



## **Never mind the question. The Answer is Yes.**

***Imagine that every time employees ask for something, your answer is Yes! No matter the request, the company covers it. Is this crazy or brilliant leadership?***

*Maiken Piil, expert on Conscious Leadership and Business*

A paid weekend away with the loved ones, time off to experience a different workplace for some time, concert tickets, a new coffee machine, help taking care of the children for a week – you got it. All employees have to do is ask. Your answer is Yes! A company that always says yes to any request from employees - does that sound frightening? Crazy? Like irresponsible leadership? Or does it sound like a good business case?

If you look at the Saracens Rugby Club in England, it is damn good business giving employees everything they ask for. The Saracens Rugby Club has been practicing a 'yes policy' for the past six years, which means that all requests from employees are fulfilled. And the man, who introduced the idea of the 'yes policy', is neither an irresponsible nor crazy CEO – perhaps only crazy-good. He's name is Edward Griffiths, and he is the kind of CEO who sees it as his job to look after people before anything else. I talked to him about how his leadership approach has changed the culture of the organization and brought the business from the bottom to the top.

### **The game changer**

When Edward Griffiths came on board as the new CEO about six years ago, Saracens was a rather different business than it is today. He recalls Saracens as an organization where people were only concerned with themselves, only said hi to employees at the top of the hierarchy, and an organization where one asked for a lot of things – a 'me' culture. On top of that the club was in the business of winning, but it kept loosing.

Griffiths wanted to change all that. Among different initiatives, he introduced the idea of the 'yes policy'.

*"I told everyone, that from now onwards, 'the answer will be yes' - because we believe you are good people and you are committed to this club. We trust you", he recalls.*

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### **'Yes' fosters responsibility**

Griffiths believes in a culture where everyone feels safe and knows they have unconditional support. In order to create that, management was told never to say no to anything, and they should even encourage employees to ask for things. So whether an employee asks for extra tickets for a game, to get a hotel for the weekend, to get a salary up front because of decoration on the house, help with childcare for a week - anything really - they would get it. The company would provide unconditional support.

Providing unconditional support serves a specific purpose critical to being a successful business. It is way of creating a culture that everyone in the organization feels a part of and responsible for, Griffith explains.

*"When you always say yes to your employees, the employees have to take responsibility for the transaction, they are asking for – before asking, they will stop and consider, 'if I ask something ridiculous and something I don't really need, it will hurt the culture and the others'.*

*So when you share the decision-making responsibility, you also share the responsibility of the culture and the vision of that organization. Everyone owns the responsibility of whether or not to ask for things. If they take a short cut or take advantage, they are not just damaging the club, but they are also damaging something that means something to them.*

*The 'yes policy' then works as a mechanism that encourages everybody to understand, engage in and embrace the culture of the business".*

### **A culture of looking after people**

The culture at Saracens is rooted in the purpose of the business, which is no longer to win rugby games, as it once was. Rather the transcending purpose of Saracens is clear and simple 'to look after people better'.

*"This is the whole deal you get at Saracens, you get looked after", Griffiths explains. "The entire business strategy is basically to gather talented people together, treat them unbelievable well, and in return they perform unbelievable well."*

Other clubs believe you cannot make players too comfortable, or they will just take advantage.

At Saracens the belief is that it is vital to the business that people don't have to live with any sense of fear, but instead feel unconditionally supported.

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*"We say, you will be with us for about 16 years – there might be a couple of years where you are injured, there are disruptions to personal life, where you are not a good player. And we will back you through the tough times. A young player is not threatened in any way."*

This also extends into other ways of caring for people than the 'yes policy'. Personal development programs, looking after families just as good as after the players, no rough criticism, no getting yelled at or dropped.

### **Looking after people is incredibly good business**

One might think that looking after people the way Griffiths does, is incredibly expensive. One might even say that a yes policy sound like poor management. But according to Griffiths it has been good business:

*"A lot of people say that caring for people is expensive. This is one of the things that people don't understand. They think that it cost money, but looking after people is incredible good business. At Saracens we cannot afford not to do this. Some players could earn 50% more elsewhere, but they don't want to play outside of the environment", he says.*

And the lower pay is also accompanied by high performance.

In fact, Griffiths points out: *"Since we stopped worrying about winning, we haven't stopped winning. Before 2009, Saracens had only once ever finished in the top four of the League... since 2009, we have finished in the top four five years in a row, winning the Premiership title in 2011 and finishing top in 2013 and 2014; since 2009, in all the 136-year history of the club, we had only once qualified for the quarter-finals of the European competition... since 2011, we have qualified for the quarter-finals three years in a row, reaching the quarter-final in 2012, the semi-final in 2013 and the final in 2014."*

And the 'yes policy' hasn't flooded the club with tons of unreasonable requests. The employees ask for fewer things today than they used to, and more often than not, the requests now come on behalf of other employees. And in the past five years, there have been less than 3 incidents of employees trying to take advantage of the system.

*"Today, the requests management receives from employees and players are not as trivial, they are fewer and more significant than before the change. Now they ask for something when they genuinely need help", Griffiths says.*

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### **A shareholder's nightmare?**

When Griffiths changed the way of being a business at Saracens, not all shareholders were thrilled at the prospects of saying yes to everything and investing heavily in people.

*“Some of the shareholders were skeptical and concerned, but they trusted that we would create the right results. We focus on the process and the results come around”, Griffiths says and adds – before one gets the impression that the club is just a happy-go-lucky place –*

*“It is not like we go around happy and clapping all the time, it is a tough environment. You **know** you have to deliver on that bottom line. There are challenges every day – because it is a dynamic process, and we are not perfect, we have many challenges, and we reflect critically every day to get better.”*

Having a ‘yes policy’, and creating a caring, conscious culture is possible for all kinds of organizations, according to Griffiths.

*“You can adopt it to a school, government, any business and any place that wants to share a culture. And especially businesses with a previous ‘hard line’ will see that they will get more out of their people.”*

About the author: Maiken Piil works as a catalyst specializing in conscious leadership and business. She works with companies that want to succeed with a purposedriven culture. Read more on how she can help your company [here](#)

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