Silver Winners | Category: Leadership Development

Helios Towers & Cranfield University

Supercharging Prosperity Through Connectivity

How Helios Towers and Cranfield turned leadership development into the engine of a pan-African growth story.

Stand beneath a telecoms tower in rural Tanzania, and you are looking at far more than steel and antennae. You are looking at a child's route to education, a clinic's link to specialist advice, a trader's access to mobile money. Connectivity, across much of Africa and the Middle East, is not a convenience; it is infrastructure for opportunity.

That is the business Helios Towers is in. Its model is elegantly simple: rather than every mobile network operator building and maintaining its own towers, Helios Towers builds them once, and operators become tenants, sharing the same structure. This cuts the total cost of ownership by up to 35%, savings which translate into broader coverage and lower consumer prices. Today, the company operates 15,270 towers delivering more than 34,000 tenancies across nine countries, bringing mobile connectivity to 166 million people.

But this is not really a story about towers. It is about what happened inside the business when ambition outpaced cohesion, and how a five-year leadership partnership became connective tissue for the strategy itself.

When Growth Outruns Culture

Between 2020 and 2022, Helios Towers acquired businesses in four new markets: Senegal, Madagascar, Malawi and Oman.

By late 2020, CEO Tom Greenwood and his Executive Committee recognised that the leadership model needed to evolve alongside the business. Helios Towers had grown through a strong entrepreneurial culture, with considerable autonomy and expertise within its individual markets. The next phase called for greater alignment across the Group, a more consistent approach to leadership, and an increased emphasis on empowerment, accountability and collaboration. Many leaders had progressed through deep technical and operational expertise, creating an opportunity to complement that experience with structured leadership development. At the same time, the business wanted to strengthen its succession pipeline and broaden diversity at senior levels, including gender representation in a traditionally STEM-heavy sector.

What happened next is instructive for anyone who has watched leadership development get parked in a corner of the HR plan. The ExCo did not delegate the opportunity. They made leadership development a key enabler of the growth strategy, designed to evolve with every acquisition that followed.

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Start with Tensions, not Training

The partnership with Cranfield did not begin with a curriculum, it began with a mirror. Using the Strategic Tensions Assessment Tool developed by Professor David Denyer, Cranfield facilitated the ExCo through a candid examination of the organisation's competing pulls. What surfaced was a predominantly defensive leadership mindset: hierarchical, top-down, prizing control and predictability. The work ahead was a shift towards something more progressive, adaptive and empowering.

Crucially, managers from across the business were then brought into a six-day workshop to co-build the new five-year strategy. The leadership imperatives that emerged, from inspiring ownership and accountability to role-modelling the behaviours that make a business an employer of choice, became the learning objectives of the programme. Impact measures were agreed upon before a single module was designed. A line from the original request for proposal became our touchstone: why would you embark on a journey if you weren't sure you would know when you'd arrived at the correct destination?

Tom Greenwood's sponsorship deserves particular mention because it never faded into a logo on a slide. He launched every cohort, shared his personal leadership story with each one, and attended every Capstone event. The ExCo and ELT mandated themselves onto the first cohorts; there was no opting out. When the most senior people in a business go first, an invitation stops feeling optional.

Designing for Energy, Not just Knowledge

The programme was built around three interwoven strands - Leading Self, Leading Others and Leading the Business - delivered through residential modules blended with online learning.

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Two design choices proved particularly powerful.

The first was the deliberate engineering of psychological safety. Each cohort wrote its own learning contract in module one and revisited it throughout. Coaching trios, carefully combined across countries, gave participants a protected space to turn learning into workplace action and to hold one another accountable for doing so. Participants grew used to a recurring question: how will you transform what we have just learnt into a tangible action?

The second was an unexpected provocation. Most participants arrived conversant in time management. We invited them to consider instead where they spend their energy - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual - and why each is a leadership resource in its own right. Sessions on biophilia (the performance benefits of our connection with nature) moved learning outdoors, using woodland as a classroom and prompting reflection on how energy shifts in different spaces. For leaders expecting a traditional programme, this raised a few eyebrows. But it stuck. Line managers later reported that alumni shared the concept with their own teams, and became more conscious of the different energies they brought to others and how to switch between different modes when circumstances demanded it.

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The programme was equally unafraid of harder commercial realities. Some participants arrived having experienced acquisition-related restructurings in which colleagues and friends had lost their jobs. Rather than tiptoe around the disruption inherent in rapid growth, the programme confronted it.

Did it Work? Ask their Line Managers

Evaluating leadership development is notoriously challenging, so the evaluation deliberately avoided self-report and its familiar bias of illusory superiority. In December 2025, the line managers of programme alumni, an unusually high 80% of the participant population, rated capabilities, before and after the programme, on a six-point scale. Every one of the eleven target skills showed an increased mean and a reduced standard deviation. In plain English, leaders got better, and they got better together, rather than a few stars pulling up the average.

The business results moved in parallel. The tenancy ratio reached 2.2x a year ahead of target. Weekly tower downtime decreased from 2.5 minutes to 59 seconds, with Senegal recording a historic zero. Customer satisfaction hit 92% against a 90% goal. Women now hold 33% of senior leadership roles, from a standing start of zero in 2021, while leadership representation at the Managing Director level has expanded materially, with an increasing number of markets led by leaders born and developed within those markets. Alumni retention is at 91%, against a company average of 83.4%; more than

$792 million

Adjusted EBITDA rose from $241 million in 2021 to $421 million in 2024, with revenue climbing from $449 million to $792 million.

150 leadership roles have now identified successors, and programme alumni are responsible for over 90% of Group profit and loss. Adjusted EBITDA rose from $241 million in 2021 to $421 million in 2024, with revenue climbing from $449 million to $792 million.

No evaluation can cleanly isolate a programme from everything else a business does well. But when leadership skills, engagement, diversity and commercial performance all move together, in precisely the direction the strategy pointed, the connection becomes hard to dismiss.

The People Holding the Towers Up

If one story captures the whole, it is this. Karim Ndiaye joined cohort one as Senegal's Managing Director and was promoted to Regional Director within twelve months. He spotted the potential of his Financial Director, Fatoumata Mbaye, created a deputy role to stretch her, coached her and enrolled her on cohort two. Karim now leads talent development for the Group.

Fatoumata stepped into his vacant seat as Senegal MD, one of the company's first two female Managing Directors, and an inspiring role model for those coming up behind her.

Towers connect people, and so does leadership.