

EVERYONE HAS A PLAN UNTIL THEY GET PUNCHED IN THE MOUTH



Anyone running a business recognises the inherent truth in boxer Mike Tyson’s famous quote. Business can be just as unpredictable as sport. Knowing when and how to respond to fast-changing events, and reacting appropriately, requires wisdom, experience and good old common sense. It also helps to have a bit of luck on your side.

In April 2017, Jon Bruce had just sold Prestige Nursing & Care to multinational corporation Sodexo Group. Things were going to plan but a surprise was coming. The business, based in Wallington, Surrey, was originally set up by his parents in 1945. It grew to the point where today it has c2,000 home carers on its books, managed via 35 UK-wide branch offices.

Although he’d sold the business, the deal stipulated that Bruce would remain in his role as managing director. The plan agreed with Sodexo management was that he’d continue implementing the improvement plans started pre-sale. Two other directors would leave the business by mutual consent, leaving an experience gap that Bruce needed to fill. Before the sale, he had already identified that he needed someone from outside the home care sector.



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“I specifically wanted someone with fresh ideas, different experience and who would constructively challenge me at times. I knew there were still many operational and commercial improvements to be made. And the acquisition signalled a huge, impending culture change; we’d been a medium-sized family-run business and were now part of a huge multinational.”

Bruce met several interims but found them to be overly-prescriptive in their approach. They were offering their preferred methodologies



on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. He then met Nick Diprose of Holdsway after referral by a non-executive director at Prestige. In turn, Nick recommended Chris Shaw, an interim operations director with a strong commercial bias.

With twenty successful interim management assignments to his credit, Shaw combines huge, varied experience with high personal energy. It gives him the rare ability to adapt quickly to changing needs and to manage different roles, often simultaneously. His under-pinning knowledge of people management and leadership comes from The Royal Navy’s renowned Dartmouth College, combined with a decade of military service.

Shaw says he had a polished, professional experience of working with Holdsway.

“I’ve found lots of interim management providers are very transaction-oriented; rather like the ‘body movers’ of volume recruitment. By contrast, Nick works very hard on close relationship-building to identify that elusive ‘perfect fit’. He briefed me very well on Prestige. I felt it wouldn’t be a wasted journey to meet Jon.”

That initial feeling was confirmed at the introductory meeting, which subsequently led to his appointment.

“Chris had done thorough research and listened carefully. I found we quickly established a rapport. His gentle manner was deceptive at first. I wondered if he was tough enough for the challenges ahead. But that thought soon disappeared when I learned about his military background!

“We quickly created a plan and prepared the final scope of work together. He was great at understanding what I wanted to achieve but he also challenged my thoughts and ambitions, while never losing humility,” adds Bruce.

The overall plan was to create a standardised operating model and a tighter commercial focus, while retaining essential, high-quality care-giving and safeguarding. Each Prestige office had its own quality assurance and administration managers. Some smaller offices were unprofitable. The plan involved simplifying this structure, removing duplicated roles, closing unprofitable offices and organising local care delivery around a more efficient regional hub and spoke model. After a few weeks, this plan was about to be rolled out.

And then came the ‘sucker punch’, as Shaw explains:

“Sodexo executives were naturally supporting the reorganisation but then asked Jon to accelerate his plan and also make a large, additional, business-wide cost reduction. So the original plan had to be postponed while this work was done, then adjusted.

“This was a big distraction but, in the end, it was relatively easy to do. Most of the savings came from the already-planned office closures and by winding-up a cost-draining recruitment side-venture.”

During this period, Bruce and Shaw found Sodexo executives based in the US to be very engaged. They wanted to understand all the fine details of Prestige operations and plans. Weekly transatlantic phone calls became part of the new regime.

“Chris’ experience of working in large corporations and reporting into an American-style of management scrutiny really paid dividends here. It was an alien world to me, admits Bruce.

“He took the initiative on gathering and reporting management information, and naturally led these calls at first. This gave me

breathing space to learn how to adapt and then eventually take over. Chris was superb and massively helpful during this time, anticipating my needs and managing the expectations of all the different stakeholders; much of time against his natural instinct which is to build rather than cut.”

Prestige Nursing & Care is still undergoing the changes initiated in 2017. Such was the level of satisfaction in Shaw’s contributions that he was re-hired the following year, on a much-tighter, operational remit.



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His task this time was to reorganise Prestige’s two, highest revenue-generating offices. While taking overall responsibility for their day-to-day operations, Chris also supported, guided and coached existing managers to improve performance. The changes put in place are designed to allow both offices to fulfil their true commercial potential.



The home care market is highly uncertain. Cuts to local authority budgets have led to severe underfunding issues creating unsustainable business models for some of the bigger care providers. Bruce candidly characterises the changes he’s driving at Prestige as an ‘ongoing experiment’, with results not yet secure and taking longer to materialise.

In different circumstances, this chapter in the long story of Chris Shaw’s interim management career would have the usual neat and tidy ending, with clear ‘job done’ results. In reality, some assignments are destined to turn out differently.

As the testimony from Jon Bruce shows, they are no less valuable as a result.

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