

Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

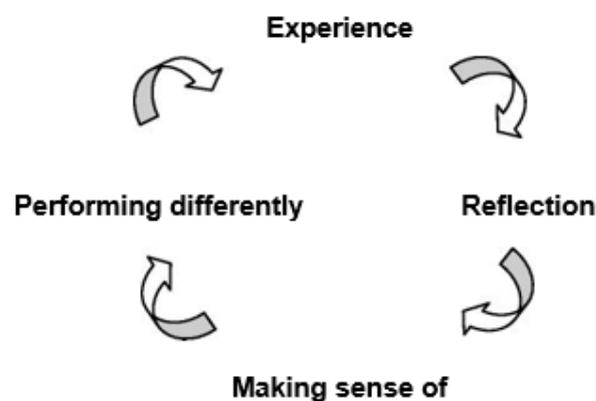
DEVELOPING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

This chapter is based on the view that day to day experience is essential for developing new skills and abilities. This implies that opportunities to do new and challenging things are the key to developing yourself and supporting the development of those who work for you. Moreover, to learn from an experience you need also to reflect upon it. As a line manager, you can use your ability to coach and to provide feedback to help your people to review and develop. Learning from experience is also the basis of talent management where a management team seeks collectively to identify and nurture the talented people within their organisation.

Learning from experience

I strongly believe that deep and sustained learning – that is, becoming able to do something you couldn't do before – only comes through experience. Experience on its own isn't enough, however. You need to reflect on and make sense of your experience to create knowledge, and this knowledge deepens when you apply it in new situations. As shown in Figure 10.1, you can view this as a learning cycle.

Figure 10.1 The experiential learning cycle



In this chapter we shall explore how you can use this notion of learning from experience to build the capability of those who work for you. If you are looking to develop people, you need to offer them new experiences that they will find challenging but achievable. You also need to help them to reflect on and learn from these experiences.

This works at both an individual and team level. Your team will develop confidence and capability when it tackles fresh challenges and systematically reviews how it has performed. Moreover, the same principle applies in looking after your own self development.

The learning cycle in Figure 10.1 is a rewording in simpler language of the learning cycle set out by David Kolb in his book *Experiential Learning*. He offers there this definition of learning:

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience

The four points of the learning cycle

You can begin the process of learning from experience at any one of the four points of the learning cycle. Here is a simple illustration based on a non-work example,

Theory: You read a cookery book and decide to try out a new recipe.

Experimentation: Some friends arrive unexpectedly and you cook up whatever you can find in the fridge to make a new and surprisingly tasty risotto.

Experience: At dinner at a friend's house you eat something delicious and ask for the recipe.

Reflection: You start a diet and consider how you can make some of your favourite dishes using alternative low calorie ingredients.

The learning cycle is actually a learning spiral which you can go round many times with increasing expertise and fluency. You learn to drive, for instance, through a series of lessons, not just one. And once you have passed your test, you can still improve considerably as you gain further experience or as you apply what you learn from an Advanced Driving course.

You can go round the learning cycle in seconds – something happens, you pause, something clicks, and you adjust your approach – or you can spend a lifetime blocked at some point and, therefore, not learning. For instance, I am hopeless at DIY, and will never get any better unless I take a risk and begin to experiment by, say, putting up some shelves.

In the minds of many people, learning and development is equated to going on a course. If, however, day to day experience coupled with reflection is the key to learning, what then is the role of an off-job workshop or programme in developing people? One way of looking at this is to recognise that participation in a workshop offers the opportunity to engage at each of the four points of the learning cycle.

- *Experience:* A workshop can be used to simulate an experience that might be too costly or risky to undertake for real.

For instance, a business game lets inexperienced managers make financial decisions and see the effects without risking the success of the real business.

- Reflection: Managers are extremely busy these days, often caught up in day to day activities with seemingly little time to stand back. Taking a couple of days out gives them the opportunity to reflect and make sense of their experience. It also gives them the chance to network with their peers and to hear how they have tackled issues.
- *Theory*: Participation on a workshop offers people the chance to listen to and understand theories and models, or to create their own frameworks that make sense of their world.
- *Experimentation*: A workshop on, for example, presentation skills or assertiveness gives people the chance to practise new skills or behaviours in relative safety, enabling them to make mistakes and learn from them. It can also give them the chance to make action plans about what they will do differently back at work as a result of their learning.

The importance of experience coupled with reflection as the basis of a successful management development programme is captured by Henry Mintzberg in his book *Managers Not MBAs*:

The key ingredient for management education is *natural* experience that has been lived in everyday life, on the job and off.The most powerful learning comes from reflecting on experiences that have been lived naturally. Indeed, because every practicing manager is loaded with such experiences, a classroom full of such managers makes for a most remarkable learning situation.

The idea of the learning cycle leads to the notion that different people have different learning styles – for example, Activists, Reflectors, Theorists and Pragmatists. I myself am skeptical about whether people do in fact learn in these different ways. Rather, I think people have preferences on how they like to spend their time and on what they enjoy doing. A stereotypical engineer likes to be active rather than reflective, for instance. However, this doesn't mean that this is how they learn. I think that the nature of what you are trying to learn matters more than how you prefer to spend your time. To learn philosophy, our engineer will need to spend time reflecting. To learn to swim, they will need to get in the water. Since they may be willing to spend more time doing things that they enjoy doing – and feel more confident at the same time - it is true that they are more likely to learn from activities they find enjoyable.

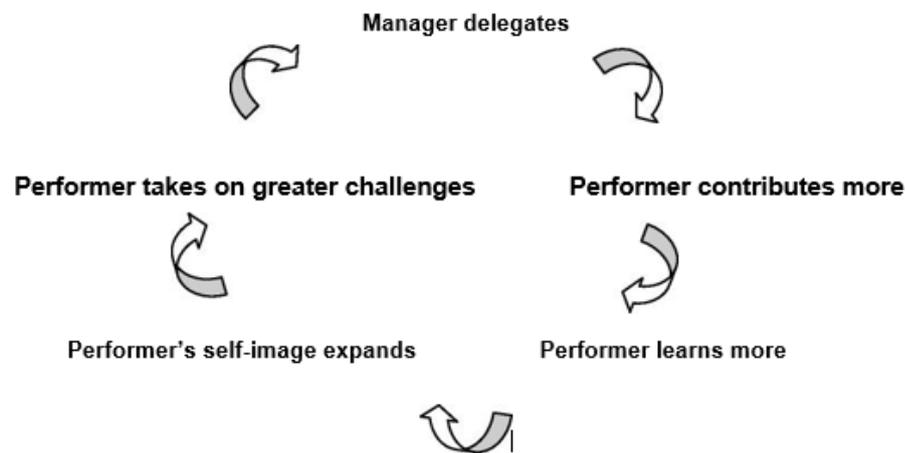
Managing and developing people

If this is how people really learn, then you as a manager seeking to build the capability of your people need to do two things. First, offer them challenging experiences at the edge of their comfort zone. Second, use coaching and feedback to help them to review and learn from these experiences. This approach is not only more effective at developing people but is also far less expensive than traditional approaches based on courses and programmes.

We looked at delegation in the chapter on managing people. One of the great benefits of delegating meaningful work to someone is the opportunity it offers for them to develop. Moreover, not only do they develop their capability but their confidence and sense of self are likely to grow too.

They are then likely to aim higher and become a capable performer who can take on bigger tasks and roles. You might imagine a cycle of development as shown in figure 10.2.

Figure 10.2 The cycle of development



This is like the recurrent pattern found by John Kotter among successful general managers, which he calls the *success syndrome*. In *The General Managers* he writes that:

They did well in an early assignment; that led to a promotion, or a Somewhat more challenging assignment; that reinforced (or even Increased) their self-esteem and motivation and led to an increase in their formal or informal power and an increase in the opportunities available to develop more power. More challenging jobs also stretched them and helped build their skills....

We explored the use of a coaching approach to managing people in the previous chapter. One situation which lends itself readily to a coaching conversation is the annual review process that occurs in many organisations. While in some places this is a sterile routine that is gone through to keep the Human Resource department quiet, I think that used properly it is an essential element in supporting the performance and development of people.

It is easy to overcomplicate this. It is actually quite simple to design such a process around a small number of crisp open questions that structure and record a conversation between an individual and their manager. Having a meaningful conversation is far more important than the paperwork.

A useful review document is one that is live and that is regularly in the thoughts of the individual. It is not a piece of paper that is filed in a drawer to be extracted twelve months later when it is time for the next round of reviews. Moreover, an effective manager will have regular conversations with their people – about objectives, performance, feedback and learning – throughout the year, not just at an annual set piece occasion.

Here are some questions that you might use to structure a conversation to help one of your people create their development plan. Note that the questions are worded to put the individual at the heart of the process. The questions are intended to open up a dialogue rather than to be followed mechanically.

- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What are your aspirations for the future?
- What development goals do you want to set yourself?
- What experiences will help you achieve these development goals?
- How will you reflect upon and learn from these experiences?
- How can I best support you in carrying out this development plan?

Giving, generating and gathering feedback

Some managers find it very difficult to give feedback to others. There are a number of reasons why this might be so. It may be because the manager – and perhaps also the person receiving the feedback – feels uncomfortable about engaging in this kind of conversation, particularly if the feedback is seen as negative. It may be that the manager doesn't have a clear idea of what would constitute effective behaviour and so is unable to offer constructive feedback. Or perceived lack of time may be used as an excuse. As with many aspects of development, however, time invested in the short term repays itself handsomely in the longer term as people grow and take on more responsibility.

Giving feedback can be valuable, particularly if it is accurate, specific, timely and offered non-judgmentally. For example, compare these three pieces of feedback:

- *Your PowerPoint slides are no good*
- *Your PowerPoint slides are great*
- *The font size on your slides is too small, which makes them difficult to read at the back of the room*

While it might be nice to hear that your slides are great, this feedback isn't useful. The final piece of feedback is useful because it is specific and you can do something to improve things.

We saw in the previous chapter that when coaching someone you are trying to do two things – to raise their awareness and to encourage them to take responsibility. A risk in giving feedback is that – even when the other person apparently accepts what you are saying – they do not really grasp the point. Moreover, even if the person fully understands the feedback they may not be committed to doing anything as a result.

An alternative to **giving** feedback is **generating** feedback. Your role is – using your coaching skills – to encourage the other person to generate their own feedback on how they performed. Someone who generates their own feedback is likely to be more aware of what they did and to take responsibility for performing differently next time.

In *Coaching for Performance*, John Whitmore writes that:

Generating high-quality relevant feedback, as far as possible from within rather than from experts, is essential for continuous improvement, at work, in sport and in all aspects of life.

Here are some illustrative questions to help someone to generate feedback for themselves on a piece of work. These are open questions that encourage exploration. There is no need to ask all of the questions below, and they can be modified to suit the actual situation. Note that your questions will be even more effective when they flow from what the individual has just said.

- What are you pleased about in this piece of work? Less pleased about?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you? What would have made it a 10?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What have you learnt from doing this project?
- What patterns do you notice about how you did this task and how you have tackled other tasks?

Your ability to engage in the kind of conversation that helps someone to generate feedback for them self will depend on the quality of the relationship between the two of you. There needs to be a degree of openness and trust in the relationship.

If after reviewing a piece of work the performer is still missing something important, you may wish to point this out. This can be done after first questioning. You may well find that there is no need for you to add anything because the performer identifies all of the key points themselves.

While it is valuable to help someone to generate their own feedback, there will nevertheless be times when it is essential that you tell someone what you think about their performance or behaviour. When someone is underperforming – or when someone's behaviour or style of interacting with others is causing offence - it is part of your role as a manager to address this explicitly with the individual. You may well find that you need to state clearly, with supporting evidence, what the person is doing wrong.

We have just looked at going beyond **giving** feedback to **generating** feedback. Further still is the idea of **gathering** feedback, where the individual actively sets out to collect information that will enhance their development or performance.

As an illustration, suppose you are keen to develop as a manager and would like feedback on your management style. Begin by identifying those around you whose views you respect, who are likely to have valuable insights into you behaviour, and who will be willing to be honest in their comments. Seek out these people and ask for their feedback, either in conversation or in writing. You could seek their responses to a series of structured questions. Once you have collected and digested the feedback, you might follow this up by meeting some of them to clarify their views and to check out important aspects of the feedback.

A difficulty that may arise is that people may be reluctant to share fully their views of you. An alternative approach – which may go some way to counter this - is to obtain the help of a facilitator whose role is to gather the feedback in the first instance and then to help you to understand the feedback and consider what you will do differently in response.

One way of gathering feedback used in many organisations today is 360 degree feedback. It is called 360 degree feedback because the feedback is given by people from all around the individual – line manager, peers, team members, and possibly customers or suppliers. The person also assesses themselves in order to compare their own views with the perceptions of others. The aim is to help individuals to review how other people see their performance or behaviour and then to consider how they wish to behave differently – that is, to raise awareness and encourage responsibility.

Talent management

In this final section we consider how you as a member of a management team can work with your colleagues collectively to identify and nurture the talented people within your organisation or department. I shall call this process **talent management**. The proposal that real learning requires real experience together with reflection to make sense of that experience also provides the essential foundation for talent management.

The aim in talent management is simply to identify the people in the organisation who have more talent than others and then to develop these people so that they become more experienced and competent, able to play a greater part in the success of the organisation. Note that in focusing extra effort on those with more talent you are still looking at the same time to develop all of your people.

In my book *Growing People* I suggested that there are three key stages required for an effective talent management process:

1. An agreed statement of what this management team regards as the vital indicators of talent and potential. It is important that this is articulated to enable a robust collective discussion of individuals and their potential to take on greater responsibilities within that organisation. Otherwise, you run the risk of making poor assessments, with a danger that *talented* may implicitly equate to *someone like us*. I also think it is useful to publish this statement so that people know what they need to demonstrate if they wish to rise through the organisation.
2. A series of honest conversations to decide against this statement which individuals are regarded as most talented. These conversations might begin with the annual performance and development review between an individual and their manager, which we considered above. They can then be taken forward in some form of group discussion where the management team collectively reviews individuals against the organisation's agreed statement of talent and potential.
3. Having decided who is regarded as more talented, the management team then needs to agree what experiences or other development activities will be offered to these people. In my view it is important that these development actions are agreed by the individual – this is not about doing things to people. It is also important that

actions are reviewed regularly – perhaps every three or six months – to ensure that they are in fact happening.

Let's look in more detail at the third stage. The most valuable action you can take in most cases is to offer your talented people new experiences that will challenge and stretch them. As Morgan McCall says in his book *High Flyers*, "The principle is simple: most people learn most by doing things they haven't done before."

The obvious way in which to do this in the workplace is to offer someone a new job. In placing a talented manager in a challenging role where they will learn new things, the organisation has to balance the development of that manager with the need for an effective performer who will deliver what the organisation requires. This is inevitably a matter of judgement - a tradeoff between investing in development to yield future performance against short term delivery of results.

While a new and challenging job provides the richest vehicle for development, there are other ways of giving people opportunities to build their capability. A secondment to a new role or the chance to lead a major project will provide real time experiences for development. Non-executive opportunities can also be extremely valuable. These may be within the organisation – for example sitting as a non-exec on the board or management team of a subsidiary company – or in an external organisation. Many charities and public sector organisations deliberately seek people from a different background to their own to contribute to their governance.

You might also want to give your talented people the opportunity to take part in a significant development programme, such as a spell at business school or the chance to take part in your organisation's flagship leadership programme, if you have one.

As well as offering talented people fresh experiences, you also of course have to help them to reflect on and learn from these opportunities. If you are the line manager of the individual you can use your coaching and feedback skills to help them review. Or you might offer them the opportunity to work with an experienced mentor or an internal or external coach to support their development in a way which will be tailored to their needs at this point in their career.