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Make Tomorrow, Today

Mercer is in the middle of a major transformation program covering its people, processes and technology that will support growth plans to become an even greater consulting and financial services powerhouse in the Australian and wider Pacific marketplace.

Images by Scott Ehler

Culture eats strategy for breakfast, or so the corporate aphorism goes. While Mercer has been investing significantly in strategy development and execution, it was organisational culture that was at the forefront of Ben Walsh's mind when he was appointed managing director and pacific market leader of the health, wealth, and career consulting firm in April 2015.

As Ben puts it, "I'd already been heavily involved with my predecessor and the rest of the leadership team in developing our five-year business strategy, and the business was performing strongly. So, my first priorities were to recognise what we should continue doing, what we should change, and what we should stop—and, for me personally, what was the thing I was uniquely placed to do in the early days as the new MD.

"We began by discussing culture at the leadership team level, and questioning what activities and behaviours we expected from each other and as a team, and how this could cascade throughout the organisation. We spent time thinking about our clients and how they were looking for strategic partners. We spent time thinking about the individuals that utilise our services and products, and how the battlefield continues to migrate towards excellent customer experiences; and we

reflected further on our need to grow through new partnerships, alliances, and acquisitions."

With 15 years experience working across Mercer's global network, Ben was an ideal candidate to head up the Pacific market. His understanding of the totality of what Mercer can bring to the table for clients was borne out of numerous roles in four of the company's five business lines, and included working in regional roles spanning Mercer's 13 countries across Asia and the Pacific.

Following his appointment as MD, Ben quickly got to work with his leadership team and determined three key areas of focus. The first was around disciplined execution. "Having a strategy is super important; but it's only as good as the execution of that strategy."

The second was to drive the business with leadership urgency and accountability. "I felt that bringing a sense of excitement, energy, and passion in combination with disciplined execution, leadership commitment, and accountability was important as well," he says.

The third point was to make lateral leadership and strengthened communication a priority. "I really didn't want to be seen as the only boss in the organisation. In fact, I wanted to simplify and flatten the organisation, not only to be faster

and nimbler internally, but also for clients. I wanted to have leaders all over the business feel empowered—and feel that they have permission to sometimes lead, sometimes follow, and sometimes walk alongside other leaders providing support. This is something I personally try to role model. I need to be there routinely—but I don't always have to be out front.

"Similarly, on the strengthened communication front, we are working really hard to institute two-way communication within the organisation. I am attempting to engage colleagues at all levels, in all cities and countries, in a conversation. I want to share a dialogue with all colleagues who are not only interested about what's working well and where we can go faster, but also about where there are opportunities for improvement, or where there are blind spots and unconscious biases—how we ensure we balance quality for our clients and colleagues over quantity in terms of deliverables and utilisation."

For Ben, and Mercer's leadership team, having real two-way conversations has led to the adoption of multiple and diverse communication channels. In the very early days of Ben's role as MD, he implemented 'Let's Chat', an hour once a week where all colleagues could communicate with Ben and other members of the leadership team, via a >



communicator, and have questions answered and ideas heard in real-time. “Colleagues, particularly introverts in our workforce, have gravitated towards this new communication tool. It’s amazing how extroverted an introvert can be when chatting online! Inclusive leadership has to look at how to leverage our diverse talent to provide innovative and diverse solutions for our business and our clients.”

With a refreshed people and culture strategy being developed under Ben’s watch, along with a refreshed five-year business strategy and diverse leadership team, Ben believes that the future looks incredibly bright.

“Change is all around us; but we’ve infused our DNA with a bias

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- Ben Walsh

towards innovation, change management, and agility of action. It has been a work in progress for a number of years, and we are now bringing several major initiatives to market. We have been innovating and diligently executing in the background, and now there is a whole raft of new products, services, and approaches that are coming to market.”

Mercer has delivered a number of award-winning products in recent years, including Mercer LifetimePlus, and Mercer SmartPath. Within the first six months of Ben’s leadership, he took steps to ensure these innovations could be delivered to clients consistently and with scale. He formed a team that spans all lines of business within Mercer to bring together innovation, product development, and product management capabilities across the firm.

The unification of silos within the organisation did not stop there.

Ben knew from experience that Mercer brings the most value to a client when a holistic approach is adopted. Ben appointed the leader of Mercer’s investment consulting team to also lead the actuarial consulting team. “Combining the leadership of these two separate parts of the business is intended to facilitate more collaboration—which will, ultimately, lead to better outcomes for our clients, and new and different career paths and ways of thinking for our employees.”

In 2009, Ben experienced a serious health scare that had a profound impact on his leadership style and approach to clients. “My personal experience during this time was that various well-intentioned and highly competent health professionals viewed issues in isolation, and the whole patient was sometimes missed.

“Learning from this experience, in a business context, I now passionately believe that clients

need to be thought about holistically, and we need to bring the whole of the firm to them when we engage with them. It’s the same with our customers, or whether it’s employees, members of superannuation funds, or private clients within our financial advice business. We are at our best when we take the whole of our clients’ circumstances into account.”

Mercer is taking this same ‘holistic value-add’ approach it has with clients to its relationship with suppliers. “We want to develop more of a partnership model than we already have with our clients and suppliers, because we believe more affinity partnerships will be a critical component of our future growth.”

Mercer works to enhance the health, wealth, and careers of its worldwide client base through its investment, superannuation, actuarial, insurance, financial advice, and workplace reward services. “We know what our value

proposition to the market is, but we want there to be a joined-up view with our clients and our suppliers of what success for each other looks like.

“Mercer’s relationship with SuperChoice is a great example of two organisations adding value to each other; we’ve worked together for well over a decade. We’ve both experienced growth in this time; but we’ve also seen a dramatic wave of regulatory reform in the superannuation industry that could’ve stifled innovation. However, our partnership has ensured we’ve both done the opposite—we work together with a focus on innovation and operational efficiency with results that ensure both parties are better off.

“Our long-standing relationship with Australia Post is another good example of identifying and maximising shared value. This relationship has evolved over the years from transactional to sharing innovation. Obviously, Australia

Post is a critical component of how we communicate with members, and we provide their employees with services also—but we now go beyond this. We regularly discuss innovation, and a number of issues that are relevant for both Australia Post and Mercer. For example, we both have evolving digital strategies reflecting the changing expectations of our customers; we’re excited to continue to build this relationship during a time of evolution and innovation in both organisations.

“When we go about our work, our purpose really is to ‘make tomorrow today’ for our clients and customers, and we look to do that by making a difference in peoples’ lives through their health, wealth, and careers. I want to encourage the organisation to think about how we can assist our clients through those domains, and to do it holistically. I want to bring the whole of the firm together for the needs of our clients and customers.”

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- Ben Walsh

“Partnering with Mercer has been a blend of strategic vision and collaboration. Initially addressing a business objective to deliver multi-channel communication choices for Mercer and its members, we look forward to solidifying the partnership as the digital mailbox offering matures.” - Robert Frendo, Head of Digital-Sales and Onboarding, MyPost Digital Mailbox



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