

Designing Effective Leadership and Management Development Programmes

This paper draws from research I did at the Institute of Leadership & Management between 2009 and 2011, with Pam Heneberry and Arthur Turner (of The Professional Development Centre) and the late Bryan Webb (of Wizard Solutions). Our goal was to develop a model of best practice in leadership development that helps individuals to transform their leadership performance by combining original research with several decades of academic research into the links between cognition (what we know) and behaviour (what we do).

The model we developed (which we christened 'Impact') consists of five key elements. Individually, each of these elements will have a positive impact on learning and performance, but it is the collective effect which brings about the most significant changes in performance, helping good leaders become great leaders.

What are the five elements of *Impact*?

The five key elements of the Impact approach fall into one of two broad principles - the value of *individualising learning* and of designing in strategies for enabling *learning transfer*.

A. Individualise learning

1. Get learners to complete valid and appropriate diagnostic tools (psychometric and performance assessment tests) before the programme starts.
2. Use the outcomes of these tests to enable learners to identify how they currently behave and the personal factors that drive their performance, and to agree realistic and achievable learning goals to change or improve their performance
3. Individualise the learning (within the particular learning context) to link what has been learnt to each person's particular characteristics and goals.

B. Learning transfer

4. Bring the workplace into the learning environment (through the use of techniques like action learning, case studies, simulations, critical incident analysis and role plays)
5. Support the application of learning in the workplace (through the use of techniques like coaching and mentoring, action planning, project and work-based assignments)

Why does this approach make a difference? Knowing something (*declarative knowledge*) is not necessarily the same as being able to use that knowledge (*procedural knowledge*). The gap between knowing something and knowing how to use that knowledge effectively can be small, but where significant behaviour change may be required, that gap can be very wide. This is especially true where the required behaviour is driven not just by the acquisition of conceptual knowledge (*memory*) but also by our way of thinking (*cognition*) and feeling (*affect*).

The way that the Impact model works is to build new learning on top of existing knowledge (which we know, from neuroscience is the most effective way of learning) and to link it into our existing pattern of behaviour. This is the reason for individualisation, to gain insights into who we are and how we currently perform, so that the new learning is placed into context for us personally, building up our *reflection on action*¹ and encouraging *double loop learning*².

¹ Donald Schön (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner How professionals think in action* London: Temple Smith.

² Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974) *Theory in Practice. Increasing professional effectiveness*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Reflective Practice

Donald Schön challenged the notion that professionals' behaviour was driven purely by technical-rationality - that they applied some form of cold, clinical reasoning to the problems they face. Instead, he argues, professionals use their experiences, connect with their feelings, and employ theories in use, all of which he labelled reflection-in-action. This is because each case is unique in some way, and we can't follow textbook models of action, but instead look for patterns in the experience which enable us to link it to our existing repertoire of actions. Subsequent reflection (*reflection-on-action*) enables us to make sense of what we did and to develop a coherent picture of what we did and why we did it, to inform our future action.

Double Loop Learning

Donald Schon and Chris Argyris developed this theory to explain the observed behaviour of professionals, when they engage in evaluation of their actions (reflection). Most have a set of *espoused theories* (mental maps) that they use to explain their actions, theories which are often related to the technical-rational principles of their discipline. However, their actual behaviour is governed by theories-in-use, which are derived from their experiences and the context in which they found themselves at the time.

When we engage in reflection on our behaviour, we employ *single loop learning* - we strive to rationalise our behaviour by reference to our espoused theories. However, *double loop learning* requires us to question those espoused theories, to ask how well they truly explain our experience and our actions, and challenge us to be truly reflective.

Diagnostic tools (both psychometric and performance feedback) provide the basis for professional discussions through which we can gain insights into our own behaviour and question our espoused theories. These in turn can help us to build a better picture what we do and, most importantly, why we do it. This creates a framework of understanding into which new learning can be added.

FAQs!

WHAT DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS SHOULD I USE?

What diagnostics you use depends on the aspect of behaviour that you are helping to change. There is a variety of psychometric tools available, some long established, others quite new. What you should be looking for are tools that have been properly validated, ideally by an independent third party, and that have a real and clear relevance to the area of development. Some tools are more generic than others (especially cognitive styles and personality inventories), whereas others have a focus that may be particularly appropriate for some areas (eg emotional intelligence when looking at interpersonal relationships or values when looking at ethical practice).

DOES 'INDIVIDUALISED LEARNING' MEAN E-LEARNING?

Not at all. Individualised learning is not about the mode of learning but the extent to which an individual is enabled to link what they have learnt to who they are and their current knowledge and performance in their role. Good trainers can ensure that individuals are given the opportunity and the stimulus to join these things up. E-learning may make it easier to select the right learning inputs to meet individual needs, but is no guarantee of the reflection that is needed to translate that into action.

WHAT IS LEARNING TRANSFER?

Learning transfer is concerned with the ability of learners to use what they have learnt in the environment in which the learning is intended to be applied. As a general principle it is the case that the closer the learning context is to the application context, the easier it is to transfer learning (called *near or low road* transfer). Conversely, the harder it is to reproduce the work environment (especially where there is a high level of complexity, uncertainty or unpredictability about the role) the greater the challenge for learners (called *far or high road* transfer). For more information about learning transfer, see the paper *From learning to performance* on davidpardey.com.

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'LEARNING CONTEXT' AND 'APPLICATION CONTEXT'?

This refers to the physical context in which learning takes place (*learning context*) and where it will be used (*application context*), including the people as well as the location and other features, but also to the emotional context (ie the relationships the learner has with each one). It also includes the extent to which the opportunities to apply what has been learnt are similar to the situations in which learning took place - this reflects the learners' ability to recognise that this situation is the same and be able to relate a set of principles to that situation and work out the right behaviour. For example, having learnt about the causes, symptoms and effects of stress, would a manager necessarily recognise them in a direct report and take the right actions?

WHAT'S SO HARD ABOUT APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT?

Some aspects of vocational and professional learning present fewer challenges for learning transfer, simply because it is possible to establish learning environments and activities that simulate reality (training restaurants are a good example). Much leadership and management development takes place in environments that are quite different from the real work place, and generally involves learning general principles and practices which have then to be applied in quite disparate circumstances. There are techniques that can be employed to create simulations or to recall reality (action learning, role play, case studies, critical incident analysis), to bring the workplace into the learning environment - called *hugging* - but they still only represent a small sub-set of all possible application situations.

There is one further factor inhibiting learning transfer when the learning involves changes in behaviour in relation to other people but the workplace remains the same - there is pressure on the individual to revert to how they were before the learning intervention. No matter how well the new behaviours have been demonstrated in the learning environment, the likelihood is that learners will revert to their previous behaviour, simply because it is more natural.