Management and Organisation Development

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Beyond Arrows, Boxes and Circles

KEITH PATCHING

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First published 1999 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-75414-6 ISBN 978-1-349-27315-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-27315-7

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99

Copy-edited and typeset by Povey-Edmondson
Tavistock and Rochdale, England

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction	1
WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT	1
THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK	2
THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK	3
MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT: WHY DO WE DO IT?	7
1 Management Development: Organisation Development	10
INTRODUCTION	10
A TEMPORARY MODEL FOR GETTING ANSWERS TO ORGANISATIONAL QUESTIONS	16
2 An Overview of the Management and Organisation Development Process	32
1 ORGANISATION WANTS TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY (STRATEGY) OR SOLVE SOME CURRENT PROBLEM	33
2 ORGANISATION RECOGNISES ROLE FOR MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT IN HELPING ACHIEVE STRATEGIC GOALS	33
3 ORGANISATION SELECTS A PARTNER TO HELP WITH THE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT ASPECTS OF THE STRATEGY	38
4 ORGANISATION AND PARTNER CHECK THEIR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHALLENGES AHEAD	39
5 PERSON OR PERSONS TAKE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR MANAGING THE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME OR PROJECT	46
6 DEFINITION OF THE 'DESIRED STATE' (WHAT MANAGERS WILL NEED TO DO DIFFERENTLY IN ORDER TO HELP ACHIEVE THE CHANGE DEFINED IN 1)	47
7 'CURRENT STATE' EXPLORED, WITH REVIEW OF THE GAP BETWEEN DESIRED AND CURRENT STATES	51

8	BROAD AIMS FOR A PROGRAMME DRAWN UP AND AGREED – PROGRAMME POSITIONED	51
9	BROAD CONCEPTUAL LEARNING DESIGN DRAWN UP AND AGREED	53
10	MICRO DESIGN (OF SEPARATE ‘COMPONENTS’) BY ‘EXPERTS’	54
11	LEARNING INTEGRATION, BOTH BEFORE THE INTERVENTION (DESIGN), AND DURING THE INTERVENTION, AS NEW INSIGHTS ARE ACHIEVED	54
12	CHECKING AS WE GO HOW REALITY IS MATCHING DESIGN FOR LEARNING	55
13	PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION	56
14	RE-ENTRY – DEBRIEFING AND LEARNING TRANSFER STRATEGIES	56
15	MONITORING, REINFORCING AND EVALUATING AGAINST STEP 1	57
	CONCLUSIONS	59
3	Types of Management and Organisation Development Interventions	60
	INTRODUCTION	60
	DEVisING A SHARED LANGUAGE	61
	THE ‘MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT GRID’	62
	THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT GRID: BASIC PRINCIPLES	64
	THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT GRID: BASIC STRUCTURE	65
	THE MODEL EXPLORED: DRIVING FORCES	68
	TYPICAL KINDS OF PROGRAMME IN EACH SECTOR	70
	JUSTIFICATION AND EVALUATION	72
	BROAD STRATEGIES FOR MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES	74
	SPECIFYING AND PROVIDING ACTIVITIES	80
	A PORTFOLIO APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT	83
	GETTING PROGRAMMES CORRECTLY POSITIONED	88
	THE TECH-TEST PROGRAMME AND THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT GRID	90
	CONCLUSIONS	95
4	Key Components and Assumptions	96
	‘MUSIC’ IN MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT	97
	THE KEY ELEMENTS	98
	HOW THESE ELEMENTS MAP ONTO THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT GRID	100

SOME PRACTICAL LEARNING TRANSFER TECHNIQUES PLAY ‘MUSIC’ IN THE GRID	102
GENERIC PROGRAMMES	102
SPECIFIC CAPABILITIES PROGRAMMES	107
TRANSFORMATIONAL PROGRAMMES	114
EXPLORATORY PROGRAMMES	124
APPROACHES DO NOT ALWAYS TRANSLATE	130
‘MUSIC’ AND THE TECH-TEST PROGRAMME	131
SUMMARY	133
5 Starting from Where?	134
INTRODUCTION	134
CURRENT STATE IS NOT A TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS	135
CURRENT-STATE INVESTIGATION AS SOCIAL SCIENCE	144
COLLATING AND ‘ANALYSING’ THE DATA	161
REVIEW OF THE GAP BETWEEN DESIRED STATE AND CURRENT STATE	168
CONCLUSIONS	169
6 Aiming for Learning	171
INTRODUCTION	171
CURRENT-STATE ANALYSIS	171
7 The Myth of the ‘Empty Vessel’	177
INTRODUCTION	177
CONSCIOUSNESS AND LEARNING	188
EMOTIONS AND RATIONALITY	189
UNCONSCIOUS ‘TEMPLATES’ IN THE MIND	192
STOCKTAKE	196
UNDERSTANDING SOMETHING	197
THE RATIONAL MIND OF THE MANAGER	207
LEARNING WITH MORE THAN INTELLECT – PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS	215
8 Is Outdoor Development a ‘Clever Trick’?	228
INTRODUCTION – HOW DO YOU EVALUATE SUCH LEARNING?	228
RAISING THE STAKES – GENERATING STRESS	232
OUTDOOR DEVELOPMENT AS RITE OF PASSAGE	236
WHAT MIGHT WE BE ABLE TO LEARN FROM RITES OF PASSAGE?	241
MAKING SENSE – BUILDING LINKS	246
CONCLUSIONS – OUTDOOR DEVELOPMENT AS A VEHICLE FOR LEARNING	249

9	Personality Types	250
	INTRODUCTION	250
	THE FOUR FUNCTIONS WORKING TOGETHER	256
	'IDEALS' GET EMBEDDED IN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES	261
	APPLYING THE LEARNING TO MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS	266
10	Designing for learning	268
	INTRODUCTION	268
	WHERE DOES LEARNING TAKE PLACE?	269
	LEARNING DESIGN – SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES	283
	THE DESIGN DIAMOND – A MODEL FOR LEARNING	293
	DESIGNING IN LINEAR TIME	315
	DESIGN, LIKE LEARNING, IS A CONTINUING PROCESS	318
	CONCLUSIONS	318
11	Managers as People	320
	INTRODUCTION	320
	PERSONAL GROWTH – THE MANAGER AS DEVELOPING PERSON	322
	ORGANISATIONS AND THE PURSUIT OF INDIVIDUATION	328
	THE ORGANISATION AS OPPORTUNITY FOR PERSONAL GROWTH	334
	DEVELOPING PEOPLE WITHIN ORGANISATIONS	340
	CONCLUSIONS	349
	<i>Appendix: Tech-Test – A Case Study</i>	350
	<i>Bibliography</i>	376
	<i>Index</i>	385

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

1.1	Evaluation model: answers to organisational questions	17
1.2	Interaction of the elements	21
2.1	Levels of strategy	35
2.2	The 15 steps of a management and organisation development intervention	58
3.1	The basic management development grid	67
3.2	Key aims	68
3.3	Driving forces	69
3.4	Typical kinds of programme	71
3.5	Measures/evaluation bases	73
3.6	Broad strategies	79
3.7	Specifying the activities	82
3.8	Sources of supply	83
4.1	The 'extended' grid	101
4.2	Levels of challenge and support	115
4.3	Practical learning transfer techniques and the management development grid	128
5.1	Evaluation model: leadership skills	139
5.2	Questionnaires and the evaluation model	149
5.3	Research methods and the role of the manager	153
6.1	Defining programme aims from the desired state	171
6.2	Defining learning aims from the gap	174
6.3	Filling the vessel	176
7.1	Kolb's learning cycle	185
7.2	The Lancaster model of learning	186
10.1	The learning diamond	295
10.2	Different ways of thinking about a social problem	296
10.3	Key themes and approaches in management and organisation development	300
10.4	Key components of lasting learning	303
10.5	Successful tutor styles	315

Table

7.1	'Inner self' vs. 'social self'	217
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Acknowledgements

In the long history of my own personal learning and development I have gathered valuable insights from people too numerous to mention individually. However, in recent times, I have had special help in forming my ideas from one or two very close friends. I should like to thank these personal mentors for both their encouragement and ideas. Over many years my wife and children have put up with long periods of absence as I buried myself in the writing, and I thank them for their patience. Most recently, my enthusiasm and drive for understanding has been given new dimensions by my colleague at Cranfield, Robina Chatham, with whom I am working on several new initiatives. I should also like to thank other colleagues who have worked closely with me, especially Martin Clarke, Liz Bridge, Don Skilling, Pam McCarthy, Terry Lockhart, Andrew Kakabadse, Iris Sampson and Graham Abbey. Extra thanks go to Gerry Dehkes, now of Lucent Technologies who, as a client and friend continues to remind me why I am in this business.

However, the book is not a statement of the philosophy of Cranfield School of Management. It is a set of personal perceptions with which many of my colleagues would wish to differ. For that reason, any errors within it are mine alone.

KEITH PATCHING

Preface

One evening recently I was parking my car outside our new Management Development Centre at Cranfield. It was becoming dark outside. I could see through the windows of the lecture rooms three concurrent events taking place. In each case, a group of managers were seated in a U-shape, facing a screen. Beside each screen stood a lecturer, each an expert in his or her own area. On each screen was projected some words, which were too far away for me to read. But as well as the words, each screen showed a series of boxes and circles, connected by arrows. These are the arrows, boxes and circles of my title.

In earlier days I studied social anthropology; now I frequently attempt to refocus my eyes to recapture that naive wonderment with which ethnographers first confront a society or culture new to them. It was in this state of mind that I looked through those windows. The cultural icons were extraordinarily consistent. People sitting, listening and looking, all seated in the same shaped arena. The lecturer was standing, and the screen illuminated. But most fascinating to my ethnographic mind was the arcane symbolic significance of those arrows, boxes and circles.

I began to ask myself anthropologist's questions. Most of them touched upon the same issue: how has it come about that managers and organisations which seek to better themselves in some way accept that this ritual of gazing up at boxes and circles connected by arrows will achieve that improvement? Of the almost infinite number of ways in which we can help managers, surely, to the uninitiated, this kind of ritual is not what would first come to mind as part of an effective learning process for managers.

Clearly, among the portfolio of management and organisation development activities there exist many other ways of helping learning to happen. None of our programmes at Cranfield consist exclusively of this ritual involving arrows, boxes and circles. Many of them manage to be apparently highly effective and successful with hardly any arrows, boxes and circles in them at all. The point is not simply whether the arrows, boxes and circles quotient can be correlated with success; it is far more about the underlying assumptions upon which managerial learning has been founded over the years, and whether and to what extent those assumptions can be fully explained and validated.

Management and organisation development, like many practices, are not a static set of prescriptions. New ways of learning and new approaches to development keep us at Cranfield, and those elsewhere, constantly reviewing

what we do, and how and why we do it. Sometimes, this kind of review is relatively superficial, taking stock of what is currently being done, and ascertaining whether any 'tweaking' needs to be done. But sometimes we undertake a much deeper and more significant review, in which we attempt to take as little as possible for granted, and go right back (as far as this is humanly possible) to 'basics'.

This book records such a review. It reflects what my colleagues and I have been asking about management and organisation development. It relates some of our current answers and what we have done with those answers. Although it is a work of theory, seeking to understand the whys and the whats of management and organisation development, it is also a book of practice, recording through large numbers of case studies how the theories we have been exploring have been put into practice.

Because I work in an institution which earns its keep in the down-to-earth world of real organisations and management, this book reflects two quite distinct driving forces. On the one hand, there is the deep curiosity about what makes managerial learning effective, as illustrated in my story of the arrows, boxes and circles. On the other hand, there is the drive, during times of challenge and change, to maintain an excellence in managerial learning for which Cranfield School of Management has gained a (what I naturally believe to be a well-deserved) reputation.

This second driver provides us with the chance to work collaboratively with managers to achieve and maintain their own excellence, leading, in turn, to their success in their own business ventures. Our role in this partnership centres upon how management and organisation development can enhance their 'knowhow'.

'Knowhow' may soon become to be seen as the only sustainable source of competitive advantage. In other words, whereas products and processes are rapidly imitable, knowledge of how to do things better than the competition may be much harder to replicate. Organisations whose people know more, are smarter, can adapt more, and can learn faster and more effectively will be those who will stay ahead and remain in business.

However, not many managers are 'experts' in learning. Most have their anecdotes and preferences; and many learning activities are designed around such glimpses into what works and what is disliked about learning. These are analogous to organisations' approaches in former times to disciplines such as marketing, for example.

Years ago, people 'did' marketing largely on the basis of what 'stands to reason' in the minds of a few senior managers. The boss would suggest a product be made because he would buy one if he were a customer; or a sales strategy would be based upon some interest of the Sales Director. These days, of course, successful organisations 'do' marketing significantly more rigorously; most managers would accept that marketing is too important to be left

to ill-formed prejudice. Marketing has become almost a 'science' with a marketing planning toolkit of hundreds of techniques and methods. It is acknowledged as one of the most important aspects of many organisations' business.

But unlike management and organisation development, marketing does not directly deal with 'knowhow'. Ironically, management and organisation development is a poor relation to marketing, often delegated to a small band of 'trainers', who are, themselves, rarely lionised by the organisation's senior stars.

One possible reason for the success of marketing and the relatively lowly status of management and organisation development is that marketing appears to get results. Many management and organisation development activities, on the other hand, produce a few good intentions, a relatively smaller number of good ideas, and hardly any lasting impact. Consequently, some people doubt whether management and organisation development leads to 'knowhow'.

My colleagues and I are firmly convinced that management and organisation development does have the potential significantly to enhance an organisation's 'knowhow', and thereby to enable the development of sustainable competitive advantage. That it has not often done so in the past is due, I believe, largely to a deep and fundamental misunderstanding of the processes of managerial learning. Buried under the surface of a great deal of 'folk' theorising about what constitutes good management and organisation development are an interconnected series of outmoded and inappropriate models of organisations, of management and of how mature people learn. Innovations in management and organisation development often fail to make much of an impact upon this subterranean set of foundations simply because these innovations are themselves either built upon those same foundations, or because their potential efficacy cannot be reconciled with the 'folk' theories.

For managers seeking to develop strategies for management and organisation development – strategies to enhance organisational 'knowhow' – there are many books and models to turn to. But none, so far as I am aware, have been developed in the light of radical reappraisals of what other sciences have been telling us about organisations, about the mind, about the brain and learning, and about many other perspectives. Much of this research does not directly relate to management and organisation development; but much of it has implicitly posed some fundamental challenges to how we have traditionally gone about management and organisation development.

Which brings me back to the arrows, boxes and circles. I wanted to check out, among all the other key questions which formed the basis of our fundamental review, the robustness of these visual icons. Could these screen-projected images stand up to this interdisciplinary scrutiny? And if they were to do so, what would this tell us about effective managerial

learning? To answer such questions, we had to seek out some fundamental principles concerning managerial learning, and test them out in practice. This we have now done.

The principles help us answer some of the basic questions which many managers who need to understand how ‘knowhow’ can be acquired will need to be able to answer for themselves:

- ☐ Why do some apparently successful approaches to management and organisation development suddenly appear to fail?
- ☐ How should management and organisation development connect to an organisation’s strategy?
- ☐ How important is it that managers should want change to happen?
- ☐ What is ‘unlearning’, and what does it tell us about successful change and competitive advantage?
- ☐ Should ‘knowhow’ be gained on the job only, like apprenticeship?
- ☐ Is outdoors development a waste of time and resources?
- ☐ How do you make ‘learning’ stick?
- ☐ Is ‘lifelong learning’ just another consultants’ fad?
- ☐ Is learning about *knowledge*, about *understanding*, about *need* or about something else?
- ☐ Does everyone learn in the same way?
- ☐ How can organisations capitalise upon managerial learning as a source of sustainable competitive advantage?
- ☐ Will the arrows, boxes and circles remain a key part of managerial learning into the future? In fifty years time, will a similarly ethnographically minded person look through those windows and still see the same cultural icons, and the same learning rituals taking place?

None of these questions has an absolutely ‘right’ answer. But there are some clearly wrong answers. Our practical research is based upon collaborative work with thousands of managers worldwide. It enables us to get better answers to these questions than we had just five years ago. That is what this book is about.

The views expressed in the book are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of other members of Cranfield School of Management.

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