

Q: What was the challenge?

RSA runs general insurance businesses with strong market positions that deliver sustainable profitable performance. They provide insurance products and services in over 130 countries and have operations in more than 28 countries. RSA recognise that the key to success is having the right culture and right people operating in an environment where responsibilities and accountabilities are clearly defined, people are challenged and performance rewarded.

A core part of their industrial relations strategy in the UK is to have strong relationships with the Unions. In the UK RSA recognises Unite the Union. Based on the principles of individual and collective responsibility, Unite is dedicated to improving its members' standard of living and quality of life in both the public and private sectors reflecting the changing world of work, supporting workers through a programme of campaigning and organising.

RSA and Unite's relationship has traditionally been strong and has previously been acknowledged as 'best practice'. Both parties recognised they were not working together as well as they could and wanted to refresh the relationship.

The RSA UK Executive Team (UK ET) commissioned Questions of Difference to facilitate dialogue between Unite and RSA with the aim of refreshing the relationship. The aim was to transform the relationship to move away from a traditional 'them and us' way of working to achieve a true and proactive partnership.

Q: How did we work together?

Questions of Difference facilitated meetings with the stakeholder group from November 07 to July 08. Our key focus was to create an environment where all stakeholders felt confident to voice their concerns, assumptions and aspirations for the strategic partnership. As a result, in the first instance our attention was on how people worked together rather than the presenting issues for discussion. Initial one to one conversations were followed by collective meetings that identified a set of principles of engagement for the group:

- We will make good use of history
- Our differences are one of our greatest natural resources
- There is goodwill and good intent on the part of all concerned
- We will relentlessly check out our assumptions
- Openness and trust need constant attention
- We will hold a position of optimism by focusing on success

Trust is often considered in 'all or nothing' terms (for example 'You can never trust them' or 'I would always trust him with my life'). We worked on the basis that trust is more like the tide – it ebbs and flows - trust grows and diminishes in line with our evolving experiences. When people do something they have committed to, levels of trust increase. When people apparently go back on what has been agreed trust diminishes. These principles provided a reference point that challenged the group, individually and collectively to recognise how their participation could foster a growing sense of trust and honesty. They also encouraged the group to speak up when it seemed people were going back on what had been agreed. This had a powerful impact as it uncovered the different assumptions and meanings given to existing agreements.

Regular feedback prompted discussions that noticed how they were individually and collectively working differently, how the group were achieving a new way of working and reinforced stronger relationships across the group.

In this environment it became relatively straightforward to work out together the terms of the revised collective agreement for Consultation, Negotiation and Disputes Procedures.

Q: Did the outcome meet expectations?

The process has resulted in RSA and Unite committing to a new Strategic Partnership as:

- The UK ET have become advocates of the partnership with a greater awareness that their relationship with the Union is a key contributor to business success. They are committed to developing an environment where Union activity flourishes
- Unite are committed to the successful delivery of the strategic plan for the business and supporting business change so that it is managed efficiently and sensitively to re-enforce employee engagement. They recognise how this partnership offers a role model strategic business partnership

This development in their relationship is supported by:

- Agreement to a new Direction of Travel for the partnership that will challenge all stakeholders to think and work as partners
- Joint goals and measures of success which drive a shared agenda (to be reviewed annually to keep pace with the changing business and Trade Union landscape)
- Tangible commitments from both partners to slicker and more streamlined ways of working
- Pro-active support of the Trade Union to enable a professional partnership throughout the business
- Revised formal agreement including a move from binding arbitration to dispute resolution involving senior executives and Trade Union officers
- Increased pro-active information sharing

Q: What did RSA and Unite learn from the relationship with Questions of Difference?

- When we approach a challenge in the spirit of true partnership there is real opportunity to achieve significantly more than the sum of the achievements that can be delivered individually
- It is natural for different partners to have different opinions, priorities and objectives
- If we invest our resources to address HOW we work, WHAT we have to do becomes more straightforward
- Taking the time to notice the positive contributions that individuals and teams achieve generates the courage and confidence to take risks and change the way things are done
- Trust emerges through the integrity of the conversations. It is possible to address the 'real' conversation in the room, with all stakeholders present. Equally once individuals are working well informal communications have become increasingly effective
- Transformation of a relationship – even one which has been shaped by lengthy history – becomes easy when partners truly take on board 'the others' priorities and objectives as their own
- Devolution of responsibility for relationships fosters a 'can do environment' where people make the real change