

The Brief. . .

Hackney had decided to take a more proactive and systemic approach to developing their leadership capacity. Historically in the local government sector, people are promoted, and then a scramble ensues to bring their skills up to par, or worse still, it's necessary to look outside the organisation to find the required skills. By focussing development proactively on those identified as high potential leaders of the future, Hackney hoped to grow their skills ahead of the need, building capacity within the organisation, and preparing these high potential people for future roles.

What we did. . .

Real, honest and educated feedback is a rare commodity in British management. Talking to people about where they could improve is culturally uncomfortable, and when it's done at all, it's all too often confrontational, condemnatory, and ill-planned. Good quality feedback to leaders on what they do well, and what impedes their effectiveness, however, can provide one of the biggest opportunities to learn and grow.

The Hackney Development Centre throws leaders of all levels, from frontline to the most senior, together in teams to work on a project simulation exercise. Participants are split into 4 teams, who are asked to co-operate on the design of a Community Recreation and Activity Park. Each team has responsibility for a different aspect of the park, but these overlap in many areas, and since the group has shared responsibility for the delivery of the overall project, they must work together if they are to achieve a good result. They are set very tight timescales, asked to manage within a budget, and required both to work together on a model, and in the individual teams on a presentation concerning their part of the project.

Throughout all of this, an experienced observer stays with each group, making notes on the interactions, leadership behaviour they observe, and the particular aspects of each person's style which work for them, or reduce their effectiveness. As the day wears on, competing priorities are introduced, goalposts are moved; in fact real business conditions are replicated, placing considerable stress and time limitation on the participants, ensuring they work hard right up to the deadline and presentations. Amongst the methods used to change timelines are team exercises designed to encourage the teams to think about how effectively they are working together, and to give one another feedback.

On the second day, each individual has a feedback session with their group's observer. This includes the feeding back of a psychometric tool completed before the Development Centre began, but more importantly, of the observations recorded during the first day. The observer coaches the participant in thinking through the way their personality drives these behaviours, what the implications and consequences, both positive and negative are, and how these situations are replicated in the workplace. This session ends with the creation of an action plan for changing the behaviours which are least effective, and reinforcing and building on those which are most effective.

Whilst the feedbacks sessions are underway, the three members of each team who are not having feedback attend workshops on Building Relationships of Trust and Personal Resilience.

The Results. . .

Whilst the relative newness of the programme, coupled with it's intended long term impact makes measurement of the overall objectives difficult at this stage. Results for the individual managers, however, have been impressive. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the managers are not only showing specific improvements in some of their most challenging areas, but that their self awareness and emotional intelligence has increased considerably. The programme gives participants new tools for dealing with work relationships, as well as a new perspective on what constitutes effective behaviour. It is anticipated that in the longer term, the Development Centre will significantly increase the quality of internal applicants for more senior positions, and that these candidates, when successful, will be able to reach full effectiveness more quickly.

“The professional banana skins you laid before us, and we tripped up on, were so sophisticated – and just like work. This has been so special for the people participating . . . real value.”

Hackney Development Centre Participant