



Management Training - from Steam Jenny to Nellie and beyond

There must be many ex-indentured apprentices walking about out there who have no idea that the apprentice training they received derived its essential purpose and form from medieval times, and the methodologies used from the craft guilds of slightly more recent times - and probably don't care.

There are probably even more managers wandering about out there, as well, who have received management training well adapted to the steam age plus a few who have moved up to the late industrial era - and, if they don't care, perhaps they should start worrying.

Why? Because the process of transformation which will take us from the late industrial era to the information age has already started, and the nature and scale of the change will be at least as great as that which occurred in the transition from the agricultural age to the early industrial age - that's why. And the skill sets that successful managers will need, and the training that will have to be given to develop them, will be about as different from many current methodologies as was a steam driven factory from a nineteenth century farm relying principally on the horse drawn plough.

From Steam Jenny to Parallel Processing

Much has been written about the looming advent of fifth generation computers - parallel networked processing being the next stage of development in the chain that started with the electronic vacuum tube, and followed through the transistor, the integrated circuit and very large scale integration. Less has been written about the development of organisations through a similar five generations of development, although the literature that does exist is excellent, challenging and exciting.

In case the recent work of Drucker, Zuboff, Briggs, Savage, Beer, Galloway, Peters et al has escaped attention, it may be as well to summarise the five generations of organisational development. In the medieval era, it was the feudal system that governed, with land being the essential source of wealth.

With the arrival of the early industrial age, and the exploitation of labour being the next source of wealth, the first generation of organisation, the proprietorship, was the mainstay of the production of the goods and services that flowed from the new age of trade and

industry. As the source of wealth rapidly moved towards the exploitation of capital, these organisations changed rapidly into the steep hierarchies we know and love so well, since the scale of the operations required to harness evolving technologies needed a degree of funding, planning and co-ordination beyond the abilities of one person. The second generation of organisation had arrived.

As the late industrial era developed, second generation organisations began to struggle to cope with the increasing volatility and complexity of the businesses they

were supposed to manage, and the organisational matrix became the hoped for way forward. Many organisations tried it, some struggled, some prospered and some are still struggling today - others gave up the matrix as a no-hoper.

Hence the move towards the fourth generation of organisation, which relies more and more on computer interfacing and networking of information, to offset the rigidities built into the traditional, steep hierarchy. The problems that have risen to the surface with this latest development are too numerous for them all to be mentioned here, but perhaps a few will suffice.

There are computer systems that do not talk to each other, languages that are different, the problems of definitions of meanings being variable and the long lost assumptions that were made when any one system was defined. And these are just the technical problems.

More fundamental are the management, human and organisational problems that have been embedded in and encouraged by the steep hierarchies of yesteryear, that are still with us and have not been addressed at all by the third and fourth generations of organisations. These are more about turf wars, the ownership of information, the massaging of information and the politics of organisations, all of which exist to protect the individual and effectively harm the health of the organisation.

So what about fifth generation of organisations? These are going to be based on human networking, which will raise a whole new series of issues, and more for those managers who will wish to avoid the transformation than those will embrace it wholeheartedly. The former will stay, as they currently are, wedded to the second generation of organisations - the steep hierarchy - while the latter will not just accept the inevitable - they will welcome it as the solution to most of their current and anticipated management problems. The reality is that the second generation of organisations has little to offer those businesses seeking solutions to the challenges offered as the millennium heaves up over the horizon.

But in all the froth and pother about the transformation that organisations will be going through, there is one other facet of business management that has received rather less attention than the issues of computer and human networking. And this is the equally significant transformation that has to happen in the way that we develop and train our managers. Which brings us back to where we started.

From Standing by Nellie

If we trace the development of training methodologies, over the same sort of period, while there is little to suggest a similar, tidy succession of four generations with a fifth appearing from the murk, there are, nevertheless, distinct patterns to be observed.

From the early days, Standing by Nellie was the rule, with apologies to the ladies - why it was never Fred or George or Joe is not understood, especially since there were always more male apprentices than female, but decades of comment seem to have left Nellie in the role of the evil person in training. Because Standing by Nellie was fine, as a method where one of the early craftsmen passed the trade on to the next generation, and pride in the craft was everything, but as the industrial era started to emerge, so did the weaknesses with the Nellie training approach.

The first was that all the bad habits and short cuts got passed over with all the craftsman's skills. The second was the lack of defined and agreed standards, which resulted in an almost, at first, imperceptible reduction in those same standards. Much was done with the formalisation of apprentice training schemes to address these two problems, and technical training proceeded apace. But where were the equivalent developments in management training?

At first, the simple reality was that there was none. Education was deemed to be sufficient. Providing that the applicant had a good enough formal education, with a few bits of paper to demonstrate the ability, at a point in time, to access information stored in the brain and reproduce it on more bits of paper, this was considered all the qualification needed for management.

To supplement this, as the evident inadequacy of well educated but untrained managers became painful to the business, some training was provided. In the absence of any other avenue, Standing by Nellie had to suffice, but in the management skills arena, two new problems reared their ugly heads. The first was the gap between those with only unconscious skills and those who had conscious skills, the difference being that members of the second group could articulate what it was that they did that produced success, and the former only knew that somehow things seemed to work out OK. The problem was that, mostly, managers fell into the former category and were unable to pass on their undoubted skills.

The second problem was the gap between perception and reality - what many managers thought they did in the job was very different from the way others saw them. Which did raise the odd difficulty in trying to get across to others how to succeed in this most difficult aspect of the job of management.

At about which time, there was a convergence of two very different schools of thought. The first was represented by the Smith/Taylor/Fayol position, which was espousing a variety of ideas about the nature of business management, focused heavily on the principle of the division of labour and the basic principles of management - we have probable all gone through the planning, organising, commanding, co-ordinating and controlling framework, which was neatly in line with the needs of the emerging late industrial era with its steep hierarchies.

The second was represented by the felt need to educate our managers better, to overcome the observed failings of Nellie in management. So guess what we educated them in? You guessed it - Fayol's fourteen principles and all its derivatives. As the management education bandwagon gathered more adherents and momentum along the way, the subject matter of management education moved into marketing, finance, strategic planning and culminated in the widespread adoption of the MBA.

Which was all very well in itself, but seemed to have missed one of the most vital points of all. What about management skills? There are a couple of loose definitions which may be as well to surface here - they are loose, but they will suffice to make the point. Knowledge and understanding are that which reside between the ears, and they are developed by educational processes. Skills are what we use when we apply our knowledge and understanding and DO SOMETHING, using our hands, feet, eyes and ears, and mouth and vocal cords, and they are developed by training. And there is very little to suggest that the acquisition of managing skills is aided by sitting and listening to lectures, which is the traditional, mainstream method of the educationalist.

To the Harvard Case Study

Which brings us to the fifties and sixties - we said the chronology was not precise! - and the emergence of the case study approach. Realising that lecturing was not enough, the educationalists, both in the public sector and their look-a likes in the private, moved into the use of case studies to provide students the opportunity to practice the application of their new found insights, in a more-or-less practical situation. Which was a great step forward.

Those of us who experienced the early applications of the new technique will remember only too well the shock of having read the book, watched the movie and listened to the lecture, and then gone on to screw up the case study. Which demonstrated the point amply, and produced great strides forward in the transfer of knowledge and understanding to applications as practical skills.

But still left two very great problems on the table, one old, one new. The first was the question of the perception gaps - remember one of the old problems of Nellie? The ability to process a case study, neatly presented on several pieces of paper said nothing about the interactions that occur between human beings, when the same tactics were tried out, back at the ranch. And the fact that the newly hopeful manager's actual behaviour towards and responses from the people with whom the interactions occurred had little connection with the expectations developed in the training process.

At which point the new problem hit home. The skills developed processing those same tidy and oh-so-complete case studies on pieces of paper somehow did not quite work as well when applied in the very untidy and partially defined situations to be managed in the real life workplace. The phenomenon became known as the re-entry problem - the difficulty that many managers had in the transition between the learning environment and the work environment.

And on to interactive skills and reality anchoring

If we can describe formal Standing by Nellie and the management education / case study approach as the first two generations of management education and training, the move to behaviourism and reality anchoring probably represents the third and fourth generations.

The behaviourist approach requires that all the things that managers do should be made measurable and measured, and the subject of objective and analytical feedback to the aspiring manager. The move started with the action centred leadership approach of John Adair and The Industrial Society and continued on through Kepner Tregoe and Huthwaite Research. The techniques are used widely today, and reject the old Fayol plan, organise, command, co-ordinate and control approach - the reason being that they work.

Hallelujah! For the first time, managers were trained in real skills, that they could use back in the job, and with a skill set that tackled the problem of the perception gap. For those who have not experienced this type of training, they will not know the feeling - those who have, will remember the horror when faced with the reality of what we actually did, as distinct from what we thought we did.

The last and fourth generation of management training tackled the re-entry problem by supplementing the case study as the only vehicle for practising new skills, by adding

the processing of real issues. The whole idea was to bridge the gap between learning and work environments, in the learning environment. The good news is that it worked; the bad news is that the approach, that became known as reality anchoring, in turn produced its own problems.

The first, and in many senses the most formidable for the practitioner, is that it demanded a set of skills from the trainer at once both different in kind and in scale. No longer would it be possible for the trainer to work up model solutions to the case studies, and be able to rely on this alone. The trainer would now need to be able to develop solutions to all new cases, on the fly, and to cope with incomplete and fuzzy data, at the same time. This required the trainer to move to the role of quasi line manager for the day, and the key skills became counselling and facilitating, with a distinctly line manager mind set in the approach to the analysis of problems, identification of blockages to performance and development of workable solutions.

The second is that reality anchoring required a very different level of commitment from the line managers of the trainees. They had to accept their own contribution to the new training ball game. That included the selection of the issues to be treated during the training and in conjunction with the trainees, and the briefing of the trainee, pre the training. It also implied a commitment of time to attending the training forum, to take feedback and make more commitments to management action in line with the blockages identified and decisions made during the training. The final commitment to be made concerns the follow up to organisational development actions, post training.

All of which is fine, but the transition to reality anchoring also moved the training of line managers to an in-house setting - the day of managers being able to solve their training and development problems by sending people on outside courses was coming to an end.

Fifth generation training

The next generation in training methodology will be driven by the changing nature of organisations and the information technologies they use. The key issues for the articulate and competent manager will be related to the advent of networking organisations - that is, the networking of people, in groups, teams, teams of teams and as individuals. There will be three sets of complementary skills, to be grafted on to the old skills. But the old skills, in this context, means those of managing projects, managing knowledge and learning, managing change, managing the context, empowering and direction giving - not the old, old skills of planning, organising, command, co-ordination and control.

The first skill set will be associated with managing human beings through the turmoil and uncertainties inherent in the break down of old organisation norms. The loss of the one employee/one manager relationship will bring its own insecurity issues. Increased accountabilities, including the self learning and self tasking nature of the newer forms of work group, will introduce stresses that will flow directly from the discontinuity with the past, where steep hierarchies and their cultural norms tended to suppress and limit accountability - not enhance it. The very fact of working within changing and temporary work roles and linkages will, itself, be unsettling to those who are unaccustomed to the style. And the whole skill set will involve managing the integration of skills, knowledge, values and emotions.

The second skill set will be concerned with the selection, guidance, facilitation and counselling processes needed for the formation and management of the networking groups implied by fifth generation organisations. The identification of the realities of the informal organisation, that exist before, during and after the transitional period will be crucial. The management of people in key liaison roles and virtual teams will be another subset.

The third, the management of information systems, also networked, also operating in a parallel processing mode, to match the needs of the human networks, will be the final and critical skill set.

And underlying and underpinning the whole set will be newer generic skills that all managers will need. These include the processing of uncertainty and ambiguity - the pattern recognition and fuzzy information sets beloved of the researchers in the field - managing without authority, creative influencing and negotiating skills and motivating people without recourse to financial rewards.

All of which is fine but it raises one last difficulty that has to be overcome - who is going to do the training? The one thing that is for certain sure is that few are going to have the experience on which to base the development of new skills. The organisations that will provide the experience are only just beginning to emerge from the glorious ashes of old, second generation organisations. So the transformation process is going to require some courage from the trainer as well as the organisation attempting the crossing.

All Aboard for the Network Train

The prospect is an exciting one, with mountains to be climbed, oceans to be crossed and swamps to be traversed - with enough traps for the unwary, potential failures for the faint hearted and escape routes for the tenacious hangers on to second generation training to suit their second generation organisations. But the prize is a glittering one, the attainment of which may just be the difference between continuing existence and oblivion. So all aboard that's coming aboard. Or, if you don't fancy the journey, you could always try the training standing at Platform 2, which is the 1991 calling at Reality Anchoring, Interactive Skills and The Harvard Case Study and going forward to Standing by Nellie - or is it backward?