

DEVELOPING SKILLED LEARNERS

What's in it for my business?

The question – what's in it for my business? Will very likely be at the top of the list for any commercial organisation considering taking on board any initiative claiming to improve the effectiveness of people, it seems that there is a spectrum of style of interventions.

At one end of the spectrum there are interventions that are designed to control the behaviour of employees. This gives the management of the business the sense that they are in charge and are laying down the framework within which individuals should operate.

The thinking behind this is that “if only people would think and behave in this way, everything would be OK”.

At the other end of the spectrum are initiatives which are designed to empower individuals within the organisation, enabling them to become more independent and self directing. The thinking behind these initiatives is “if people felt more self confident and purposeful, then they would contribute to the business in a creative and committed way.”



There are a number of difficulties with initiatives at the right hand end, for example

- they are generally a longer term investment which may not appeal to the urgent needs of the business
- in the early stages, it is more of an ‘Act of Faith’ which requires a high level of tolerance within the organisation
- it can create new behaviours in the organisation which are not understood in the early stages
- those who lead the initiative face to face need higher level skills to be able to cope with the changes they will create and be prepared to give up their sense of control.

On the other hand, initiatives at the right hand end of the spectrum are usually a lot less expensive and generate much more real commitment and interest.

In *Agricultural Division of ICI* our individual and organisation development strategies embraced initiatives along the whole spectrum but with an increasing commitment to initiatives that empowered individuals and enabled them to become more purposeful.

When we were first introduced to Developing Skilled Learners, the ideas that were being presented fitted exactly with our thinking.

The approach put increasing capability of the individual learner at the centre and concentrated realistically on removing the blockages to individual self-management of the learning process.

How has Developing Skilled Learners affected us?

All those training people who have been exposed to the DSL approach have 'seen the light' and have become increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional way in which they conduct their educational role. The courses and learning events that they have run since have all reflected their richer understanding of the learning process. Everything that we do has been touched in some way by the approach, and in other cases has been radically redesigned. Whenever we can, we build in the principles; for example, we have recently introduced a new supervisory development programme that is qualification based and focuses on developing competent behaviours. The first module in the new programme is a one day session on Managing Your Own Learning, which goes through the DSL principles. At the end of this day, participants are given an Open Learning audio tape/workbook which describes the principles in more detail and allows the opportunity to practise the skills after the introductory event.

We give each participant a list of competent behaviours that skilled learners use. Our list contains:

- They ask more questions
- They ask better quality questions (eg "Am I correct in thinking" rather than "Tell me.....")
- They manage their own learning and take more initiatives in furthering their own development
- They talk knowledgeably about the learning process and their own strategies of learning
- They learn more quickly
- They learn "better".
- They build relationships with their trainers that enhance their learning
- They talk to their tutors about learning blockages and how to overcome them
- They stimulate others to give help
- They learn relevant things without being told
- They show persistence and are not easily deterred in difficult learning situations
- They are aware of all the resources available to them
- In learning situations they explain what they already know and ask the trainer to fill in the gaps

We then look for real evidence that participants in the scheme are practising these behaviours before accepting that they have achieved a satisfactory standard in this module.

Interesting, no one in the organisation has questioned the value of having this module in the scheme, and there is a very high level of acceptance that this is the way to do things. As training and development people, we didn't seek high level permission for these ideas, but simply got on and demonstrated their power by using them day by day.

We continue to reinforce the principles as we progress through the scheme, and expect to see participants developing their ideas and skills in an increasingly effective way.

Other examples of using the approach are outlined below. They are all quotes from trainers within the organisation.

“In our graduate induction course we used to wheel in a series of people representing different parts of the organisation and they did their bit in turn usually as a 20-30 minute presentation followed by a few stilted questions from course members. We redesigned this by setting up what we called the ‘organisation jigsaw’. We invited along 20 people representing different parts of the organisation including operators, tradesmen and managers. The course participants chose who they spoke to and decided themselves what they wanted to know. It was a most exciting experience for everyone. We then reviewed the learning that had come out of the exercise and were impressed by the amount people had learned.”

“We have redesigned the Basic Development course for potential supervisors. The old version used to comprise inputs by the tutor and exercises followed by tutor-lead review sessions. There are no inputs by the tutor on the revised version, participants develop their own models and lead their own reviews. The tutor then gives his model or opinion for comparison.

“We were always dissatisfied with the old version, we are much happier with the new version because we now know, through inbuilt continuous assessment, that learning is taking place.”

“One good thing to come out of the Developing Skilled Learners events is that when people don't know something, they are not afraid to ask questions. There is one notable case where a supervisor of one of the participants complained to her manager about the number of questions she was being called upon to answer. We regard this as success.”

“During Managing Your Own Learning courses we developed the habit of using a technical officer in the laboratories who demonstrated the use of a viscometer for the silent demonstration session. This was particularly useful because all our participants were real learners in this situation and had no prior knowledge of the use of the equipment.”

“The interesting point was that the technical officer told me he intended using this technique with his own laboratory trainees as he was so impressed with the value of it. Since he had had no other involvement with the event. I found this very encouraging.”

“We came to realise that we were not differentiating in the way we were trying to teach people to memorise facts and to understand. Since we got to know about Developing Learning Skills we pay particular attention to understanding. What we often do is to get the learners to compare and contrast by means of a consensus exercise.”

“A recent involvement with the labs highlighted a trainer with great technical knowledge who was having difficulty communicating at the correct levels with a mixed ability group of trainees. Once a silent demonstration and a discussion around questioning techniques had taken place, the problem was solved by the trainees “driving” the sessions (rather than the trainer) and being encouraged to ask any questions they felt appropriate.”

All of these examples illustrate in an anecdotal way the sort of influence that Developing Skilled Learners has had on the organisation.

Having sound ideas about the learning process is central to the developmental thrust of any organisation. Other ideas about learning like Learning Styles and Accelerated Learning are all compatible with the approach to developing learning skills.

We feel that we have some very powerful ideas in the DSL approach which we will continue to develop for many years.