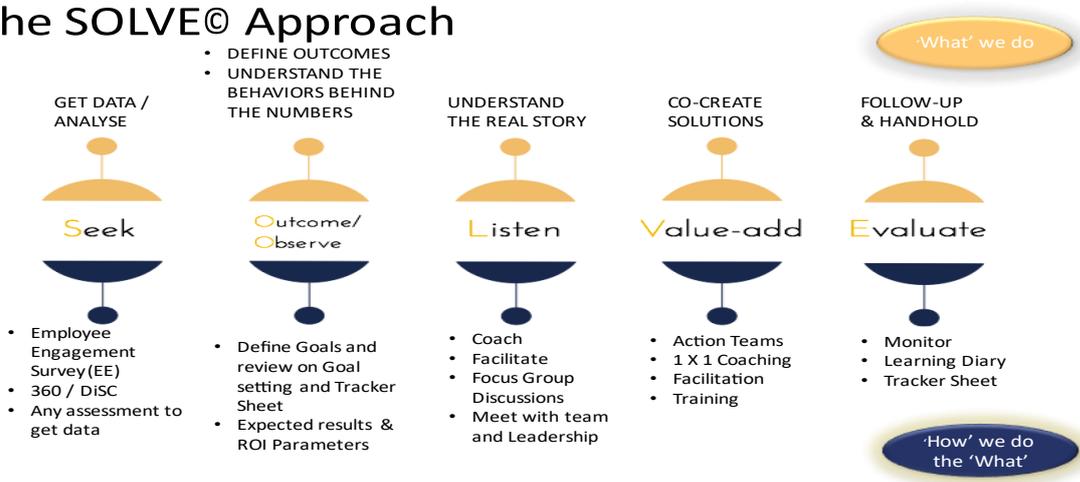
Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.969	42

(Source: Primary Study)

4.2.1 The SOLVE<sup>®</sup> approach could be summarised in the slide below:

**Figure 4.1 – The Overview of the SOLVE Approach**

### The SOLVE<sup>®</sup> Approach



(George, 2019)

The approach had seven visits, spread over eight days. K India wanted this project to start in Jan 2020 and close by Sep 2020.

#### 4.2.2 Overview of visits:

**Figure 4.2- Focus of each visit and the cadence (Solve Initiative at K-India, 2020)**

K-INDIA	SOLVE – Annual Plan 2020						
Coach Name: Mr. Sunil George	January	March	April	May	June	August	September
Number of Visits: 07, spread over 08	17th Jan	16/17 -Mar	20th Apr	15th May	22nd June	6th -August	14th -Sept
MD & VP	Expectation setting	EES Report share	VOC status discussion	Review Action plan	Review Action plan	Review Action plan	Review Action plan
Leadership Team	Orientation to SOLVE and EES	EES Unpack, 1x1 Coaching	VOC overview	Need basis	Need basis	Need basis	Need basis
	Review of Brightspots and Sharing	BPR	Review of Brightspots and Sharing				
	Creating a SOLVE vision	Review of Brightspots and Sharing, Action Plan	1 X 1 Coaching EES Action Plan	1 X 1 Coaching EES Action Plan	1 X 1 Coaching EES Action Plan	1 X 1 Coaching EES Action Plan	1 X 1 Coaching EES Action Plan
Front Line	Team Orientation to SOLVE		VOC - Gap analysis	Focus Group Discussion - Sales			
	Introduction to EES		Action Planning and Team Coaching	Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion	Focus Group Discussion

(Source: Primary Study)

This initiative had seven visits spread over eight days. Due to business reasons, the MD wanted this to conclude by September 2020 and be reviewed in March 2021.

## 5.0 Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Summary of findings from the EES:

**Table 5.1- Overall Employee Engagement Survey Data**

ITEM	5s %	4s %	3s %	2s %	1s %	TES	Market stage
Overall Engagement	46	44	9			79	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Vision & Values	47	41	12			76	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Teamwork	28	51	22			63	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Leadership	34	44	21			63	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Right People/ Right Jobs	38	48	13			72	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Performance Management	34	52	14			72	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Accountability	33	51	16			69	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
Overall Average	37	47	16			70	Stage 2 ( Highly Independent)
<b>Response / Direct Reports</b>	<b>90/87</b>		<b>Response Rate</b>			<b>103%</b>	

(Source: Primary Study)

Overall engagement and focus on vision and values were the highest-rated areas. Teamwork and leadership scored the lowest.

#### 5.1.1 Key Bright Spots and Opportunities:

##### 5.1.1.1 Some of the key organization - related bright-spots that everyone agreed to, included:

- Employees seem to be proud of working for K India.
- Role clarity exists.
- Goals and vision are clearly communicated.

##### 5.1.1.2 Key overall opportunities included:

- Leaders working together as a team.

- My colleagues in other departments make my work easier.
- K's policies make it easy to satisfy customers.

### 5.1.1.3 The lowest-rated items included:

**Table 5.2- The lowest rated behaviours**

K policies and procedures make it easy to satisfy customers.	53.0
I am given enough coaching from my manager to do my job well.	58.0
The various department Heads of K work well as a team.	43.0
My manager demonstrates the utmost respect for all those who s/he works, even during disagreements.	54.0
My colleagues (people I work with in other departments) make doing my work easier.	51.0
I believe we have the most talented & competent people in K.	58.0

(Source: Primary Study)

**Table 2 – Lowest rated items on EES (Solve Initiative at K-India, 2020)**

## 6.0 Discussions and Implications

While the revenue goals were globally reworked, K excelled over the previous year's performance (of 72.6 million) and achieved USD 73.6 million, while it may not have met the SOLVE<sup>®</sup> Vision of USD 74.7 million.

- Owing to COVID lockdowns, production was hit, and supplies were impacted. Yet the sales made up for lost time after supplies resumed and production facilities opened up.
- Face-to-face sales calls were modified to the virtual mode. There was a paradigm shift in customer relationship management.

Over ten sales processes were redefined and documented. To ensure sustenance, KRAs were built, and process adherence was tracked. Most leaders and individuals had process-related goals in addition to productivity-linked goals.

- The frequent gathering of customer engagement scores and monitoring them on an NPS scale created the beginning of a customer-focused organization.
- For most common process issues, ready reckoners were created. Ex: root cause analysis, W-L sheet, etc.
- Lockdown and the saving of travel time enabled process owners to redefine and improve processes.
- Development plans for each team member helped grow internal leaders.

Customer satisfaction was measured using an annualised survey. After SOLVE<sup>®</sup>, feedback was sought after each delivery. The focus on the customer's experience was new. Salesforce attempted to exceed customer expectations by managing their experience and showing that they cared lockdown.

- While teamwork helped, the age debt percentage grew to 21.38%. The market was cited as reasons for not meeting the goal of 10%.
- With lockdowns, it was hard to ensure receivables. Creditors were difficult to track. Due to lockdowns and a lack of raw material supply, finished goods and deliveries were delayed. This created a challenge for collections.
- There was an effort to continue to supply aged debtors, which may not have happened in the past.

A noticeable change was experienced in the teamwork between leaders. Attrition was negligible (10%).

- Thanks to SOLVE<sup>®</sup>, leaders met more frequently than before. They had to work with others to achieve their goals. Team goals were measured. The focus on shared goals created better understanding and comradery among the leadership team.

### **7.0 Limitations and Future Recommendations**

This study was done in the sales function of a large organisation. The population may need to be scaled up in a larger organisation and tested.

The managing director at K was invested in the project and highly committed to driving it. A lot depends on the commitment and determination of the senior leaders. If senior leaders are not engaged, this project may not succeed since cultural change starts at the top.

The MD's direct reports were also extremely engaged in this project and took accountability for critical parts. If the leadership team is not responsive to feedback, if there are willingness issues or competence issues, this project may not see the success we had.

SOLVE<sup>®</sup> is an infinite project (Sinek, 2020). There is no finish line to cultural improvement and organisational growth. Some change is possible in a year. If the organisation is willing to invest for at least three years, this project may see sustainable change. A one-year initiative sees the risk of performance backsliding despite good intentions.

The study was unable to make any strong causal claims. A causal study could be the subject of further research and improvement.

Confidential coaching data is available but not cited in this article. Effective coaching skills are critical to driving an initiative like this since this project involves at least 60% leadership coaching. An external coach with HR consulting and facilitation skills would be a requirement. An internal resource may not get the traction that an external coach could.

### **8.0 Conclusion**

While the service profit chain (Heskett et al., 1997) is a relatively old concept, SOLVE<sup>®</sup> makes an effort to apply it to the real world in this case study. If applied correctly with the right coaching basics, SOLVE<sup>®</sup> could be an effective long-term solution for culture development, customer loyalty, and growth.

This is a unique approach, with very little documentation available on the practical application of Heskett's approach. This programme is a customizable solution based on the needs of any organisation. It has the capability of bringing about long-term change in most organisations if the senior leaders are committed to change and are coachable.

This paper is an excerpt of the findings and attempts to summarise the SOLVE<sup>®</sup> process. The findings from the study could be used by coaches and organisations to help sustain long-term organisational growth. If culture defines organisations and brands, SOLVE<sup>®</sup> may be the key to achieving it.

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