UK POWER NETWORKS AT A GLANCE
Electricity distributor UK Power Networks has approximately 5,600 employees — over 50% of its workforce are engineers and craftspeople (including lines people, jointers, fitters, and technicians) who “make sure the lights stay on” in the East of England, South East, and London. UK Power Networks is driven to constantly improve the vital service it provides to more than eight million residential and business customers.

SETTING THE CONTEXT
In 2010, the networks business was acquired by the CKI Group, resulting in a change in senior management. The new CEO wanted to bring about a shift in organisational performance through a new vision for UK Power Networks: to be an employer choice; to be sustainably cost-efficient; and to be a respected corporate citizen.

The principles defining the new vision had specific measures to help drive a step-change in performance, with a focus on creating cost efficiencies, increasing employee engagement, and improving customer service. Emma Nicholls, Head of Organisational Development, describes how this affected the company’s approach to leadership:

“We wanted to create a leadership culture that was different — one that engaged leaders and empowered them to deliver the company vision.”

“Our goal was to be a ‘one to watch’ company in The Sunday Times ‘Best Companies’ by 2016.” To do that, the company had to demonstrate that it had improved leadership capability, increased engagement, and raised performance.

DESIGNING THE SOLUTION
The journey to shape UK Power Networks’ leadership culture began in 2011, at an event for company leaders facilitated by external consultants. The aim was to identify three words that best described the leadership culture the company wanted to create. The three words that were ultimately chosen were Focused, Accountable, and Visible. These words served as the foundation for building UK Power Networks’ culture.

THE LEADERSHIP WAY
To support the creation of that culture, the “UK Power Networks Leadership Way” programme was developed to bring the company’s new guiding principles — Focused, Accountable, Visible — to life. Through a series of courses and activities, participants explore how leaders “show up” and how this affects those they lead: an important concept that helps participants understand a leader’s impact is the “shadow of the leader” — as role models, leaders must remember how far their shadow is cast, and the power they have to influence the behaviours of their teams, for good or ill.

In addition, UK Power Networks defined new leadership competencies and ran workshops to help people develop those competencies. The focus of the development workshops is on leadership thinking and behaviours, listening skills, prioritisation, and on bringing “Focused, Accountable, Visible” to life. To encourage individual development, the workshops also include a self-diagnostic based on the leadership competencies, which informs individual coaching and participant action plans. The Leadership Way initially was delivered to senior management to set the tone at the top, and then cascaded to middle managers and team leaders.

LEADERSHIP RECONNECT DAY
Other leadership events take place throughout the year, including an event called “Leadership Reconnect Day”, to remind people of the importance of being “Focused, Accountable, Visible”. In addition to taking part in team activities, participants hear important messages from the CEO and executive team about the role of the leader in transformation and managing people through change. To supplement the learning, workshops on specific leadership competencies are also offered. Past topics include team-building, collaboration, and commercial focus.
PREPARING NEW LEADERS AND FUTURE LEADERS

UK Power Networks has also created a programme to help new managers better understand the company vision, the leadership competencies, and their role as leaders. The New Leader Programme also covers case studies on people-management issues to help participants prepare for tough situations and practice new leadership skills. In 2014, Nicholls and her team introduced the Future Leaders Programme, aimed at high potentials likely to assume a senior role within five years. Participants are nominated by senior leaders and undergo an assessment process to receive feedback on their development needs and action plans. They then undertake what Nicholls describes as “a mini–internal MBA”: Participants complete external course work on emotional intelligence, personal brand, influencing, and negotiating. Other courses are run internally by senior managers who deliver sessions on building future networks, leading innovation, managing employee relations, and delivering excellent customer service.

MAKING AN IMPACT

Over the last four years, business performance has improved dramatically due to strong leadership, clarity of vision, and the successful creation of a leadership culture. UK Power Networks has also received external recognition for its leadership development efforts: the company was awarded the “Silver Standard” and “Gold Standard” by Investors in People in 2012 and 2014, respectively. It has also been named one of the 2015 “Top 25 Best Big Companies to Work For” by The Sunday Times, meeting the ambitious goal set four years earlier. Annual surveys indicate an increase in employee engagement scores, and the company has also seen significant improvement in customer service and safety, other important areas of focus.

Building on this success, the company has further focused its development efforts on a specific group of leaders: 90 field staff supervisors who are largely responsible for managing 2,000 operational staff. Nicholls describes them as “a massively influential group” who are the heart of the company: “If they are not out there jointing cables or fixing poles, we would not have a business.” The workshops for this target group focus on finding solutions for specific challenges they face in their roles as supervisors. The key outcome is presenting the challenges and proposed solutions to stakeholders in other parts of the business (representatives from transport, occupational health, the training team, among others) to get their buy-in and commitment to resolving the issues. The workshops have had a positive impact because many obstacles that are identified — administrative burdens, regulatory demands, the challenges of performance management — can be overcome. As Nicholls observes, “It’s really about changing process or changing the way we communicate.” Opening up the channels of communication to jointly reach solutions has increased engagement among field staff supervisors and has allowed them to focus on other important priorities, such as increasing productivity.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Having senior leaders involved in the workshops helps engage participants, Nicholls notes, because they can discuss real issues in participants’ working lives and can make the links to business performance. And delivering most of the interventions in–house means that facilitators can easily adapt the programme to address pressing business issues.

Nicholls also advises that embedding learning takes time. Rather than changing priorities or trying to teach something new, she recommends focusing on deepening the learning and making it stick. Even after four years, Nicholls notes:

“We are still talking about being ‘Focused, Accountable, and Visible’ — everything we do has the same messages in it.”

Finally, Nicholls asserts the critical importance of defining your leadership culture at the start: “If you can come up with key words or a sentence to describe your leadership culture, it makes it much easier for people to understand it and bring it to life. If you try to bring in activities without that focus, there is nothing to ‘hook’ [the learning] into.”

“Make sure you have your business performance targets pinned down, be clear about what your company vision is, then link your leadership culture to your vision and goals. If you do this, you will achieve your targets.”