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ENGIE's GEM business unit: Towards a new way of working

As Edouard Neviaski, CEO of ENGIE's GEM business unit, walked across the busy trading floor to his next meeting, he acknowledged greetings from team members as they looked his way. It was late afternoon at the firm's headquarters in La Défense, Paris, on February 12 2019. GEM traders were huddled in small groups spread around floor, conferring with analysts, on the telephone, planning and executing trades. The scene was a microcosm of the GEM business unit as a whole: a trading and services unit of a global energy firm with specialised teams operating in cities across the world.

"The teams are collaborating, sharing intelligence, debating options", noted Neviaski. "We are working better and people are happier." GEM's culture had been transformed, a journey that had begun four years earlier. It was a necessary change, given that GEM quality of service, intelligence and effectiveness were the only tangible attributes that differentiated it from its competitors. Neviaski was conscious of the fact that GEM's clients, both internal and external, could choose to work with any competitor at any time.

In 2015, Neviaski initiated a transformation process that had seen decision-making power placed in the hands of employees, enabling them to act more swiftly. He had created an environment where experimentation and failure were acceptable, where employees were empowered to act in the best interests of the business unit. More than a third of GEM had adopted Holacracy, a self-directed management system. Schools of expertise – management, leadership, customer focus – had been set up as a result of employee initiatives. And the business was performing well – 2018 had been the best year in GEM's history, from a financial perspective.

Yet Neviaski sensed that more needed to be done. GEM was an entity with teams in 16 countries, each with its own unique workplace culture. The number of individuals working under Holacracy had peaked around 450 out of a workforce of 1,800. What should the next steps in GEM's development be? Should there be a firmer push from the top; for example, by pushing other units to adopt Holacracy, or by putting in place other organisational initiatives to reinforce the new ways of working already in place?

This case was written by Ken Mark, Professor Julian Birkinshaw at London Business School and Assistant Professor Nicolas Chevrollier at Nyenrode Business Universiteit.

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