

**“LEAD is fascinating and a massive learning curve. I feel honoured to have been part of it” – Nicola Dugdale**

### **Case Study: Specialist Training – Nicola Dugdale**

**Nicola Dugdale is operations director and co founder of Accrington-based company Specialist Training. The company was set up in 1999 to offer training services in transport, warehousing and dangerous goods. The business has been running successfully but Nicola was so busy coping that she had no time to look at business development. The LEAD programme run by the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development was just what Nicola needed. It aims to promote business growth through leadership training and has led to considerable changes in the way Nicola’s business is run.**

#### **The Issues**

Like many other entrepreneurs, Nicola was finding it hard to plan for the future because she was so involved in the everyday activities of the business. Even though she knew she needed to step back and let the management team run the company, Nicola was finding it hard to let go. Her goal of becoming less operational and more strategic was proving hard to achieve.

As well as hindering the plans for the company’s future, Nicola’s involvement in everyday happenings within the company meant she wasn’t challenging herself either. Along with Tim Barker, the MD, Nicola was losing sight of where Specialist Training should be heading. “We had definitely become complacent and we were a bit bored with it as well really”, Nicola admitted. Clearly a sharper focus was needed.

Nicola describes her leadership style as: “a very direct approach. I’m a problem solver and I concentrate on making things happen so I may not always be diplomatic – I tend to overlook the people issues”. While this approach gets results and has served her well over the last few years, Nicola was keen see how other, more conservative approaches to leadership worked, and might be adapted to suit her situation.

#### **The Power of LEAD**

Being part of the LEAD programme allowed Nicola to interact with other SME leaders in a variety of environments. An overnight experiential session, a day spent hiking in the Lake District and action learning sets have all contributed to the LEAD experience and given Nicola the opportunity to see how different leadership styles can work in different situations. This has had an effect on her own style as well, “I don’t think my style of leadership is necessarily bad because it achieves results but I do try to be more laid back now, and think about how best to approach a situation”, Nicola explained.

The one-to-one coaching element of LEAD has been particularly useful. “I was a bit dubious about coaching because I’ve never done any before but it was fantastic. My coach has been continuously helping me to pull away from the day to day operations which is a massive achievement”, Nicola said. The coach’s objectivity allows the client to

focus on the real issues and difficulties without the distractions associated with the workplace. The coach can establish goals and targets for change, and keep the client motivated through the personal contact they have.

She hasn't been keeping this knowledge to herself either - Nicola has been disseminating LEAD's pearls of wisdom to her team and encouraging them to use the knowledge to come up with their own answers to problems.

### **Ch-ch-ch-ch Changes**

The LEAD masterclasses have also proved invaluable to Nicola. As well as stepping back and accepting that a good leader does not have to be in control of every aspect, Nicola has made changes to the company's business plan to encourage growth. Even masterclasses on subjects that Nicola has a good working knowledge of offered a different angle for her to consider

The changes Nicola is making to the business plan involve a longer-term outlook and a more aggressive growth strategy involving taking calculated risks for a faster return. "After the finance masterclass I went and did a few calculations that led us to a way of thinking that used the money more efficiently. This spurred us on to have a different strategy to grow faster", Nicola said. "To grow you have to keep learning and try new ideas and ways of looking at things," she continued.

Alongside her less hands-on approach and the strategy for growth, Nicola has introduced some practical measures to help the efficiency of Specialist Training. With the help of a LEAD consultant, the company's website is being developed and an interactive brochure is being produced. An operations manual is also being produced so tasks can be carried out by more than one member of staff.

LEAD has given Nicola reassurance that they were doing the right thing. A more strategic role for her, and the more efficient and aggressive strategy for the company mean Specialist Training should look forward to growing. Indeed, a 25% increase in staff, increased turnover, and the possibility of another centre being opened indicate expansion is well underway already!