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Developing Capable Employees: The Work Activity Briefing

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Abstract

One of the more interesting features of modern human resource development and management is that despite all the evidence that supports 'person centred' approaches to these activities the most persistent model applied is based on control. One explanation for this is that the problem is not one of not knowing the theory or the facts since they are common knowledge, rather the problem is that of attitudes. This paper outlines this problem and describes an approach to workplace learning that has been used in the construction industry as an example of how to apply modern ideas of human resource development and management in a simple but very effective way. The outcomes being not only a much more effective workforce but also enlightened managers who make the paradigm shift when they experience the benefits.

Introduction

Organisations currently operate in what has been called a turbulent (Emery & Trist. 1965) or whitewater (Ford, 1995) environment which is characterised by rapid change. Thus, the need to be adaptive, innovative, proactive and creative has never been greater. A highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce that is able to learn quickly is critical for organisations wanting to compete in a global marketplace. Knowledge according to Peter Drucker (1993: 54) is:

> "the only meaningful resource today. The traditional factors of production – land, labour and capital – have not disappeared, but they have become secondary. They can be obtained and obtained easily, providing there is knowledge"

Similarly, Arie deGueus (1988) in what is a well worn idea that the ability to learn faster than competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage for an organisation.

The ability to learn is one component of what has been described as being capable (Hase, Malloch & Cairns, 1998; Stephenson, 1994). In addition to knowing how to learn, the capable person is able to use competencies in novel as well as familiar situations; is creative-able to 'think outside the box'; has justified confidence in self (self-efficacy); can take appropriate risks; and works well in teams. Thus capable people are more able to respond to the demands of a rapidly changing and ambiguous environment where there is a requirement to do more with less, turn a profit no matter what or be innovative.

This paper explores the notion that our current human resource management and development systems need to change dramatically in order to develop and encourage capability in organisations. Fundamentally, there needs to be a major shift in thinking

about how we conceptualise learning and management within organisations based on addressing traditional ideas about power and control. The Work Activity Briefing and Pre-Start Meeting have been innovative approaches to addressing this issue in an environment that has a long history of using high levels of control over work practices and strict hierarchical human resource management techniques. These two innovations are described as examples of how capability can be developed in the workplace and as a challenge to traditional management methods.

From Competence to Capability

Application of the capability concept has largely involved the creation of innovative learning experiences that help develop the elements of capability in individuals (Graves, 1993; Stephenson, 1994; and Stephenson & Weil, 1992) in both education settings and in the workplace. More recently, in Australia, we have been interested in not only how work based learning can develop capable people but also how human resource management and development systems may also be designed to enable capability in everyday work (Cairns & Hase, 1996; Hase, 1998).

In a study of a number of different Australian organisations Hase, Cairns & Malloch (1998) concluded that to develop capable people and capable organisations, "requires major paradigm shifts in the way in which management, education / training and workplace are conceptualised". In particular they argue that the capacity to learn is highly significant and along with Fiske and Taylor (1991), Fosnot (1996) and Hewitt (1997) believe that "people and organisations need to learn, to construct meaning from identifying and solving problems they face".

Competence is an essential ingredient of being capable. However, capable people and organisations are those that can operate effectively in unknown contexts and with new problems. The clear implication is that learning must occur. A key plank of the Capability concept is that "becoming capable requires different learning experiences from learning competencies. Learning how to learn, values and self confidence, for example cannot be achieved using simplistic behavioural approaches" (Hase, Cairns & Malloch, 1998). Competencies reflect skills and knowledge and have suited the need for a multiskilled workforce in a climate of doing more with less, downsizing, economic rationalism, turning a profit and reducing costs. Like the latter, they can be measured. While competencies are the basis for capability they are insufficient for optimum human resource management and are part of the old pedagogical paradigm that fails to empower people to be learners and demonstrate capability elements.

The idea that given the right environment people can learn and be self-directed in the way learning is applied is not new and has been an important humanistic theme that can be followed through the philosopher Heider (Emery, 1974), phenomenology (Rogers, 1951), systems thinking (Emery & Trist, 1965), double - loop and organisational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996), andragogy (Knowles, 1970), learner managed learning (Graves, 1993; Long, 1990), action learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), capability (Stephenson, 1994), work-based learning (Hase, 1998) and heutagogy (Hase, 1999).

The major implication of this theme for educational and management systems is that people need to be empowered and given the right environment to attain their fullest potential. Unfortunately current education and training, and human resource management and development systems are based on an alternative paradigm that emphasises control and power rather than enabling and developing a level of capability which would have significant benefits for organisations in the current environment in which they find themselves.

Management and Organisational Structures and Systems

Limerick and Cunnington (1993) have provided a useful overview of the predominant management and organisational systems and an explanation of organisational and managerial changes, post industrial revolution to the present, through what they call blueprints.

The first blue print describes the issues of technology and class structures of the post industrial revolution organisations in all of the industrialised countries. Autocratic management styles were predominant ruling over uneducated disenfranchised employees with specialised jobs.

The second blueprint depicts the issues of the period roughly following World War I. Key issues were, the emergence of 'social man' doctrine and the findings of the Hawthorne studies in which Mayo (1933) discovered that the group play a significant role in determining the attitude of workers – more so than management. The concepts of the 'collective nature' of humans (Barnard, 1948) the 'upward flow of authority' and the shift from human relations to human resources (Wren, 1972) are also of this period. Managers of the day were taught about the 'needs' of the individual found in the works of Maslow, McGregor and Argyris, for example Democratic leaders facilitating and leading effective groups skilled in the arts of objective setting, interpersonal communications and team development are hallmarks of this period.

The third blueprint was a significant paradigm shift from blueprints one and two. Limerick and Cunnington asserted that previously organisations were focused inwardly. With global market changes they were now forced to accept a highly turbulent operating environment. The significant shifts in thinking and organisational change associated with a more outward looking organisations were systems theory and mechanistic and organic systems (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Field and Ford (1995: 82), in commenting about open systems thinking said: "in an open system there is a continual change (in the case of an enterprise, of energy materials and people) with the environment." This period is associated with continuous improvements – the concept of change as a regular

occurrence; benchmarking – the comparing one organisation against another, usually strategic or operating process (Stace & Dunphy 1994); and environmental turbulence – the concept developed by Emery and Trist (1978) where they suggest that the ground is in motion.

In the fourth blueprint Limerick and Cunnington (1993: 48) suggest that another paradigm shift has occurred which is characterised by:

> " discontinuity – high levels of social, economic and technological discontinuity; loosely coupled organisations – smaller loosely coupled units; synergies and alliances – networks, strategic alliances that add value to one another or create high levels of synergy; collaborative individualism – organisation is characterised by a culture that places high value on autonomous, proactive, empowered, collaborative individuals; management of meaning, mission and vision – shared values, goals and beliefs represented in a common vision and mission; and transformational leadership".

Field and Ford (1995: 84) suggest that "many organisations face turbulent environments. For some discontinuous change is the norm. With the growing importance of networking, the distinction between inside and out, becomes blurred".

It is our contention that despite all the evidence that in order to cope with the current environment we should be at blueprint four, many organisations and management have yet to go beyond blueprint one. Even getting to blueprint 2 requires a major paradigm shift that many cannot deal with despite having been confronted many years ago by Maslow, Theory Y, Emery and Trist, and Drucker as pioneers in the idea of the importance of socio-technical systems. Argyris and Schon (1974) have argued that while people espouse a model similar to blueprint 2 their theory in action is in fact most like blueprint 4.

Our vocational education and training systems, and our management systems are based on the need to control rather than empower. They fail to stimulate creativity or flexibility. We are happy to promote competence but how does one deal with a really capable person in an autocratic environment? Lets not confuse autocracy with autocratic systems. It is quite possible to have team based approaches to work but in an autocratic environment.

Challenging the Paradigm: Work Activity and Pre-start meetings

It is a well known psychological phenomenom that is very difficult to change attitudes. Thus, shifting people from a tradition of developing and managing people by control to one of trust and empowerment will be a huge task. The quickest way to change attitudes is in fact through changes in behaviour. The work activity and pre-start meetings described below were a successful approach to this dilemma and are exemplars of shifting organisations to the recognition of the value of people.

Hase, Cairns and Malloch (1998) suggest that various forms or models of inclusive learning practices are developing in the workplace. These models by there inclusive nature have different knowledge – power dynamics that harness the knowledge of the group our team and at the same time focus on the development of new solutions to new problems. This problem based or learner centered leaning has also been applied in the form of 'self managing teams'. One such model of a self - managing team worth examining is the Work Activity Briefing currently employed by Thiess Contractors Pty Limited. The Work Activity Briefing is a form of self-managing work team. It involves bringing together all participants who are undertaking a work activity to think about the issues, problems, dangers, conduct and best way of proceeding. The briefing includes engineers, supervisors, specialist support personnel, workers, and in some cases suppliers and subcontractors and they are brought together at various stages of a project and on an 'as need basis'.

Such teams have become popular, because they offer a range of advantages such as synergy based on the ability to access a pool of experience and knowledge resident within the team. Also an ability to rapidly inform and develop knowledge within the group; and an increased level of involvement / commitment on the part of the group members.

The aim of the activity is to identify and apply the best solution to a problem or opportunity within the project context. In describing the characteristics of this group it is helpful to draw on the description of a self-managing team used by Cohen and Ledford (1994: 13 –14):

> "Groups of independent individuals that can self-regulate their behaviour on relatively whole tasks. The key characteristics are: 1) face to face interaction; 2) employees with interrelated tasks who are responsible for making a product or providing and service; 3) employee discretion over decisions such as task assignments, methods for carrying out the work and scheduling activities".

In socio-technical systems parlance self-managing teams provide a mechanism by which the technical needs of work and the social needs of the individual and group are able to be drawn together, an improvement in the quality of working life. The Work Activity Briefing process employed with this organisation brings together all parties involved in the activity. With the use of a pro-forma document the essential pieces of information relating the activity including the technical information, the risks, the safety considerations, previous experience that has application and the skills that exist/ missing are included in the spaces provided. Having attached all the relevant information a discussion or series of discussions together with any developmental work are completed. The result is a plan for the achievement that represents the best option possible, within the project context. This document is then signed by all participants who use it as the 'blueprint' for the activity. Further briefings enable refinement and additional issues to be addressed as they occur.

The power relationship changes for the project manager and the engineers. As all workers are able to provide new knowledge, based on their experience, which is outside the knowledge of

the engineers the power relationship change for them. The shifts in how the workers are now 'seen' suggest a level of equality and acceptance. A change in the normal 'truth' applied by management towards labour is changed and thereby the manager or engineer is changed.

Another aspect of the Work Activity Briefing worthy of analysis is that the document produced as part of the dialogue between the active parties. The document becomes a plan and identifies the activities, the parties involved, the actions required by them and the roles and responsibilities of the parties. It might also list the resources together with timings and coordinating data. The document in essence will 'govern' the activity.

Using this description we can see that the requirements and specifications of the plan will govern the parties in the activity and, therefore, their actions. The managers and supervisors will exercise power in coordinating the arrival of materials, the workers will exercise power through the application of their skills to the tasks without having to wait for instructions and directions. Indeed the parties will in fact regulate themselves with the terms of the plan and the project context.

With the application of the signature of each of the Work Activity Briefing participants identifies them as being a party to the knowledge and power that can be exercised to achieve the desired outcome.

Another aspect of the Work Activity Briefing worthy of discussion is the taken-for-granted assumptions that also govern the bodies involved in the activity. For example those who were part of the dialogue and certainly those who signed the document take for granted that each participant will do their individual best to achieve the desired outcome. That they will exhibit a level of professionalism and skill that will deliver the quality specified. And that they will demonstrate a level of commitment that will ensure that obstacles that might have proven a limiting factor under ordinary circumstances will not prevent the parties from achieving the deadlines.

An extension of the Work Activity Briefing has been the establishment of Pre-start Briefings in which work teams meet at the start of the shift and discuss issues, problems, the day's activities, the best way to approach what needs to be done. Every member of the team is involved. Initially the primary aim of Pre-start Briefings was work safety but soon they included discussing the days activities and what could be learned from the previous day. Our interviews with participants (Hase, Cairns and Malloch, 1998) revealed a high level of empowerment, involvement and sense of commitment to the work team. It was clear that learning was taking place even though it was not credentialled and that the learning was an inherent part of what they did rather than an add-on.

What we see happening with Work Activity and with Pre-start Briefings is the development of the elements of capability such as: learning to learn; higher self-efficacy; using competency in novel situations; creativity; and working in teams. The learning and management are planned but the processes are person centred.

In Summary

Work Activity and Pre-start Briefings are examples of applying an emerging learning and management paradigm that emphasises developing and enabling individual and organisational capability. Not only do we see changes in the teams and the relationship between professional groups, the attitudes of the managers and supervisors also changed by being involved in an activity that brought them face-to-face with a letting go of autocratic behaviour. There appears to be considerable opportunity for learning to take place as a natural consequence of opening channels of communication and enabling involvement in decision making. Tacit knowledge becomes more explicit and is shared among those who most need to know. The effectiveness of this approach, however, needs further evaluation despite the apparent advantages. Preliminary data collected on three sites using breifings suggests that there is a decrease in injury and sick leave, higher levels of satisfaction and increased productivity all of which combine to reduce the cost of a project.

A more systematic extension of the Work Activity Briefing that enhances the learning aspect is that of Word Based Learning in which human resource management and development systems are closely integrated (Hase, 1998). We suggest that the recent interest in work based learning in the vocational education sector has been the result of a recognition of the need to address the problems with human resource management and development discussed here. However, there is much greater commitment needed by an organisation to fully develop a Work Based Learning model and it is early days yet in the evaluation of the concept's usefulness (Hase, 1998).

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