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Getting Value for Management Development: Participant perceptions on practicing their learning in a public sector environment.

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Getting Value for Management Development: Participant perceptions on transferring and practicing their learning in a public sector environment.

Introduction

This working paper will present the findings of an empirical study into the successful (or otherwise) transfer of learning gained from a management development programme. The programme has been ongoing for over four years and was run by Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University on behalf of a large public sector organisation in the North-east of England.

The programme involved four formal input sessions (modules) interspersed with self-managed learning sets, running over a 6-9 month period. Around 480 managers have participated in the programme. Consequently, participants have come from many levels of management in the organisation; with more senior managers participating in the early groups and more junior supervisory staff joining the later cohorts.

Initial evaluation of each module, and the programme for each module has been based on Kirkpatrick’s (1978) Level 1 data around participant satisfaction; these findings generally producing high levels of satisfaction in terms of content and delivery. The overall success of the programme has been evaluated internally by the organisation through the use of ‘Impact on Performance’ surveys and the success of ‘Service Improvement Projects’, which were reviewed by a Programme Steering Group, and also show high levels of success in terms of ‘application of competencies’ (85% of participants and 96% of line managers have seen an improvement) and, at Kirkpatrick’s (1978) Level 4, 73% of participants and 81% of line managers consider the impact to have been ‘positive’ or ‘very positive’. It appears that both the participants and the organisation regard the programme as successful and has offered value as an investment.

The data has proved less valuable in assessing the effectiveness of particular elements in the programme, or if the application of learning has been distributed equally amongst different departments and across different cohorts. The extent to which participants perceive the programme delivering ‘near’ or ‘far’ transfer (Spitzer, 1984, Detterman, 1993, cited in Merriam and Leahy, 2005)) is of particular interest to the researchers. The timing of summative evaluation has always been problematic and one of the main aims of this study is to identify if the ‘time since programme’ learning is significant in the extent to which learning is applied in the workplace.

Other issues related to the transfer of learning will also be explored. The organisation prides itself on being progressive and feels it has staff who are motivated to learn and develop. As motivation has been identified as a key learning transfer variable, the effect of any goal-setting as a motivational tool to enhance learning transfer, (Lim and Johnson 2002) will be explored.
Learning and knowledge transfer are recognised as areas central to the strategic aspects of human resource management and development. For example, Matzdorf, Price and Green (2000) comment “organizational learning is seen as a source of competitive advantage in modern business”. Although competitive advantage is not a key objective for public sector organisations, the same operational efficiencies are a valuable outcome of these processes of utilization of learning and knowledge. Indeed, many such organisations pride themselves on demonstrating to other similar organisations how their efficiency gains have improved their service to their communities. Such demonstration is importantly recognised by Central Government with the ‘Star Rating’ system.

Such success is not only focused on the management development and other learning processes, and therefore not easily achieved. Yeo (2002) points out that “learning is not independent of other organizational processes and dynamics”. These ‘other’ organizational processes may actively inhibit the learning process. For instance, the application of cost-based resourcing, driven by constant ‘efficiency savings’, tends to limit an individual’s ability to reflect and act creatively: information becomes processed in a “just-in-time” fashion. This view is supported by West (1994) who comments that many “organizations operate within the confines of short-termist and financially-driven perspectives”. As the organisational environment continues to change, competition and technological developments change the rules on learning. Although a more flexible and organic labour force is an essential ingredient of organizational learning, many organizations – particularly in the public sector – do not adapt quickly enough to grasp the opportunities promised by such learning.

Grieves et al (2004) have suggested that ‘barriers to learning occur when there is a discrepancy between mental models. The biggest problem occurs when there is a significant gap between the organisation’s espoused philosophy and systems of ideas held by different groups of people”. The espoused philosophy is clear in the title of the programme ‘Modern Gateshead Manager’.

In this context, the adjustment of the social architecture of the organisation through the participation of many of the key influencers on the programme, may be a significant help (or a hindrance) in the development of a working environment that facilitates an open dialogue to support transfer of learning.

Yeo’s (2002) ‘other’ organizational processes, particularly, “lack of mechanisms to encourage risk taking, action and innovation, line managers “blocking” the introduction of change and a culture of control and compliance” (Wilding, Fenwick and McMillan 2006) may actively inhibit the learning transfer process and understanding their effect can help improve individual learning, and organizational performance, both of which are important measures of success to the organisation. Cook (1999) has spoken “traditional approaches of command and control” that neither “engendered (both) trust
and support, nor allowed for a more coaching style of intervention to be employed”.

Since line managers have also been participants on this programme, we will try to find if these organizational blockages have been reduced.

Consistent with the work of Argyris and Schön, (1978, 1996) and Senge (1990) who argue that learning is a process that must engage all employees, fully supported by an organisation whose structure and culture, the design of the programme, and the participation of most of the line managers hoped to - using Hodgkinson’s (2000) words, lead to “dialogue, experimentation and learning from each other”.

“...one challenge in managing knowledge is the reality that knowledge is power in many organisations; many individuals in organisations choose to keep knowledge to themselves”. (Cook, 1999)

It was hoped the use of learning sets, to support the taught modules, and the module on wider partnership working, may break down some of the ‘silos’ which many larger organisations unconsciously develop within their organisational structure. Consequently, the extent to which relationships developed within the learning set will also be explored.

As a result, this paper does not seek to analyse all the aspects of learning and learning barriers, but seeks instead to use the results of the research to focus upon two aspects. Firstly, through the identification of participant perceptions of critical incidents in the transfer process, to assess the successes and difficulties of transfer within this specific organisational context. Secondly, to try to ascertain if, and how, the period between the learning input and the use of the learning in the workplace is significant.

Methodology

All the data obtained for this study has been obtained from a questionnaire study carried out in 2009 from course participants who have attended the programme. Because the Management Development programme has been running for so long, the results should provide a much richer insight into transfer, particularly in the public sector, than single, short period post-course studies. The sample will include participants from the early cohorts and so they should have had a greater opportunity (often a barrier according to Wilding et.al. 2006) to implement knowledge acquired through the programme, than those from later cohorts. Participants from the later cohorts may provide insights into the extent to which the ‘management style’ of previous participants has been affected and if that has had an effect on learning transfer processes.

In line with Gibb’s (2008:94) view that “what is measured and how it is measured” is part of the diverse landscape for managing quality in workplace HRD, the authors have followed a methodology similar to that of Lim and Johnson (2002), using a questionnaire to gain participant’s own perceptions of
learning and the extent to which it has been transferred, followed up with interviews with volunteers to draw out from critical incidents the extent to which encouragers and barriers to transfer have occurred.

Findings

As the necessary permissions to conduct this research have taken some time, there are no results to be included in this paper. However, the authors hope to be in a position to present their early findings to the conference.

Although the questionnaire will have been distributed at the conference, there will be a number of interviews still to complete before the research stage of this evaluation project is complete. The authors would like advice from those attending the conference as to which aspects of learning transfer and barriers to the transfer might be most usefully explored in those interviews.

References

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