1999

Capability and vocational education and training

Stewart Hase
*Southern Cross University*

Leonard Cairns

Margaret Malloch

Publication details

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.
Capability and Vocational Education and Training


Introduction

Australian public and private sector organisations are increasingly aware of the need to continually adapt in order to cope successfully with the rapidly changing and highly competitive environment that characterises the global economy. Hence there is a strong interest in what can be done to make organisations more flexible and responsive so that they can compete both nationally and internationally.

One element of individual and organisational adaptability is Capability. This can be described as: the confident and mindful application of both current and potential ability (competence and capacity), and values within varied and changing situations to formulate problems and actively work towards solutions as a self-managed learning process.

Most developmental work around the application of this concept has been undertaken in the past eight years in the United Kingdom. by the Higher Education for Capability group led by John Stephenson. In Australia, the Australian Capability Network (ACN) was formed in 1993, and has since run four national conferences and a number of workshops: the latter have focussed on how the idea of Capability can be applied in Australian workplaces. As a result of these forums it was decided to formally investigate the application of organisational Capability in the Australian context.

This research project was designed to examine the question:

What is existing best practice in the development of Capability in Australian organisations?

In particular, there was a need to:

- Further develop the concepts of organisational and individual capability in the context of adaptation and growth within organisations.
- Document examples of how organisational and individual capability is currently being developed in Australian organisations.
- Further understand how to increase workplace capability.
- Identify the implications of Capability for vocational education and training.

Methodology

A Reference Group consisting of representatives from interested organisations was
established to provide advice to the conduct of the study. The members of this group are listed in Appendix 1.

A two stage approach was used to achieve our objectives. The first stage involved interviewing staff in 10 different organisations. These organisations were selected using criteria for assessing Capability established at ACN conferences, and also with assistance from the reference group.

The ten organisations were:

A An international engineering consulting company  
B A cement manufacturer  
C A large construction and mining company  
D A special Aboriginal school  
E A large city council  
F A cable manufacturing company  
G A section of a large public sector organisation  
H An education and training provider  
I A large chemical manufacturing company  
J A state road authority

A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 2) was used to conduct 79 face to face interviews; these were recorded on tape (and transcribed) or in writing.

The second stage involved an extensive search conference which determined the implications of the various findings from the case studies. A search conference is a large group strategic planning process that is used to harness the opinions and ideas of people from diverse backgrounds.

Findings

The case studies identified a number of factors that are essential in achieving organisational Capability and the development of Capable people. In Capable organisations there needs to be:

- Recognition by all levels of staff of the enormous complexity and ongoing nature of organisational change and development that affects all levels of the organisation. This recognition involves an appropriate commitment of time, energy and resources.

- A CEO who unambiguously supports a vision of the future consistent with many of the elements of Capability. This support meant that resistance can be overcome and that innovators and ‘champions for change’ could thrive.

- Skilled leaders (rather than ‘managers’) who have an excellent grasp of the ‘soft’ or people-oriented skills associated with leadership. This finding is consistent with other literature including the Karpin Report that suggests Australia needs to improve
leadership/management training. Leaders also have the capacity to manage the complexity of change and its effects on people.

Team based structures that enable people to be involved in decision making, have access to knowledge and information, and have responsibility for their own work.

Adequate reward systems that provide for the intrinsic and extrinsic needs of people. Intrinsic rewards are seen as being actively involved in decisions about work, having access to the right information, and training opportunities: these issues largely centre on feelings of empowerment. Extrinsic rewards, such as financial and other benefits are often articulated in an enterprise bargaining agreement.

Members of the organisation feel that individual elements (such as being valued and encouraging self-esteem) are embedded in the organisation's operations with a resultant perception of real empowerment (particularly in relation to learning control) being evident to all. People want to feel that their abilities are recognised and used.

Opportunities for multi-skilling provided by a commitment to the development of competencies.

A clear focus and commitment to learning.

Performance evaluation which is perceived by staff to be carried out clearly and equitably.

The provision of time and resources for staff learning and development.

**Implications**

A number of implications were derived from the findings.

Vocational education and training needs to focus on developing people for the modern workplace which is demanding more holistic attributes that go beyond competence. In doing so there needs to be a recognition that the recipients of this education and training must include people already in the workforce and the unemployed, as well as school leavers, given the current needs of organisations and society.

There is a need to change our understanding of what constitutes good management skills especially in a rapidly changing environment.

Seamless post-compulsory education is an important priority that will assist organisations to develop their people and their capability as simply as possible.
There is a need for management training which emphasises leadership rather than technical skills.

While competencies are useful in developing a multi-skilled workforce, there is a need to go further by developing capable people who can cope with the constantly changing needs of the modern workplace.

Working in teams is a commonly applied concept in organisations and people could benefit from special training in how to function effectively in a workplace in team based structures.

Developing some of the qualitative aspects of human behaviour will require new and innovative ways of learning rather than the current training approaches.

Education providers should consider the provision of innovative learning processes consistent with the notion of developing Capable people. There are a number of current models for developing learning cultures that could be further investigated in terms of vocational education and training. Three of these are: Work Based Learning (Hase, 1998); Ford’s (1995) Integration of People, Process and Place; and Learner Managed Learning (Graves, 1993).

Integration of learning with other human resource management systems will facilitate a culture of learning.

The role of the trainer needs to change dramatically through the acquisition of new skills to develop people who can learn and thereby assist in the creation of learning organisations. The new role will be more akin to that of a learning facilitator and mentor rather than that of a trainer.

Partnership arrangements between education providers and workplaces may assist in the development of Capable people by utilising the unique skills of the partners. Education and training must be driven by the needs of the learner and the workplace rather than by the provider.

**Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Vocational Education and Training sector:

Examine ways in which people can be assisted to 'learn how to learn' since this is the point of focus in ideas such as the learning organisation, work-based learning, flexible learning and independent learning.

Modify the role of the trainer and existing train the trainer programs to include mentoring and learning facilitative skills consistent with flexible learning methods, flexible curricula, learner managed learning, Capability and learning organisations.
Further investigate the transition from competency to Capability and the changing learning processes as the person progresses from one to the other.

Investigate how workplace learning and learner managed learning models might be used by VET providers to assist organisational and individual learning needs to be met.

Examine how flexible curricula can be developed to accommodate work-based learning models.

Consider how leadership, as well as the technical skills of management, can be learnt.

Examine how team building and teamwork can be better learnt given that current techniques, particularly the use of experiential exercise, are limited in their success and direct application to the work environment.

Investigate the possibilities of partnering/partnerships with local companies/organisations in order to further develop our understanding of how to create learning and Capable organisations.

Consider how learning in human resource management can include some of the broader aspects of human growth and adaptation.

Further develop collaborative arrangements between TAFE, universities and private providers that enable a smooth transition through the Australian Qualifications Framework.

References

