



## Training does not work ...

... and the best training works least of all.

Management training has never had a wonderful reputation, in many organisations at least. The record is a sad one: of wasted investments: few returns: tales of academically interesting material, 'but does it really apply to me': or, saddest of all, 'it's super material, but we don't work like that in our company'.

Worse, with the changes now occurring in world markets - change cycles getting shorter, new technologies and competitors appearing and increasing demands for quality and customer service - there is little doubt that yesterday's solutions will not be applying in a more dynamic today, let alone the future. Levels of uncertainty are increasing, as is the internationalisation of both the supply and user sides of markets.

And yet, much training is still peddling old management technologies, and standard solutions in a world crying out for a more creative approach to management thinking.

Even a cursory examination of the techniques taught in most management training will show that they are still firmly entrenched in the systematic or scientific schools of management. It was a wonderful theory, and may even have had some relevance at the time, but with a more dynamic market, there is not much point in training more managers to develop the same, mechanically-arrived-at solutions as everybody else, and then take the time to get there second!

So, if the sausage machine approach is no longer a runner, what next? If we need managers who can think outside the square, is that not a case for recruiting them? And probably younger managers, at that. You can almost hear the cry go up, 'You can't train people to think more creatively - they are either creative or not'.

Fortunately, there is almost no evidence to suggest that older or more experienced managers are less creative, or that creative thinking cannot be taught. There is considerable evidence that suggests that increasing experience can inhibit creative thinking, but it can hit the young just as quickly as the older.

Experience generates lots of previously-used solutions to problems, that are known to have worked. The brighter the young manager, the more quickly they pile up workable solutions. When time is short, and the pressure to produce is on, guess where either type of manager will tend to go for a working solution to a new problem?

### Left hands and right hands

When examined, with its protective skull removed, the brain looks rather like an enlarged walnut, complete with its two halves. Each side of the brain deals with different types of processes. The left side handles the systematic activities, such as logic, reasoning, numeracy, language abstract concepts. The right side handles the more creative processes, including rhythm and music, imagination and daydreaming, colour and images.

Early research suggested that people were naturally left or right dominated thinkers, but later conclusions suggested that creativity is more likely to be a product of the individual's education and upbringing than an inherited characteristic. Subsequently, we have learned that both sides of the brain are capable of complex thinking behaviour. Moreover, when people are encouraged to develop those thinking functions that have been neglected, the whole performance of the mind becomes strengthened.

In short, if it is possible to train managers to become more creative in their thinking, the result will be that the systematic processes become more effective too. To identify methods of training managers in a more creative approach, we have to first look at the environmental factors that have tended to suppress right hemisphere activity.

The list is comprehensive, and includes experience, but a short review will indicate the nature of the problem, and thus the solution.

The first is lack of feedback, on the quality of management decisions, from the people who have to implement them. Most organisations do not have any conscious mechanism for this kind of feedback, in reverse, back up the management line. And the style of the organisation tends to suppress it too. Hence, previously tried ideas tend to become embedded, and where they fail, it is always some else's fault – or data describing results are fudged to hide the awful truth.

Second, change nearly always causes read across effects, elsewhere in the organisation. Unless lateral communications and internal negotiating processes are well and truly in place, and in most organisations they are not, there is more resistance to doing anything different, and the conventional becomes the norm.

Third, is the emphasis on systematic approaches. These are workable, easy to package and easy to teach, for both tutor and pupil. Why imply an organisation full of unknowns and surprises, for which no simple answer can be pre-packaged, and which might force the trainer into a position of answering 'I don't know', when everything can be reduced down to a set of tidy formulae instead?

Fourth, and perhaps a key to the whole issue, is that much education, in schools, college and in vocational training focuses attention on systematic, vertical thinking processes, with a tendency to point to right and wrong answers to everything. This is certainly true of much education in science and engineering disciplines, and in accounting as well - except for the more creative variety that is!

Any approach to training, that is designed to enhance right brain thinking, and produce a more creative problem solving and idea generating team, must address these causes in its designs.

### **Assess – don't guess**

Don't ask managers what their training needs are - they don't know. Even more certain, don't ask the boss - they know even less. The lack of feedback up the line precludes both from helping to define learning needs, in an objective way. Managers in the target population are certainly not likely to know that their thinking is blinkered by experience! And don't leave it to the training or personnel specialists. It's not that they don't know how, it's just that training and development of managers should be owned by the line manager - it can't be delegated sideways, or any other way.

A full assessment centre facility, with techniques and inventories in line with the more volatile markets currently being experienced and anticipated would be an ideal, but most companies don't have one or access to one. Increasingly, organisations are beginning to doubt their effectiveness, and certainly their cost effectiveness - assessment centres are very expensive beasts. Moreover, with rapidly changing environments and businesses, just how often are we prepared to assess managers? Every few months, perhaps? In any case, many companies feel assessment is not appropriate to senior managers. In which circumstances, there is a need to develop an in house method of assessing current skills. An indirect or oblique approach is likely to be needed.

Start by defining the context in which the job is currently being performed. What changes are occurring? What sorts of ambiguity and uncertainty have to be processed? What level of strategic thinking as distinct from operational decision making is needed? Examine future change. Enquire about the use of shared resources, about zero sum decisions that are needed, about the need to enable change. What limitations are imposed on the manager? How close is the role to the market? Is it close enough?

Now define the skill set needed in the job, in objective terms. Examine each component and identify the balance needed between systematic and creative thinking. In which areas are new ideas needed? How critical is it that the manager should be able to generate creative thinking in staff? Which are the priority skills needed, at this time? In the future?

Examine areas of results. Where are they good? Not so good? What kind of conflicts occur? What trends exist? What feedback is available from the market? What feedback is available from the peer group? How resistant is that part of the organisation to change? What are the implications for the required contribution to strategy being delivered? Now and in the future?

Now is a good time to talk and listen with the incumbent. The information already generated will enable the right questions to be framed, but stay with the oblique approach. Enquire about those aspects of the job which are easiest, and the most difficult. Ask about changes and new ideas already introduced and needed, adequacy of resources, sources of conflict and resistance, and then how these kind of problems are handled. Find out about the balance between operational and strategy-related activities, time and how it is managed.

Relate the two sets of data, and it should be possible to identify the skills deficiencies of the managers in question. Place current skills alongside current demands, but remember also potential for development.

One last thought on the subject of defining learning needs for managers. One split we have already considered is that between systematic and creative thinking skills. Another is between analytical and interpersonal skills. The former is concerned with those activities which could occur behind a locked door, including decision making, planning and analysing data. The latter occur when the manager gets face to face with another person or people.

Much of management training treats the two as isolated from each other. In practice when managers are face to face with someone else, they will almost always be using one or more of their analytical skills. Training that fails to integrate the two creates severe problems, at the stage of return from the learning environment. Integration makes the

application of newly acquired skills in the real world that much easier. Identification of both should be taken care of at the research stage.

## **Designing the learning environment**

The emphasis is on the word learning - too many trainers forget that learning is about the manager, not the trainer. People learn by doing, seeing the results, and getting social and analytical feedback. If the only justification of training, and it is not, is that it speeds up the learning process, then the trick must be to design learning environments in which precisely that can happen.

Some of the requirements of the design will be standard, and not related to the task of generating creative thinking. To make training work, it needs to be task and job related. It should build the required skills piece by piece - throw twenty seven new skills at a manager simultaneously, and don't be surprised if you get a nasty case of saturation and information overflow.

Build the process using the experiential learning concept, and protect delegates against failure, because, if the programme is designed to stretch them, and it should be, then fail they surely will. Early failures that are supported will create the determination to succeed at later stages in the learning process. Build in humour and fun - laughter, and learning to laugh at oneself, is the best palliative going for failure. And generating a desire to experiment, is required is it not?

Now is the time to address the issue of designing opportunities to learn to think more creatively. Remember, the ability is there in all of us - in some, it just needs a little work to bring it out. The first step is to recognise the different applications for creative thinking. Essentially, there are three main applications. The first is at the stage of identifying the causes and especially root causes of problems. The second occurs when there is a need to generate solutions to the problems and their causes. The third is about opportunity generation and is similar to the second. In practice, all problem resolution and decision making needs a blend of both systematic and creative skills.

First, a word about the need. Traditional methods of teaching problem solving or decision making have concentrated on a step-by-step approach. There is nothing wrong with this, in itself, but there are limitations. For example, a tidy, systematic method of problem solving is fine when all the data needed are available, when that data are hard and objective, and when one neat, tidy cause pops out at the other end of the sausage machine. But when did you last come across a real problem as well defined as that?

Similarly, the processes that are needed to evaluate the options / decisions about actions to be taken can be very systematic, when we know all the circumstances in which the action has to be taken, and one of a set of previously used methods will fit. But in today's world, that level of certainty has all but disappeared, and customers and competitors are getting more innovative, all the time.

When the ground rules contain lots of uncertainty, a new set of skills becomes essential, and they must be learned in a cross-functional environment, if one of the sources of lack of creativity mentioned earlier is to be eliminated. The rules are simple enough, although they may need an experienced practitioner to use them. There are just six.

- 1 Banish prescriptive management - this is the process by which experienced managers always have an instant solution to all problems brought to them by their staff. They need to get rid of it, even more than their staff need them to.
- 2 First ideas always come from experience, until practice has brought this characteristic behaviour to conscious attention. Allow this to happen, and then demand an equal number of ideas, that have not been tried before, in the organisation, or anywhere else.
- 3 Delegates have to learn to suspend judgement. It is always easy to respond to any idea with 'That won't work because ....'. Most people find this process of offering negative evaluations easy, and satisfying. Such evaluations must be suppressed.
- 4 Free-wheeling is to be encouraged. This is the process by which one daft idea spins off another equally daft idea, and they all get written up. Daft? Read item 5.
- 5 Intermediate impossibles must be encouraged. The intermediate impossible is the daft idea that won't work, but giving it attention and acceptance not only encourages more, but, sooner or later, produces the spin off idea that is the killer - competition killer, that is!
- 6 Design frameworks for the groups to work within. There are many devices, and they are all valid. There are why-why diagrams, fishbone diagrams, morphological analyses, force field analyses, mind maps, spider diagrams and how-how diagrams. The structure serves to allow total freedom of thought but within a framework that is appropriate to the issue.

Acquiring new skills in the learning environment is fine, but if they are to be passed on, at the workplace, and to carry all the way through to the point where the organisation can become more creative, there are other actions that have to be in place first.

### **Making it work for you**

It is no good developing a whole bunch of creative thinking managers, who can work that way across functional boundaries, if the organisation promptly suppresses the new skills. Designing the organisational environment is just as if not more important than the training provided.

The first step to adding value to the training is to involve the manager's boss, from the outset. As suggested above, the boss should be part of defining the need, but more is required. If there is no pre-course briefing from the boss, the training will immediately be seen as cosmetic, and will die at that point.

The briefing must cover what the objectives are, for both learning and the business. It must also agree what actions will be taken on return, and which particular business issues will be addressed, using the new skills acquired. Post the training, the debriefing must cover similar ground - what was learned, how it will be applied, with whom and by when. This must be followed by the task briefing itself, and business goals and standards defined and agreed - all to be done by the delegate's line manager.

And now for the critical stage. Out of the process of tackling the task, there are, almost inevitably, going to be some new ideas developed. This is the time where the 'abominable no-man' can strike, in the form of the boss saying 'that won't work, because .....'. If this

happens, don't be surprised if all the attempts to develop a more creative thinking organisation just ran aground.

If an organisation is to become truly creative, that implies the willingness to experiment. Experiments involve risk, and risky ventures sometimes fail. There is no way forward involving creative thinking and change that excludes risk. If the organisation style is such that it always tries to analyse risk to the 'n'th degree, and legislate all uncertainty out of the window, the managers don't need training in creative thinking - the organisation needs a new set of goals, values and permissions.

This last point is a specific example of a hostile environment. In this case, the hostility is towards creative ideas that comes with a risk averse organisation. The more general case concerns organisational resilience. Resilient organisations are those that are capable of constantly adapting to a changing environment, mainly external but changes to the internal environment also trigger adaptive changes. Risk aversion is just one the 15 dimensions of organisational resilience, or, to be exact, the lack of it. Some of the others are:

- Management denial of mistakes
- Power held tightly by a few
- The mud hut syndrome
- Resources follow power and influence
- Leadership treated as something for top managers only

If an organisational is low on resilience, then the best training in the world is likely to be less than successful. In fact, paradoxically, the better the training the more likely it is to fail. Highly skilled managers, motivated to try their new skills for real, who come up against a hostile environment are more likely to head for the hills than high levels of commitment to developing improved results.

Which is another way of saying that if the old saw about training not working is not to be re-enacted - yet again, it is necessary, **before any training takes place**, (especially the management variety), to take action to ensure that the organisational environment is supportive of the applications of new skills, and not hostile to them. Since the application of new skills, creative or otherwise, requires changes to happen, and since the organisational resilience model is about developing organisations where change is a way of life, the resilience model is as good as any for that development.

So try the ideas above, and have fun. And if anyone has any more ideas on how we can improve managers abilities to think creatively, please let us know - all it needs is a little creative thinking, and we are always pleased to have the feedback!