

ADVERTISING FEATURE

## AFR BOSS | Best Places to Work



SHAPE Australia chief executive officer Peter Marix-Evans (centre) says a commitment to culture and character has fortified the construction company.

## Flexibility makes for a great shape

Construction company SHAPE Australia makes a bold promise to its employees: they can be themselves, realise their full potential and forge respectful, collaborative relationships with clients.

The 32-year-old company has doubled down on genuine work flexibility in an aggressively competitive industry renowned for marathon hours.

CEO Peter Marix-Evans attributes SHAPE's resurgence and its strong profit performance to its people-first, promote-from-within philosophy. That has been underpinned by its steadfast commitment to creating an environment that keeps people safe not just physically – non-negotiable in construction and refurbishment – but psychologically.

"The construction industry is rewarding but it can also be very challenging," Marix-Evans says. "It's demanding, the hours are long, there are unacceptably high rates of divorce, suicide and substance abuse. We want our people to talk to us. We are slowly breaking down an industry culture of suffering in silence through our genuine concern for our people."

SHAPE takes pride in its "feedback for growth" mantra because if you don't know about it, you can't fix it. It has gender and inclusion policies, runs an annual culture check, has forged a strong relationship with suicide prevention outfit MATES in Construction and insists each employee has a flexible work plan within their career plan.

This is significant, not just because SHAPE with

its 400 employees is punching above its weight in the work-culture stakes, but because the most recent iteration of SHAPE's people-first philosophy was forged from a devastating low.

The construction company, which has completed more than 6000 projects valued at \$6.5 billion, started in 1989 as ISIS, founded by six people.

Its identity and financial stability was almost undone by a 2010 growth bender. In two short years it went from 250 employees to 500, culminating in a monumental hangover when the music stopped in late 2012 and early 2013.

"We had business units, commercial projects, hotels, education, retail and health divisions competing against each other for internal resources and clients," Marix-Evans says. "It was back to a traditional, competitive construction culture – and a short-term vision. You can't build relationships in an environment like that."

Despite retaining "pockets of our original DNA" many long-term staff felt ISIS had become an awful place to work.

"We were hit, like every other construction company, and we needed to make changes, [and] reduce our headcount," Marix-Evans says. "It forced us to reevaluate. If we were just going to compete on price, it was a race to the bottom."

"We decided we needed to get back to focusing on people. If we got that right, we could rebuild a really solid business."

The group was rebranded as SHAPE Australia in

**"Leadership drives culture. Culture drives performance. When our culture is right, the results follow."**

Peter Marix-Evans

2015 saying it wanted everyone who worked with it to feel safe, connected and proud to work together.

SHAPE got serious about its vision and purpose, made a commitment to its people (with a focus on culture and character) and adopted its "feedback for growth" mantra. It turned the business around within a year.

"We have mapped it for the past five years," says Marix-Evans. "As we have improved our culture measurement every year, we've improved bottom-line profit growth and our strategic measures – safety performance, employee churn, the way our clients see us – have improved."

Its Net Promoter Score, an index from minus 100 to 100 that measures how clients rate and recommend its services, (where 50 and above is very good) stands at an impressive 84.

SHAPE breaks down results by state and when

it identifies a problem, it takes action. That includes parting ways with leaders presiding over divergent culture and poor results.

"Leadership drives culture; culture drives performance," Marix-Evans says. "When our culture is right, the results follow."

He acknowledges that genuine change is hard but says it's worth the extra work because everyone wins. "We train our project managers to talk about flexibility at the start of a project from a team perspective," he says. "Who's got what? Who needs what time off this week? Who is coaching their child's soccer team at 3pm on Thursday? Who has a wedding on Saturday?"

The power of this disclosure means the team works smarter and everyone's needs are met.

In recent weeks, SHAPE has signed off on a job-share deal for two project managers, a woman returning from parental leave and a man wanting to spend more time with his children.

"Once it's been done, it becomes more accepted," Marix-Evans says. "It's going to be a big point of difference for SHAPE in the next couple of years."

For now, SHAPE is targeting gender diversity and building on its Reconciliation Action Plan because it is trending positively on age, race and sexuality.

"For us to reduce the horrifying construction industry statistics around divorce, substance abuse and suicide, we need greater diversity," Marix-Evans says. "So we are changing the way we work to be truly flexible."

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