

IMHO: The Business of Learning

This is the second issue in a series aimed at stimulating debate about the present and future of learning and development. One of the features of the column is that it pays particular attention to the trends in our work that may transform it. Rob Sheffield looks at what is happening 'out there' that may change, for better or worse, the way we work.

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The learning market is big business. Witness the figures from a quick 'Google': 715,000,000 references to "time management"; 384,000,000 on "personal change". The commoditisation of age-old principles begins to pall a little. Many are presented as the unique solution to our problems. Whether you buy, sell or consume learning, it's somewhat overwhelming. Which are genuine breakthroughs and which are wearing "The Emperor's New Clothes"? The repackaging of learning services gives us a slightly queasy feeling. Buyers are also more sophisticated these days. Too many of us have direct experiences of culture change programmes that over-promised and under-delivered. We just know that organisational life is more complex than consultants sometimes smile at us.

I argued in the previous article that the key questions to ask suppliers are: What factors aid sustainable behaviour change; and what's your record in enabling this?

Change

We know too that personal change is painful. We can learn from other, more extreme, domains of our lives. "In many studies of patients who have undergone coronary bypass surgery, only one in nine people, on average, adopts healthier day-to-day habits. The others' lives are at significantly greater risk unless they exercise and lose weight, and they clearly see the value of changing their behaviour. But they don't follow through."(1)

One of these key factors is to focus on a change that really matters to the person - of course, we've always known that, but too rarely applied it in our work. To work with the individual and marry personal and organisational needs takes time, trust and understanding. Effecting and sustaining behaviour change matters more these days. The push for performance improvement in a globalised economy is much more pressing than it was even five years ago.

Bite-size

Buyers and consumers of learning want smaller, bite-sized bits, just-in-time, at more convenient places, 'closer' and more 'relevant' to performance problems. In some ways, personal coaching exemplifies these changes. *People Management* magazine reports how the practice of coaching has become much more mainstream and strategically important in the USA in recent years. Kathy Auerbach of Credit Suisse says:

"We are shifting the emphasis of our coaching towards more strategic, leadership and high potential coaching, and moving away from using coaching for remedial purposes." (2)

In addition, the frantic drive for performance improvement will trample over several cultural boundaries and conventions. Spatially, work and home boundaries will blur. Information from our nearest and dearest outside of work will increasingly be used by coaches to tap into what matters most to us, and diagnose areas for improvement. Temporally, coaches will develop knowledge and skills in understanding how our unique history blocks our present potential - a quasi-clinical perspective. Many coaches will not make this grade. Enough will, including those currently practising as psychotherapists and psychoanalysts. This will create a cadre of elite coaches: business-savvy and person-aware.

Future learning

It's 2012. Just imagine...coaching is more widespread and professionalised. The doyens of leadership research agree that the role of leaders is to help their team members feel strong and powerful, in the service of meaningful aims. Increasingly, society wants leaders to display personal authenticity in their dealings. All of these have promoted the requirement for learning to be tailored to the personal.

Technology from the health care industry has started to be used in measuring and monitoring learning. Authorised consultants used hand-held MRi scanners to determine whether 'change' had taken place organically in the neural pathways of the brain. Employee engagement means talking about emotion. Twelve years ago, emotions could only be mentioned in a negative context at work. Now, managers are expected to understand how their actions affected others' emotions and thinking. Innovation is businesses' God and managers are more aware of which emotional states are associated with creative idea-generation

The learning curriculum has changed for people helping others in organisations to change. Universities are in the vanguard of helping learning consultants become expert in aiding change in others.

A typical, and intensive, six-month "Making Learning Stick" programme includes:

1. Learning and the brain: An overview of neuroscience's approach to understanding the development of the human brain. What we know about the interplay between emotions and cognition, and the implications for effective learning.
2. Breaking habits/making habits: Lessons of personal behaviour change - what we know works from dependencies on alcohol, drugs, phobias, and other unwanted habits. Fire-fighting at work is recognised as a milder form of dependency.
3. Creating will: The role of motivation in creating energy for habit-breaking.
4. Stages of human development: How people mature emotionally and cognitively. Why we get 'stuck' at stages of our life, and what helps 'movement' to the next stage.
5. Technology for measuring and monitoring learning.

Rob Sheffield, December 2006

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Sources:

1. <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/freearticle/06207?gko=498f4-12656449-15832258>

2. People management, December 28th, 2006, page 40-41