

# Developing Managers

## Finding wisdom in a clever world

The adage that *'if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day but if you teach a man to fish you feed him for a lifetime'* has deep resonance for how we approach the task of developing our people. Traditional training programmes are excellent at providing the knowledge we think our people ought to have. Competency models that provide both framework and detail abound – there are plenty of fish about. But often the issues we face are not so neatly segmented.

Such programmes are less good at encouraging people to think for themselves, to exercise their judgement when faced with a situation that isn't in the book, to spot their own habitual thought processes and take action to avoid recurring problems. In short they are less good at teaching us the process of learning - or of fishing.

On the one hand we have *what* to learn and on the other we have *how* to learn. There is of course a place for both approaches but there comes a time when pumping in more knowledge begins to lose its return on investment. To defer to the Gurus is to undervalue what you and your people already know. It is an act of disempowerment and self-betrayal.

### ***To defer to the gurus... is an act of self-betrayal***

Advocates of *how to learn* owe a great debt to Reg Revans<sup>1</sup> who developed and introduced the practice of 'Action Learning'. Revans saw learning as a combination of gaining knowledge and seeking insight from it. In Action Learning it is assumed that in order to solve the problems people face, enough knowledge already exists. The process, therefore, focuses on the act of generating insight through questioning.

To explore this assumption further we can distinguish between puzzles and problems. A puzzle can be characterised as a difficult situation to which a specific solution already exists – it needs only to be found. Problems on the other hand have no existing solution, requiring the 'solver' to think for themselves. Parallel to this is the realisation that, in thinking for themselves, several individuals are likely to come to subtly different conclusions based on their personal experience and preferred ways of thinking. The critical question is – Do my managers mainly face puzzles or problems?

In many cases the reality of our environment is turbulent and far from certain. Internally there may be little agreement on exactly what the next steps should be. If this describes your organisation, as it does many in the process of leading change, problems will vastly outnumber puzzles. This makes a compelling case to develop your managers in order to learn how to learn.

### ***Problems will vastly outnumber puzzles***

Part of this 'double loop learning'<sup>2</sup> process invites us to acknowledge the subjectivities that each of us hold and make them 'centre stage' in the solving of the problem. Whilst people are certainly capable of thinking logically it is a mistake to assume that logic will result in a common solution. We each start from a slightly different position and this subjectivity, which is often unspoken, creates the gap between what we say and what we do. This gap deals a mortal blow to our leadership hopes and credibility.

The act of solving problems in this way is initially daunting as it requires us to hold up for inspection the foundations of our thinking. It creates space for uncertainty when we might wish to make things more certain. It might be more appealing to investigate best practice and import it into our own situation. But although it appears more efficient, we are trying to solve *problems* by applying the solutions to *puzzles* – to catch trout with dynamite – it might bring results but it is not sustainable.

Action learning, as the title suggests is directed at taking action in respect of real life problems and learning from the experience. In this sense it is predominantly a pragmatic investment of time. Colleagues both support and challenge initial thinking and then hold the problem solver to account for the actions they subsequently take. It is a tough school when the participants take responsibility for themselves.

Action learning also builds systems of feedback between the participating parts of the organisation (including senior management!) that allow the impacts of actions taken to be better understood and factored into future decisions. The richness and connectedness of feedback loops determine the health and effectiveness of the system.

In learning how to learn we empower ourselves to solve not just our immediate problems but those of tomorrow, whatever they might turn out to be.

1 Reg Revans. A.B.C. of Action Learning

2 Chris Argyris & Donald Schön. Organisational Learning II