

Employee experiences spur change at National Australia Bank

Award-winning Private Wealth Group sees immediate progress after story-based leadership program.

“We walked in, and around that room were stories from our people... it was by far one of the most compelling, confronting and valuable insights we’ve experienced.”

— David Greig, General Manager, Client Experience, NAB Private Wealth

A catalyst for change

Within any high-performing organisation, the pursuit of excellence never ceases. Though National Australia Bank’s (NAB) Private Wealth division has been honoured as Australia’s Best Private Bank and Outstanding Investment Adviser of the Year, the division continuously looks for opportunities to improve.

At eight locations across Australia, approximately 500 front- and back-office staff work together to deliver highly personalised private banking and wealth management solutions to help clients grow, protect and ultimately transfer their wealth.

Every year, the group conducts a staff engagement survey to understand how employees feel about various aspects of their work environment. A recent survey uncovered several areas for improvement regarding leadership, yet the survey format left executive management craving the specific examples they needed in order to bring about change.

“The survey revealed that certain things were not resonating for our people,” said David Greig, General Manager, Client Experience, NAB Private Wealth. “If we want to be a high-performing organisation, we need specific feedback on how employees are experiencing leadership in our business.”

Anecdote – a fresh approach

Anecdote and its story-based leadership program emerged as a fresh alternative to what the division had tried in the past.

“A member of our team had the fortune of attending an Anecdote program and thought it was very powerful content,” said Sally Varley, Learning & Development Manager, NAB Private Wealth.

Company: National Australia Bank Private Wealth.

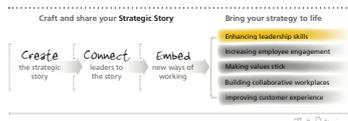
Goal: To improve leadership behaviours, the division sought to understand and feel the experiences employees had with their senior executives.

Solution: Anecdote elicited insightful, authentic employee stories and immersed the leaders in them, which immediately inspired leaders to make specific, positive changes.

Results: A few months after leaders experienced their employee stories, an annual employee engagement survey showed progress:

- ‘Confidence in people leader’ improved by five percent
- ‘Overall staff engagement’ measured across six dimensions improved by two percent
- Additionally, leader behaviours have changed noticeably.

The Flow is an integrated approach to making a business strategy stick. It combines a communication process based on stories with change initiatives that align behaviours to support the strategic directions.



Enhancing leadership skills

The process starts with Anecdote collecting examples from employees of good and bad leadership behaviours using a technique they pioneered called Anecdote Circles. Normally, focus groups generate lots of opinions and judgements, and the output is an expert interpretation of the situation.

In contrast, Anecdote Circles are designed to elicit real life experiences. When leaders hear those stories – in the exact words of employees – they are affected on a much deeper level than with facts, opinions or assertions. Most importantly, leaders understand intuitively what staff are experiencing, and this emotion drives real change.

“We had tried all sorts of leadership programs before,” added Greig. “Collecting what people are really doing and feeling was a completely different approach than anything else.”

Sharing stories candidly

Prior to collecting the leadership stories, the Anecdote team interviewed senior leaders to identify themes to explore. Ultimately, they chose three focus topics: the impact of leader behavior, collaboration and culture. Approximately 70 employees were invited from across the organisation to participate in sharing their stories, making sure to include a broad cross-section of people from different groups. They came together in small groups of 8-12 people.

Based on the themes, the Anecdote facilitator posed questions designed to elicit stories. For example, the open-ended questions included emotional words aimed at helping employees remember past events. The facilitator strategically chose when to dig deeper into responses and when to remain silent and let the interaction play out. Knowing that they would not be identified with their responses, employees felt free to share stories candidly.

A team of Anecdote and NAB Private Wealth staff used Anecdote’s online story-bank application, Zahmoo, to manage the collected stories, tagging, rating and selecting the examples to be used with the leadership team.

‘Confronting and valuable insights’

When it was time for the executive management team to hear those stories, they did something unprecedented. The busy executives set aside a full day to focus on that feedback and choose specific action steps.

When leaders arrived for Leadership Strategy Day, they were surrounded by employee anecdotes posted along the walls; 25 positive and 25 negative stories. The stories were in the exact words of staff members – without edits – for the greatest authenticity and impact.

“We walked in, and around that room were stories from our people,” Greig said. “It was not about another place. It was about what our people saw in our leadership. Forget theory, this is what people are telling you. It was by far one of the most compelling, confronting and valuable insights we’ve experienced.”

For a group focused on hard numbers every day, the emotion and detail in employee anecdotes hit them in a completely new way.

“Working with the experiences of our staff was confronting, but also very energising,” said Angela Mentis, Executive General Manager, NAB Private Wealth. “We could see exactly what we needed to do to dramatically improve engagement and the many small things we could change that would make the biggest impact. Most importantly, I could see that my leadership team found the process transparent, honest, and understood what needed to be changed. It was refreshing to commence our cultural journey with unfiltered feedback from our people – a more engaging and inspiring framework.”

Committing to change

After absorbing the anecdotes, leaders identified some of the main patterns of behaviour impacting employee engagement. An Anecdote facilitator guided them through the process of identifying key group behaviors and committing to specific action steps as a group. Then, each executive developed his or her own personal action plan with two to three behaviours they would change.

Some action items were small, such as choosing words more carefully or leaving more time for dialogue in meetings. Others were more challenging, like taking time to listen to all views during a discussion. Most importantly, the group left ready to work together and individually to improve.

“Everyone came back energised and really wanting to go forward with an enhanced approach for the year,” Varley said. “We got really positive feedback from them.”

The impact was so powerful that the Executive General Manager sent an email the day after the program to all employees, thanking them for the feedback and committing to doing better.

Signs of progress

Not surprisingly, senior executives and employees began noticing changes immediately. Just a few months after the Leadership Strategy Day, employees again completed the annual engagement survey. Already, ‘confidence in people leader’ improved by five percent, and ‘overall staff engagement’ measured across six dimensions improved by two percent – small changes that indicate the team is on the right track.

As just one simple example of change, executives received specific feedback that employees never saw some of them taking the stairs with employees during fire evacuation drills. Now, leaders are making a specific effort to show the way and join employees during these exercises.

“The Anecdote program showed us we need to be talking and listening to our people, having good candor and open, honest relationships,” Greig said. “There’s no doubt we’re starting to make positive progress. We’re seeing changes in the leadership team and that’s encouraging.”

RELEVANT ANECDOTE WHITEPAPERS

[How to make your strategy stick with a strategic story](#)

[The vital role of business storytelling](#)

Anecdote is a management consulting firm that uses its expertise in story to inspire enduring organisational change. Its clients include IBM, Shell, KPMG, the Australian Treasury, Fuji Xerox, NAB, Cadbury, Schweppes and Rio Tinto.

Anecdote Pty Ltd
people@anecdote.com

Anecdote Pty Ltd – Head office
49-51 Rosslyn Street
West Melbourne VIC 3004
t: +61 3 9923 7370

**Melbourne, Sydney,
Canberra, London**

www.anecdote.com

anecdote[®]
Putting stories to work[®]