

TURNING A DOUBLE-DIGIT GROWTH STRATEGY INTO ACTION AT WINCANTON



Revenue for 2018 at Wincanton is at a six-year high. Behind this highlight is an interim-led business performance improvement plan. Here's what happened.

WINCANTON AT A GLANCE

- **HQ:** Chippenham, UK
- **Revenue:** £1,17Bn
- **Vehicles:** 3,600
- **Warehousing:** 7.6M sq.ft
- **Employees:** 17,700

From groceries to white goods, building materials to furniture, there's hardly anything that isn't stored, picked or moved by Wincanton. At the helm of the UK's largest logistics and transport company is Adrian Colman, who originally joined as CFO in 2013.

By 2016, the year after stepping up to chief executive, Colman had completed a nine-month business review. The result was an ambitious growth strategy. What he needed now was someone to oversee the next, critical steps: planning and execution.

This was clearly a business-critical role. It required a seasoned executive who had effectively led complex transformation programmes in similar organisations; someone with the commercial acumen, character and tenacity to turn strategy into an effective action plan.



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— ADRIAN COLMAN

What happened next was the result of a routine catch-up call to Colman from Holdsway's Nick Diprose. Colman had already started the search for an interim executive, describing the call as perfectly timed, and adding:

"Nick is adept at rapidly assimilating the essential elements of a client brief and

then translating them into a concise shortlist of well-matched interim executives."

As the conversation unfolded, Diprose believed he knew exactly the right person:

"It was a perfect fit for Tony Martin. I first met Tony twelve years ago when he wanted advice on becoming an interim executive. At that point, he'd recently finished a long and varied corporate career with Diageo.

"His last role had been director of global business transformation, focussed on Diageo's strategic partnerships in China and Asia. He had impeccable, transferable skills and a reputation for getting results in difficult situations. I was keen to represent him," says Diprose.

Martin went on to repeatedly prove his project leadership skills in interim assignments across multiple sectors. These include successful stints in energy (National Grid), utilities (Severn Trent Water), transport (Network Rail), education (The Open University) and construction (Mace).

Starting at Wincanton in September 2016, Martin began turning the company's strategy into reality. Phase one involved:

- scoping and budgeting an eighteen-month programme
- defining the workstreams across all business functions
- agreeing objectives and individual ownership of sub-projects

"You can't impose programmes like this, they must be willingly-owned. So, winning the senior people over and getting them to accept and take ownership was a crucial first step. It demands sensitivity, and you need authentic buy-in.

“That’s one of the main reasons transformations fail; because this aspect is neglected or under-appreciated,” explains Martin.

Also critical was creating a blueprint of all the different workstreams that together made up the evolving plan. These covered sales, finance, marketing, HR, operations, procurement and property. Each had an executive sponsor appointed.

“This wasn’t a sideshow happening as day-to-day business continued. It had to become a roadmap for working differently to get where we wanted to be,” Martin points out.

Phase two was about aligning the evolving plan to growth performance indicators, then agreeing milestones with workstream heads. Next came a ‘brown paper’ visualisation exercise to show the overarching plan. This exercise had several goals:

- to harmonise workloads
- identify inter-dependencies
- highlight inevitable gaps
- communicate how all the component parts worked as a whole

Using the output from this session, Martin and a project planning specialist built a customised Microsoft planning management programme. This allowed the creation of dashboards for each of the thirty workstream sub-projects. In each case, detailed activities, risks, targets and deadlines were on show.

Simple traffic light colour-coding provided an instant visual overview of milestone progress. Each had associated narratives showing what was happening and why.

“Creating these dashboards was probably the most important thing we did. Rather than constraining people they were incredibly liberating; they brought Wincanton’s paper strategy to life in vivid, meaningful detail.

“But also important was how we used them. Given the choice of monthly or fortnightly reporting, the workstream sponsors chose the latter. Every two weeks the system produced updated reports. It acted like a steady drum beat, giving everyone the sense of urgency needed to stay focussed, in control and on track.

“Not maintaining speed, direction and clarity is another classic pitfall surrounding transformation programmes. You need a way to minimise friction and ambiguity at the same time, to constantly spot and mitigate snags,” adds Martin.

By January 2017, Martin and team were rolling out the plan across the business. Good, regular communication played an important role at this point. Inevitably, there were set-backs. Enthusiasm for the new plan wasn’t shared equally among the workstream project sponsors.

There was a degree of scepticism, plus latent concerns emerged about imposition or what some felt was ‘micro-management’. Once it became clear the majority had fully embraced the programme, resistance soon dissipated. This was achieved through a combination of Colman’s clear leadership and proactive encouragement from Martin.



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– TONY MARTIN

By June, Martin was confident that his Wincanton colleagues were self-sufficient. He was ready to hand over, ending his assignment two months earlier than planned. Colman was clearly satisfied with a job well-done:

“The work Tony led delivered a straightforward, no nonsense roadmap that was all about moving strategy into a deliverable action plan and getting results. Tony brings his natural enthusiasm to any change programme. At the same time, he will ‘hold feet to the fire’ to keep things on track, when required.”

In May 2018, Wincanton posted its highest revenue for six years. Employee engagement and earnings per share were also up. The business has a renewed sense of vitality, and is poised to continue delivering year-on-year performance improvement.



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