



Paul Simpson, Consultant

Through my career I've been in many organisations as an HR and OD Practitioner, particularly in the dairy industry, chemicals industry and also in similar retail. But I'm presently working in the metals business, a small organisation in Rotherham, where we're trying to achieve a fairly major shift in organisational culture. The business itself is fairly profitable, produces various different types of metals, around 250 people. But I think it's fair to say that the organisation's culture has been very traditional, very much a directive leadership style, very much a kind of typical south Yorkshire environment and I think as part of the organisation growth plan, it was important that we tried to create a new management culture, which engaged people, got everybody's brains in the game as it were, so that we could grow the organisation from where we were at the moment, through to being more modern and forward-looking and hopefully greater profitability in terms of its performance coming forward. So it's important that we shifted the organisational culture to in a sense help to embrace and engage everybody in the organisation, in the performance of the business. So to do that, we basically implemented a five modular programme of training and development for managers and directors across the business. Now that involved around 50 people actually, so we had a good critical mass of people involved in that particular programme. It was over five modules, delivered by an external organisation, over about an 18 month period and my role was very much to support the people on the programme with coaching, one to one support, group facilitation, helping to embed what they'd learned between the modules and help them to apply some of the skills, some of the concepts and the thinking, to achieving their every day jobs really, so that it became a new way of working on a fairly natural basis, rather than something that just stayed on the training programme itself.

Now it's been interesting over the last sort of 18 months to be part of that programme and see the impact that the training's had. I think the first thing we've learnt is very much the importance of my role actually, because I think without somebody on the inside, helping people to assimilate the information, apply it to their everyday lives, I think a lot of the training would have been wasted. I think typically people tend to retain 10 or 20% of what they learn on a training course, but I found that certainly with the work I was doing on a one-to-one and on a group basis, retention and certainly awareness of the key concepts on the programme, in my estimation was getting up to 80 or 90% across the general population that had been through the programme. So the first thing we learned was that just to train in a classroom without extra support internally is a waste of investment to a certain extent and therefore investing in somebody on the inside who could help these people assimilate the information, is a really positive move for the organisation.

The other thing we found was that we did identify quite a bit of resistance from a number of people, to some of the concepts and ideas that were being trained on the programme. The programme was asking people to move away from traditional task management, towards a more facilitative coaching style of management, which engaged the people in the business and whilst everybody seemed to identify that as a good thing to do, the theory was sound but the actual practice was difficult for people to actually implement. As always in change there are a

number of people who immediately went back and tried their best to embrace some of the concepts and techniques. Others found it more difficult and certainly in the heat of the battle we're much more happy to revert to type sometimes and for some people in particular, they never really took on board some of the concepts and actually you know were very resistant really to some of the major messages and concepts and techniques.

That said, I think it's fair to say again, because of the support we gave the organisation on the inside and the repetition of some of the material that we used throughout the programme, we did achieve quite a significant benefit through the sharing of stories and that's the second thing that we learnt, which was to just train in itself is not enough, to train and support may not be enough, but it's really important that an organisation starts to collect stories of some of the successes that have happened by individuals in applying some of the learnt techniques and these stories in themselves can therefore you know kind of influence and really create a positive momentum for the organisation, as other people take on what they see as positive role modelling of some of the ideas that were presented in the programme.

The other piece that was probably unexpected was that particularly towards the end of the programme we sensed in some participants a growing dissatisfaction with higher management. As people started to understand the kind of management that they should be experiencing themselves, they themselves started to actually become very intolerant of poor behaviour as they saw it, above them and in some cases, certainly in ... I can think of six cases now, people have actually left the organisation as a consequence of them not receiving what they felt were the proper type of management style that they'd been learning about on the programme and because of that I think now the Chief Executive of the organisation is becoming increasingly under pressure to start to remove some of the blockages that are perceived to still be there in some of the senior management behaviour, which may in fact mean that the organisation to get true benefit may have to actually start to remove some of the key people at the top if they don't continue to support the programme and actually start to meet the expectations of the people below. So you get this kind of upward pressure from people in the organisation as they seek to you know in a sense initiate some of the things that they've learnt on the programme and it's also the pressure that they put on their own management to start to behave in a particular way.

I think my overall reflection on the programme is that training of itself is a good thing, training with support is better, training and the preponderance of stories does make a difference and in fact we have seen some significant benefits now, both at individual level and at group level, from the training that we've invested in. But my main learning is that as with all these kind of change initiatives, we need to take a systemic approach to considering how best to get the ultimate return on investment and by that I mean training of itself is an intervention, a major one in an organisation and I think we now need to think about our reward strategy, our resourcing strategy, our consequence management strategy really, to make sure that the changes that we're looking for in the culture really you know are achieved, not just from this training programme, but from a more holistic approach to the challenge of change in the organisation's performance.