

Building capacity: learning for flexibility and creativity

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When we speak about 'capacity building, we are often focused on the capacity of organisations, rather than of the people who work in them. Yet the capacity of key individuals to interact creatively and respond flexibly in a rapidly shifting environment, is likely to be critical in determining the organisation's future.

This article is about the building individuals' capacity through action learning in professional development groups, which can enhance flexibility and creativity, enabling individuals to develop in ways impossible through more traditional training activities.

What kinds of problem can a professional development group help tackle?

Experienced managers and staff often find it hard to find development activities which can accommodate the complexity of their professional challenges. In a learner-centred professional development group, a very wide range of issues can be tackled, particularly complex or ambiguous questions where there are no "right answers" but only a series of perplexing choices and consequences. This is particularly valuable for senior people, who need developmental tools which go beyond good advice and bullet points. It is also useful to support sustained development in less confident people.

Here are the topics worked on by one past group: planning more effective interaction with statutory partners turned hostile and with the media; handling a difficult member of staff; developing an influencing strategy to support major organisational change; a "founder director" planning orderly withdrawal and retirement; a woman manager working on issues of role authority and presentation through the glass ceiling.

The spectrum includes organisational, professional and personal development -- within the same group. There is no need for members to work on the same issues, and positive benefits derive from the differences, because in this kind of group the commonality and the differences are profoundly experienced. "It's safe to be open here," commented one member, "you learn what you need to at your own pace, so it makes a difference back at work". Another added "We really share our experience. It's a meeting of equals on common ground, and we all work hard to ensure that."

So what actually happens in a group?

In essence, a group of people contracts to meet together regularly, with a facilitator, for learning through reflection on experience, over a minimum period of six-to-nine months. Members are normally strangers, or at least not close colleagues. Each person in the group selects an area of challenge in their work or work roles, on which to focus throughout the life of the group. New insights can be put into practice and tested between meetings, and previous learning refined and built upon. Learning is sustained and becomes profound; members speak of its value in terms which could seem exaggerated to people outside the experience; but it does seem to enable a real and lasting broadening of perspective which gives ex-participants an edge as they face further new challenges.

This is not a discussion group, nor a problem-solving session. While there is great flexibility about the content of learning, there is less about the process, which is rigorous. The primary role of the facilitator is not to lead, but to assist members in practising the method.

Members work in turn, supported and assisted by the others, always in charge of their own learning. Members develop their abilities to listen and question effectively, to use their thoughts and feelings more effectively, and to give attention to content and process – what and how – in their work. Attention is given to pace, to ensure that there is enough time for reflection. Members learn as they focus on each other's situations as well as on their own, but there is always an additional internal test before offering a question or an observation – "I have learned this from listening to Ken, but would this insight be useful to him at this point?" Members get to know each other well through the life of the group, and can support each other's learning very effectively.

Learning is easier to transfer back to work than that in traditional training, because it is highly applied and rooted in experience. Members can use the group to tackle "big questions" which in the rush of normal work may be neglected. "We respect the real-ness and seriousness of each other's situations," one member commented, "and so we work on a much deeper level than in training – on real problems, not luxury problems."

What theory is the method based upon?

More than one theoretical tradition underpins the model. Modern practitioners acknowledge Reg Revans' iconoclastic work on action learning: Revans became impatient with theory-based management education, and pioneered "action learning sets" which focused on learning from experience and applying learning in practical ways.

Also important are the theories of learning process of Kolb in America and Honey & Mumford in this country. These posit a (continuous) learning cycle, moving from action to reflection, to extrapolating principles, to applying the principles to influence future action, and so on. Although we learn from experience, we do not do so automatically, and we vary greatly in how effectively we use our experience. Learning groups allow busy managers and staff to maximise their learning from experience, by introducing space for reflection into busy work schedules, and by giving an experience of reflective learning which members retain and can apply to future challenges.

What are the benefits for organisations?

Although this style of working primarily develops group members, improvements in their performance can bring rich rewards for their organisations. Examples are shown in the boxes.

Why is this approach so relevant now?

According to management thinkers about the needs of the 21st century, the rapid pace of change means that the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and demands is the key skill for tomorrow's managers.

Many British managers are good at getting things done, but fewer have the talent for reflection which makes action most effective. We have all heard the adage "Work smarter not harder". Part of working smarter is sometimes to work slower, to take time to reflect, learn and apply our learning before we move on.

What is needed to be able to use it?

To gain maximum benefit, organisations should consider this method for directors, managers and staff in key positions, particularly in periods of change and new challenges. Group members commit to attend all sessions, which means 7-8 days over a 6-9 month period. It is common for this commitment to be made after an introductory day where potential members test out the method for themselves.

Potential members must be prepared to explore professional and sometimes personal implications of various courses of action. This method is not suitable for very inflexible people, those have no capacity to observe or reflect on their own behaviour, those whose primary need is for personal therapy, or those who cannot commit to attend all meetings.

Christine Thornton is an experienced consultant currently facilitating learning groups for NCVO and other clients. If you are interested in finding out more about this style of learning, email info@thorntonconsulting.org.uk or telephone on +44 01962-620572.

Case studies

1

One group member had to manage a withdrawal from a project where over a long period the statutory partner had imposed restrictions which made the project untenable. As well as managing closure and redundancies, this director had to conduct a pre-emptive media campaign to communicate her version of events and to limit the damage potentially arising from skilled and hostile publicity from the powerful former partner.

The member used the group to focus on and monitor this challenging task, and at the end had not only managed departure with great skill, but won widespread respect within their field – including from the ex-partner's chief officer (formerly contemptuous) and several of his peers. As a result, a number of opportunities for similar projects in other settings arose in the months after completion.

At the end, the member was more skilful with the media and more confident in hostile situations, and had turned an apparent setback into a range of more suitable opportunities.

2

Another member was relatively new to managing staff and had used the group to explore some difficulties. She had to recruit a new administrator to a crucial post. She commented that the processes of questioning in the group had helped her clarify the organisation's needs, and had helped her interview far more effectively.

3

A third member had to guide the organisation through a period of rapid growth. She had been recruited for management and financial skills, but was not an expert in the industry. She commented:

"My problem is confidence. But I think I'm now beginning to understand that it doesn't matter that I don't speak the language – especially now I have a new colleague who manages that side of

things and who is more than willing to translate. I've realised that I have my own language, a language that my colleagues don't fully understand – the language of accounts and accountability. Sometimes I say things that other people don't understand at first! I tried out using my language in a bid recently, and I've heard that it's only waiting for formal approval. I can do something the others can't do – just as they can do things I can't do."

4

"I was sitting here listening to Mary, and she said "Now isn't a time for doing. Now is time to stop and think." I thought "That sounds like a good idea! So since then I have been waiting. My job is really two jobs, and last year I ran round and worked so hard, I had made myself ill by the end. I'm not prepared to do that again, so I am using this time to work out what the best use of my time is, and what can be delegated to others."