



CASE STUDY

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Culture and leadership transformation at Macquarie University to enable strategic renewal.

Discover how Macquarie University transformed its culture and leadership to overcome funding challenges, rebuild trust, and achieve strategic renewal through a bold change strategy and partnership with Human Synergistics.

Background

Facing significant funding pressures, sector-wide disruption, and internal resistance to change, Macquarie University embarked on a courageous transformation journey.

Before the pandemic, Macquarie recognised challenges to its operating model: rising costs, underfunded research, and a heavy reliance on international education. An ambitious transformation plan was launched in 2019 to ensure financial sustainability and strengthen student-centred service delivery. When COVID-19 hit, those pressures intensified dramatically.

Yet despite a turbulent environment, Macquarie's leadership team — partnering closely with Human Synergistics — stayed true to its belief that culture and leadership would be critical enablers of success.

Today, Macquarie University stands stronger than ever, having not only achieved its original transformation goals but also embedded a resilient, positive culture to thrive into the future.

Macquarie University needed to do things differently.

- Lead transformation from the top with a united executive team.
- Rebuild trust, transparency, and leadership capability across the broader organisation.
- Embed a values-led, constructive culture to enable strategic success.

Challenge

In 2019, Macquarie University faced significant operational and financial challenges, even before COVID-19:

- Underfunded research and changes to education funding compressed revenue.
- Rising costs outpaced revenue growth, creating sustainability risks.
- Heavy reliance on international students exposed vulnerability to global disruptions.

An ambitious transformation plan was developed — but it triggered organisational cultural shock.

A major town hall intended to communicate the changes was met with open protest and distrust, highlighting how fractured the culture had become.

Then COVID-19 hit, compounding the university's financial, operational, and cultural challenges.

"To achieve our ambitious transformation strategy, aligning leadership and culture was key!"

Nicole Gower, Vice-President Professional Services

Solution

Macquarie's leadership made two critical decisions:

- Focus intentionally on culture, leadership, and people alongside structural transformation.
- Seek external support from Human Synergistics to guide the cultural journey.

Key initiatives included:

1. Executive Team Alignment:

Built a cohesive, high-performing executive team through The Life Styles Inventory™ (LSI) diagnostics, group coaching, and direct observation, fostering enterprise-level leadership across a "flotilla" of diverse faculties.

2. Leadership Development Across the University:

Established a Senior Leaders Forum to strengthen shared accountability, transparency, and alignment across the broader leadership community

3. Co-creation of Leadership Framework:

Developed a simple, powerful leadership model — "Lead with Purpose, Lead with Care, Lead for All" — anchored in constructive behaviours and co-designed with leaders across the university.

4. Adaptive Change Process:

Acknowledged that transformation would not be linear; responded dynamically to organisational feedback and emotional stages of change.

5. Embedding Values and Constructive Behaviours:

Integrated leadership expectations into recruitment, development, talent management, and strategic planning.

Outcomes

Transformation Strategy Delivered:

Successfully achieved the 2020–2024 operating plan objectives, despite COVID-19 disruptions.

Positive Cultural Shift:

Clear improvement in staff morale, trust, and leadership engagement — evidenced by dramatically more constructive feedback at recent all-staff town halls.

Leadership Capability Embedded:

Strong, cohesive executive team and empowered senior leadership community aligned around purpose, care, inclusion, and performance.

Ongoing Cultural Vigilance:

Culture remains a core KPI for the executive team to ensure sustained, long-term impact.

Prepared for Future Disruptions:

Macquarie University now faces an uncertain future with resilience, confidence, and adaptability.

Key Learnings

- Culture is not a 'nice to have' — it is a core enabler of strategic success.
- Leadership transformation must start at the top but cascade through the whole organisation.
- Change journeys are non-linear — iteration, patience, and persistence are critical.
- Partnerships matter — external expertise helped Macquarie stay focused and succeed.
- Investing in people and culture builds resilience for future disruption.

(*Source: Macquarie University internal reports, 2024.)



Nicole Gower,
Vice-President
Professional Services,
Macquarie University,
presenting at the
2023 Annual
Culture & Leadership
Conference

As a result of the Forum, leaders report a better understanding of:

