

Social housing is not usually seen as a locus of morality and altruism, but Chan Abraham's Luminus has won success with an approach that marries the inspirational to the practical. PETER CRUSH finds revelation in Huntingdon

Deep Magic

According to Chan Abraham, CEO of social housing company, Luminus, all of his staff say Sunday is the best day of the week. Why? "Because it means tomorrow they go back to work." Where, naturally, the first working day of the week is internally called 'Glorious Monday'.

Surprising though this opening gambit might appear, by the time you have spent a morning with someone who wouldn't look out of place on a US evangelical TV channel, nothing surprises you any more. I am at the Luminus Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire HQ for one of Abraham's monthly staff conferences, where the whole company is in attendance. He struts in last, onto a stage, with an almost rock star-like entrance and a booming 'Are you ready to be inspired the Luminus Way?' Spontaneously, his congregation – for that is what they seem to be – are rapt in chorus, chanting 'yes, we are', punching the air, whooping and smiling wildly.


As an outsider, it appears as though staff are being whipped up into a frenzy of excitement. Continuing the evangelical feel, Abraham ends with what can only be described as a sermon – he calls it his 'message of the month' – 10 minutes walking back and forth, commanding his employees' gaze, proselytising about 'daring to dream'. "Dare to dream for yourselves," he proclaims. "One of my favourite statements is, 'life in all its fullness'. Imagine this. If you live for yourself," he warns, "your life will be unhappy. If you live for others, your life will be a much happier place. Dare to dream."

To the uninitiated, this bizarre event has hokum written all over it. But, as one staff member says, "it's genuinely how we roll" and the one thing that definitely can't be questioned is the fact this unorthodox methodology seems to produce an amazing and energising sense of wellbeing. Earlier this year,

Luminus not only came second in the *Sunday Times* Best Companies to Work for (SME category), but won its Special Award for Wellbeing. It is on top of a whole string of other wellbeing success stories: finalist, Occupational Health Awards 2010 – Award for health promotion and wellbeing; Winner, National Business Awards 2008 (Regional) – Employer of the year; finalist, National Business Awards 2007 (National), Health, work and wellbeing award.

Abraham is in no doubt as to why this is. "Wellbeing comes from leadership," he says. "What drives me is a passion to lead, and make a difference to people's lives. We want our people to have an emotional connection with the company. For me, it is about being a shepherd, and having concern for my flock."

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This concern manifests itself in giving all employees access to personal and professional development through Luminus Learning Zone, offering staff courses on everything from public speaking to photography, via cookery. Each New Year, the company launches initiatives to help staff improve their physical, financial or emotional health. These are just the trimmings, though. What really matters to Abraham is the internal sense of wellbeing he hopes to inspire staff to have.

“We say, ‘let’s make work something you can smile about,’” says Abraham. He says he is shocked by the 45,000 NHS workers who call in sick every day: at Luminus, sickness absence is virtually non-existent. In 2010, in fact, he gave out 98 ‘lifestyle day’ awards to staff (staff can use these awards to take an extra day’s pay or holiday leave). These are given to those who have had no sickness absence in the past year.

This personal-improvement approach to wellness – he says, “I want to help staff be as happy as they can be, and by extension see how they can improve themselves” – might not be everyone’s cup of tea. The missionary undertones are certainly there and Abraham by his own admission is religious; he even has a cassette of Nashville String Machine’s *Hooked on Hymns* on his desk. “What does ‘evangelical’ mean?” he retorts, when asked about this. “It means good news. Shouldn’t I be giving staff good news? Here, people don’t fear the Monday blues; we don’t do office politics, sniping behind people’s backs. We even hate the ambush of monthly appraisals. Instead, our whole culture is one of openness and transparency. Each interaction is a moment of truth.”

Abraham, also founder of ‘Leadership International’, a group that says it wants to encourage ‘3rd Millennium Leadership’, was formerly a strategy director at Cambridgeshire County Council and says he had a “light bulb moment” there in 1998 – to make a difference to social housing. From nothing (and 128 meetings later), he persuaded Huntingdon District Council to hand over the running of its housing stock to him, after canvassing residents and promising them a better deal.

It is this promise of helping others, by being a fair landlord, that he says his staff buy into, and where he and they get their sense of inner wellbeing: “If we don’t change people’s lives, we can’t leave a sustainable legacy for the future,” he says. “Altruism is part of the human spectrum. CS Lewis talks of the deep magic the universal sense of morality brings, and that is what we show our staff they can help achieve,” he says.

It leads to Abraham’s catch-phrase, ‘a more excellent way of doing business’, a grammatically-suspect motto that creates the desired effect nevertheless. And it is leadership rather than HR that he thinks is what creates the overarching wellbeing culture. “Leaders, not well-intentioned HR people, should be responsible for motivating and engaging staff,” he asserts. “My task is being connected to the people who work here.”

All this makes the specific mental wellness approach to wellbeing (Luminus has cash plans and the like, as any



Shedding light on Luminus

Luminus started as the Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership (HHP), which Chan Abraham formed in 1998, as part of his vision to regenerate the deteriorating public housing in Cambridgeshire.

On behalf of Huntingdonshire District Council, Abraham made a number of commitments to benefit tenants, such as affordable rents, investment in their homes and improved services. His vision was that the focused investment of such resources, supplementing the work of mainstream agencies, could make a long-term impact for the benefit of Huntingdonshire's communities.

In August 1999, tenants voted in support of the acquisition of their homes by HHP and, on 20 March 2000, Abraham, as HHP's first chief executive, authorised payment of £65 million to Huntingdonshire District Council.

HHP succeeded in meeting – and exceeding – all the original commitments to tenants, but the demands of the changing environment and the lack of public funds to build new homes for rent led to the creation of Luminus Group. This came into being in 2004, with HHP as one of its subsidiaries, alongside Oak Foundation as provider of housing older people and Diversa as the commercial arm to provide new homes. Luminus has continued to expand and now includes Luminus Developments, its development arm.

Other organisations and businesses have shown considerable interest in joining Luminus. The Ferry Project, a Fenland-based charity, focused on helping homeless people, joined Luminus Group on 1 April 2006.

well-meaning business should) all the more fascinating. “It is a choice of mindset that people make if they think the world is descending into chaos,” he says. “Good people who do nothing don’t make a difference. But when people start to make a difference, that’s when things can change, and staff feel happy in themselves.” He adds: “No-one who works here has to have a ‘faith,’” he clarifies, “just a faith that they can make a difference. We are all about making the most difference that we can make with the hours that we have available to us.”

It is a persuasive, if not alternative, view of how to create staff wellbeing and, like it or loathe it, seems to work. Staff conferences that end with a Mexican (retitled ‘Luminus’) wave do get people going – no obviously somnolent raising of arms here. Staff turnover is a low 7% (compared to the industry norm of 17%) and those that do leave tend to be tradespeople, rather than head office staff.

All Luminus employees get given a fridge magnet, which says ‘something good is going to happen to me today’ and employees do refer to its inspiring message unprovoked.

If staff genuinely feel their day is going to be a good one, it is easy to see how their daily sense of wellbeing gets fully topped up by coming to work. During the Christmas snow, staff dipped into their own pockets to lend money to tenants to feed the meter and heat their cold homes. What disaffected member of staff, with no interest in their customers, would do that?

“No-one gets the feeling that if they come to work their creative ideas will be put down,” Abraham says. “What drives me, the business and our people is a sense of a moral code. Servant leadership is my model – being willing to put aside ego to help make people the best they can be.” **HR**





Most People Focused CEO

Chan Abraham

Group Chief Executive, Luminus Group



Chan Abraham is Group Chief Executive of Luminus Group. He is seen by all as an inspirational, hard working, caring, and “firm but fair” leader of around 300 employees, whose door is always open to staff and customers alike.

Respected for being able to look ahead, as he did twelve years ago, and seeing impending problems for local communities, Chan put his neck on the line with the council and tenants. Setting up Luminus in March 2000, he promised to look after 30,000 residents with good quality, affordable homes, and to create neighbourhoods where people could be safe and fulfilled.

Chan motivates his employees with a passion for excellence, resulting in many awards including being in the top 20 on the Sunday Times Best Companies for the last five years and some of the best performance in the sector.

Chan has changed not only tenants' lives, but also employees, inspiring, giving them hope, security and inclusion in “the Luminus family”. He has done this through events like our Awards for Excellence, inspirational talks at

our monthly conferences, and his innovative “Take it to the Top” where any employee with a work or personal problem can get to see him.

He makes the time to talk, help and support employees, and has gained remarkable trust and loyalty. Chan knows everyone by name, sends a birthday card, congratulations or personal sympathies when hard times come.

Chan has introduced creative development opportunities so everyone can grow – a Leadership Academy that he personally facilitates for managers; Luminus Learning Zone for all; programmes for tenants and board members.

His inspirational leadership and enthusiasm is contagious and employees say that, ***“Sunday is the best day of the week – because it's the day before we come to work!”***



Managers meet to discuss the "Most People Focused CEO" award.



Simon Leher - Communications, Marketing and PR Manager



I was playing with my two small children in my lounge on a Friday afternoon when I doubled over in crippling pain. I had had my first attack of paroxysmal kinesigenic choreoathetosis dystonia, a rare genetic mutation affecting my motor neurones.

At the time, I had no idea what was affecting me and, as the weeks went on, the attacks grew in frequency and intensity. During this period Chan offered his complete support. He gave me compassionate leave to see the doctors and, through the Luminus healthcare benefit, I was able to see a neurologist almost immediately and received £200 towards the consultation. The Neurologist was able to diagnose my condition and I also had an MRI scan that was completely covered.

"I knew with all my heart that Chan meant every word he said and really cared, not just for me, but for my entire family."

Nigel Finney - Executive Director (Operations)



"He has built the success of Luminus on the guiding principle that our people are our greatest asset."

I have worked closely with Chan Abraham for just over 11 years. In that time I have seen evidence every single day that Chan is entirely people focused. He has built the success of Luminus on the guiding principle that our people are our greatest asset. His unswerving commitment, passion for great customer service, boundless energy and compassion have been directed towards creating a highly successful and professional business that very much has a family feel.

Over the years I have been with Luminus I have lost count of the times our people have said how moved and inspired they have been by Chan's personal commitment to their well-being. This ranges from a personal birthday card from Chan to every staff member, a kind word or two about a family member at a chance meeting in a corridor and offers of financial assistance and personal mentoring when any one of our people are facing a personal or family problem.

Having recognised that the success of our business rests largely with a highly motivated and engaged workforce, Chan has worked hard to develop all the managers within the business to take the same approach as he does to motivating, developing and supporting our people. To ensure that this approach is cemented throughout the company, Chan has carefully crafted over the years an Organisational Wholeness Strategy that embodies his innovative thinking on how to engage and motivate our workforce.

Julia Prichard - Head of Homes and Neighbourhood Operations



Chan leads us in a culture based on trust, where all our staff are part of the family.

We work in an environment where, passion, pride, courage and integrity are part of who we are and the way we do things. Chan models this behaviour; he leads us in changing ourselves and in making the difference where we are.

Chan cares about each and every one of his employees. He knows each one of us and will often walk through the office asking how our family members are (by name) and we know that we truly are members of the family.

"He leads us in changing ourselves and in making the difference where we are."

Keith Smith - Director, Ferry Project



In 2006 Ferry Project was in need of support and without help the charity could have gone under. Under Chan's guidance Ferry Project was brought into the Luminus Group and it has gone from strength to strength since.

Chan's focus covers all staff as everyone can meet with Chan if they need guidance or advice. Chan has taken a personal interest in my family and supported me when my wife developed breast cancer. He has challenged me on my "Road to Renewal" and helped me to grow.

"Everyone can meet with Chan if they need guidance or advice."

Lorraine George - PA to the Group Chief Executive



Chan's heart is full of compassion. He is there for our employees on all occasions, whether it be a happy time when he is able to congratulate them or send them a birthday card, or whether it is a sad time when an employee has lost a family member or friend or when there is illness with their close ones, Chan is there!

As Chan's PA for the past thirteen years I can personally say that there have been occasions when Chan has supported me through my own illness and the loss of a close family member.

"He is there for our employees on all occasions, whether it be a happy or sad time."

Sharon Wilson - Neighbourhood Officer



To me, Chan is the "Most People Focused CEO" because of his personal approach towards others. Each month we have a Luminus Conference where he always delivers a powerful message. A message where Chan inspires us to always be the best in all that we do and never give up! A message that is encouraging and helps build a picture of the way forward for positive change, that could be personal or professional. I personally always feel great leaving each Conference and look forward to attending the next one.

"Chan inspires us to always be the best in all that we do."

Natalie Murphy - Anti-Social Behaviour Officer



By creating an ethos of Luminus being an extended family he has provided support when I have experienced personal challenges and always shows a caring interest in mine and others lives. In addition to this he has provided me with the opportunity to attend University during the working week and provided financial support which has enabled me to obtain a degree, an opportunity which I would have never achieved without Luminus.

I believe that Chan provides us with guidance to be the best we can be both professionally and personally and makes us strive to continually evolve and achieve our goals and aspirations.

“He has provided support when I have experienced personal challenges.”

David Allwood - Neighbourhood Warden



I just want to say how grateful me and my daughter Natalie are with the financial aid Chan gave her from the Joseph and Alice Foundation, which he set up and funded personally to help people in need. Without his help she wouldn't of been able to continue with her Hair and Beauty Course at Huntingdon Regional College. She talks about the help Chan has given her all the time and has nothing but praise for him. He has given her the chance to make something of her life and we will be forever grateful.

“ He has given her the chance to make something of her life.”

Paul Ambrose - Head of Customer Services



“Our people are our greatest asset” is NOT a platitude at Luminus it is a core belief, which our Group Chief Executive role models day in day out. In fact Chan does not limit his focus to Luminus personnel; he will often discuss leadership, inspiration and personal accountability with people outside of Luminus, and I am living proof.

While working for an internationally recognised British business, our paths crossed by accident. Our initial conversation led to a later engagement at which I was politely quizzed about the leadership within my company. In answering Chan's questions I endeavoured to remain loyal to my organisation, but was also truthful. At the end of the conversation Chan said, and I can remember it word for word, “That does not sound like an easy place to work. So what are you doing to inspire your people?”

This conversation resulted in a significant change in my management style and approach. My team noticed these changes within weeks and while our challenges remained, our positivity and focus stood out.

While this anecdote may say a lot about my managerial style at that time, the pivotal point is that Chan took time and made the effort to engage with a person who didn't even work for him, to help that person be the best they could be. This is what makes him special, and is one of the key reasons I came to work for Luminus.

“Chan took time and made the effort to engage with a person who didn't even work for him.”

Achievements



2012

Awards

Winner

Best Companies 2012
3 (Extraordinary) Accreditation*

Winner

Sunday Times 100 Best Not for Profit Organisations to Work For
Sixth Place Overall

Winner

British Safety Council International Safety Award
(Winner with Merit)

Winner

Housing Excellence Awards 2012
Best Regeneration Scheme (Joseph Rank House)

Finalist

Housing Heroes 2012
Mentor of the Year (Kim Bryant)

Finalist

Housing Heroes 2012
Leader of the Year (Keith Smith)

Finalist

UK Housing Awards 2012
Community Initiative of the Year (Ferry Project, Night Shelter)

2011

Awards

Winner

Best Companies 2011
3 (Extraordinary) Accreditation*

Winner

Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For
Second Place Overall

Winner

Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For
Special Award for Wellbeing

Winner

RoSPA MORR Safety Gold Award 2011

Commended

RoSPA Occupational Health and Safety Sector Award 2011

Merit

British Safety Council International Safety Award

Finalist

Housing Heroes 2011
HR Team of the Year

Finalist

Customer Service Training Awards 2011
Public Sector/Not for Profit

Winner

National Home Improvement Council
Best Brownfield or Recycling Building Project (Joseph Rank House)

Finalist

ICS UK Customer Satisfaction Awards
Customer Communication Strategy of the Year

Finalist

ICS UK Customer Satisfaction Awards
Customer Service Leadership Award

Luminus Big Tidy Up



Participating in the 'Big Tidy Up' event

Results of Luminus Group Staff Survey 2011

Positive
Staff
Response

Average
score for
sector

I have confidence in the leadership skills of the senior management team.

85%

51%

My line manager motivates me to give my best every day.

81%

59%

The organisation is one of the best organisations to work for compared with others I know.

87%

58%

I am proud to work for Luminus.

92%

68%

I understand the objectives of my team and how I am expected to contribute in achieving them.

98%

90%

I am able to manage the pressure that my job places upon me.

90%

64%

Monthly Staff Conferences



Inspiring talks
at the monthly
staff conference.

Community Inspiration Awards



Recognising the unsung
heroes of our communities



LUMINUS GROUP

2020 VISION: THE ROAD TO RENEWAL



Our 2020 Vision: The Road to Renewal is a focus on positive change that transforms our communities to mend "Broken Britain".

Since March 2000 we have been building a team of people who, daily inspired in their work, seek consistently to give excellent service to our customers. This energises our residents, business partners and the wider community and helps us all find a sense of purpose, hope and fulfilment. As we change, transformation occurs and a brighter future becomes reality.



Changing the world where we are

2012 A YEAR OF
**RESTORING RESPECT
& REINSTATING VALUES**



www.luminus.org.uk

Demonstrating a more excellent way of doing business