

# FROM SPEED BOAT TO OCEAN LINER: MASTERPET FINDS SMOOTH SAILING ON LEADERSHIP'S MAIDEN VOYAGE



Masterpet has been in business for nearly a half century providing the education, products and services people need to do what's right for their pets. Masterpet believes life is better with a pet, and the company provides the resources needed for people to take proper care of their pets. Based in New Zealand, Masterpet also has operations in Australia and employs more than 230 people. It was acquired at the end of 2011 by healthcare distributor Ebos Group. Website: [www.masterpet.com](http://www.masterpet.com)

**M**asterpet is a New Zealand success story and a well-recognized name in pet food and supplies. With roots going back to 1954, Masterpet's mantra is: "Life's better with a pet, and we've never met a pet we didn't get." The company has rapidly evolved from a small, family-owned business into a much larger, trans-Tasman business through local expansion and acquisition in Australia, and now forms part of the EBOS Group—one of the largest suppliers of international healthcare brands in the Australasian region.

The team at Masterpet uses a nautical analogy of a speedboat and an ocean liner to make sense of the changes in business during the past decade. The historically family-operated business is likened to a speedboat—easily maneuverable and quick in shallow waters with a captain in charge. But it does not possess the scale and robustness needed to travel far. The new corporate, CEO-led business is like an ocean liner—it can navigate the deep and sometimes rough seas with more crew on deck. However, it can be cumbersome to turn and adjust.

Like many organizations that have experienced similar changes and growth, Masterpet must perform a balancing act, both in terms of business strategies and processes, and managing its workforce.

## **THE CHALLENGE: DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH LEADERSHIP**

Masterpet aims to maintain the speedboat-like agility, rich cultural history and family-driven values that made the business a success in the first place, while driving the necessary corporate changes, including people practices, to deliver efficient and maximum business expansion opportunities.

Sean Duggan, Chief Executive Officer of Masterpet, sees this balancing act as a leadership challenge and priority. "Though employees may still have an expectation of me to be the leading figure in the business, I cannot lead the business alone," Duggan says.

As Masterpet grew it became clear that managing the change process was a leadership issue that needed to be dealt with at all levels of the organization. At Masterpet, the focus was not only on delegating the responsibility and accountability for managing the change, but equipping managers, who are often promoted based on technical expertise, with the skills required to become effective people leaders.

## **THE SOLUTION: EFFECTIVELY IDENTIFYING AND STRENGTHENING LEADERS**

Beyond identifying engagement levels within an organization, an employee survey from Kenexa, an IBM Company, allows organizations to analyze results through a number of different lenses, such as team and position level feedback. It is possible to explore areas such as manager effectiveness by extracting items in the survey that managers have responsibility for. Looking at the data in this way can increase the individual's awareness of how their management performance is viewed.

Fiona Couchman, Learning and Development Manager at Masterpet, has been instrumental in utilizing the feedback from Kenexa surveys for the past five years as input for the development of the company's leadership program. "We looked at the areas of concern expressed by our people, specifically around leadership, and realized it wasn't a one-size-fits-all approach to developing the leadership program," Couchman says.

Learning modules and outcomes were customized and tiered at three levels (supervisor/team leader, manager and executive) using a mixture of in-house expertise and external providers. Couchman supports the notion that “leadership development is also not a one-hit wonder. It needs to be progressive, practiced and sustainable.”

#### **THE RESULTS: BETTER LEADERSHIP, HIGHER ENGAGEMENT**

As a result of Couchman’s vision, Masterpet’s leadership training program runs multiple years—and the first group is already well into their programs. Now, everyone in the organization who is responsible for leading people is on some form of a two-year leadership tract. Classes are spread out to ensure there is enough time in between for the information to “sink in,” and for the new tools and behaviors to be practiced.

The program tackles topics relevant to issues that managers face in their roles. For the executive team, the program is more closely focused on identifying, retaining and engaging the best employees, and growing personally as leaders. In terms of change management, the program is focused on aspects such as communicating a clear strategy and instilling confidence in the organization’s future. Team leaders and supervisors can earn a recognized qualification from a tailored program at Wellington Institution of Technology. The program’s key focus areas include keeping staff motivated through times of change while also developing the courage to have difficult conversations at work, actively listening, communicating clearly and valuing input from others.

Masterpet managers rave about the program.

Jenny Dickinson, Procurement Manager for Australasia, says the program allows her to lead her geographically dispersed team and remain connected and involved despite the distance. One thing Dickinson learned is not to react too quickly to try and solve her team’s problems, but rather allow them to first “have a vent” and then encourage them to seek their own solutions.

A Pick-Pack team leader says her program has helped her in the transition from being a long-standing team member to a supervisor and how to manage new relationships at work. In addition to attaining critical skills, program participants also identify the benefit of the program as providing “a support network of peers with whom you can share your concerns, difficulties and bounce ideas off.”

And it hasn’t stopped there.

Having experienced the positive effect of developed leaders, Masterpet decided to roll out an optional leadership program for its key clients such as vet practitioners and pet store operators. During the last six years, Masterpet has trained more than 360 customers through a 12-month Masterpet Leadership program. They feel cascading strengths and developing those within its business network is mutually beneficial and builds business relationships that go beyond supply and demand.

The success of the programs is reflected in Masterpet’s consistently high “confidence in leadership” scores in the Kenexa NZ survey for the past two years. The programs also had a positive impact on its engagement scores, with the latest survey showing more than 50 percent of staff feeling fully engaged. Couchman recalls the theme of her first company conference six years ago, “Family Values, Corporate Focus.” Now, that theme is actively delivered on, thanks to leadership development throughout the organization.

The business has gone from strength to strength, and with the depth of leadership development building across the business, Masterpet is well set to continue to deliver on expectations—of the owners, customers and its people.

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