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Ecolibrium

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HIGH TRUST A MUST

Simon Bradwell, M.AIRAH, is managing director of ebm-papst for Australia and New Zealand. Inclusiveness is the bedrock of his leadership style.



Simon Bradwell, M.AIRAH

Ecolibrium: When did you first decide you wanted to be an engineer, and how did you get to where you are today?

Simon Bradwell: From an early age I wanted to make things. Being brought up on a farm, I was brought up to be practical and make and mend things. This led to two degrees in engineering and then on the factory floor in manufacturing in London. I always wanted to be in general management and felt my best training would be hands-on experience. While working for that company I progressed from engineer to engineering team leader, then to product development and then to operations management.

After running a team of 24 guys working three shifts, 365 days a year, I needed international experience. My wife and I moved to Africa as volunteers, where I helped with business consultancy, working with The World Bank and Unido. Having been there for two years I came back to the UK and started working for ebm-papst.

I started as salesman on the road, became a sales manager and then a director here in Australia. I'm now a director of two companies and three not-for-profits. To say my working life has been varied is an understatement.

Eco: How would you characterise your approach to work? What are the fundamentals to your philosophy and process?

SB: The main characteristics of my leadership style is inclusiveness. I always believe that no matter who we are or what we do, our potential is limitless. My role as a business leader is to ensure we set a direction and then inspire people to work towards those goals and support everyone so that we can achieve. Words such as "you before me", "integrity" – making good if you can't keep your promise – "everyone has different eyes" follow that simple approach.

Eco: Are you open to new ideas, or are the old ways the best ways? Do you like to collaborate?

SB: New ideas are good, old ideas are good, everyone contributes their ideas, as everyone has a different perspective. The important thing is that whether we act alone or in tandem with partners and collaborators, is that we should all always expect to make mistakes.

However, we should not be arrogant enough not to admit that we don't know the answers and that we don't all make stupid decisions. It is only through creating

a culture where people are able to accept their failings do we get good decision making and growth.

I often ask the sales guys, "Why did we win that order?" The reasons could be many: delivery, product, price, a trusting relationship, etc.

In answer to the question, "Why did we lose that order" we always know exactly why. We all lose orders, and that's the way it is and the way it isn't; the issue is we work with that to see what can be done better.

No matter who we are or what we do, our potential is limitless

Eco: How would you describe your management style? Could you tell us why you're happy to pay for half of any course your staff do, including for things such as breadmaking.

SB: My management style is "high trust". I ensure we have agreed clear goals, which we monitor closely, and then I leave it to the teams on how they achieve them.

We, as a leadership team, always work to support the rest of the teams in the business. If we can do this effectively then goals are normally (!) achieved.

The other side of achieving our goals though is ensuring that we have the capability. Building capability is where we spend most money. Capability can lie in the tools we use but mainly within ourselves, whether it be our hard skills or our soft skills. Our market and products are always changing; change is commonplace, and it is the embracing of change that drives momentum in a business.

In order to be comfortable with that we have to have a thinking mindset, a willingness to learn new things and take a risk. A team that is "learning" is a team that I encourage, and I do that by paying for training, even breadmaking – it can't be that hard can it?

Eco: What's your proudest professional achievement? Does one-ebm-papst get a mention here?

SB: I'm proud of the team and the guys who get up every day and come to work at ebm-papst to do what we do. We aim to make a difference in people's lives and that takes a willingness for people to take responsibility. That is not an easy thing and so working together as "one ebm-papst" makes that possible.

Eco: Whom do you admire and why? Do you have a mentor? Do you gain any satisfaction from mentoring others?

SB: I have to say I love and admire my family. I was brought up on a farm in a family who are willing to defrosting water pipes at 2.30am in -13°C to keep pigs alive, and who share sweat and hard work and eating corned beef and beetroot sandwiches for afternoon tea as we rest on the bales of straw in a balmy English summer's afternoon during harvest.

We were centred as a family in our community. All my family have been in local community groups and supported village people, bowls, kids and cubs, etc. My understanding of who we are, what we are and the differences we can make all stem from a simple village upbringing covered in pig muck!

I don't have a mentor, but I do meet in a group of business people who meet once a month to discuss issues under Chatham House rules.

I believe whoever we are, we can always learn from each other. Every Qantas flight or taxi journey, we don't know who we are going to sit next to and what conversations will ensue. We could say that we mentor colleagues in the business, but it is not that overt. We do everything we can to support one another and work in new directions.

When we all walk together on that path then I think it's more than just mentoring.

Eco: Are there interesting, funny or quirky facts you could share with us about your work and what you do?

SB: We love karaoke.

Eco: What advice do you have for emerging engineers who wish to follow in your path?

SB: Get out of your box. Typically, as engineers we know what we like, and we like what we know. We are risk-averse, and we are conservative.

This is a good thing! However, there has to be more than taking 10 per cent cost out of products year in and year out. There has to be a better way of doing things that adds further value to people's lives. My advice is to force yourselves into situations where this has to be experienced because we all have the capability to be creative. After all, one, we are engineers, and two, we create the world around us.

Eco: What's the most important lesson you've learned throughout your working life?

SB: I'm no better than you. I'm OK and you're OK.

Eco: What's next for you, and what are your goals for the future?

SB: What will tomorrow bring? Who knows. I thank him every day that I'm vertical and breathing – that's always a good start. My goals for the future is to keep doing what I'm doing. To make a difference in our lived world.

Eco: What does AIRAH membership mean to you?

SB: AIRAH, I believe, brings people together to make a difference in a lived world. That is an admirable thing to do.

To say my working life has been varied is an understatement

Eco: Describe yourself. What are your defining characteristics?

SB: Truthful. Open. Like to laugh at myself.

Eco: If I wasn't an engineer, I'd be a . . .

SB: Sculptor

Eco: Do you have hobbies or diversions?

SB: Singing, bird watching, badminton and dogs.

Eco: My most valued possession is . . .

SB: After a sense of humour, that would have to be a signed copy of "I Heard it through the Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye. Bit of a cracker that one. ■

