

## Leadership in Context

Jane has just returned from an offsite leadership programme. It was better than anything she had done before. Thought provoking and well run, it took her out of her comfort zone. She met an interesting cross-section of managers from other businesses and made some great contacts. Reflecting on the course at the weekend she felt quite inspired and committed to personal change.

After three days... reality set in. Jane was informed that her corporate transformation project needed a fundamental change in direction. She cancelled the morning's appointments to discuss the project with her boss. By Tuesday there were over 300 emails in her inbox. Coincidentally, the new PA she recruited decided not to join and one of her team members had gone sick with stress.

After three weeks ... Jane had things on an even keel. Although her team had the project's new direction under control, they were not coping well with the pressure of change. Jane's boss was delighted with her action focused and 'hands-on' approach she had adopted and her team was making a positive influence on stakeholders. Jane felt pleased, but tired. Her leadership development is already a distant memory.

After three months ... Jane was applying less than 20% of the learning from the course. Jane's bosses, peers and team members have probably seen no tangible change as she has not had adequate time and support to reflect on the learning she had gained and apply it in the context of her job. The business may not be getting adequate value from the training investment it has made.

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Mark Bouch, a Partner at Sykes Fairbairn, the strategy execution and business performance consultancy, says that leaders at all levels need different tools to cope with dynamic and fast-changing environments: *"Our view is that leadership development needs to take place 'in context' to help managers to cope with the pressure of change. It needs to be made more 'sticky' and enduring if clients are to experience sustainable results and better return on investments made in leadership development."*

Graham Smith, a Sykes Fairbairn Partner and RFU youth rugby coach, adds: *"I like the analogy of playing a game of rugby under pressure; players would be under-prepared for the rigors of a real game if the basic skills they learned on the training ground could not be performed under pressure in a match. How many leadership programmes could honestly claim that they do the same?"*

Rugby coaching today has responded to this challenge, but one view is that much of the leadership development on the market has not. Effective leaders need to be equipped to deal with personal accountability, lead critical 'plays' and align teams when under pressure in much the same way as rugby players need to 'read the game', make decisions and carry out important actions, like passing the ball and running into space, reliably under pressure.

Big budget change programmes in major global programmes can be configured to integrate team and leadership coaching, but this approach is not readily available in

the open programme market. The principle behind Leadership in Context is that the development programme must take place 'in the context of the challenges facing the leader'. Liggy Webb, executive editor of Training Pages agrees: *"It is inadequate to send leaders and managers away on developmental training without linking development and follow-up to the specific challenges facing the individual in their business."*

Larger companies tend to sponsor bespoke in-house leadership programmes developed either internally or externally to meet their specific needs. Sykes Fairbairn runs programmes of this type in a number of their consulting clients but realised that a bespoke programme was less attractive to clients who preferred to source their leadership development in the open programme market.

Using their business consultancy and coaching skills, Sykes Fairbairn looked at an alternative option to realise sustainable performance improvement. Graham Smith put it this way: *"Sykes Fairbairn has a great record of delivering results under pressure through business performance consultancy, but we needed to find a way to bring our expertise in leadership performance development to an open programme format"*

Leadership in Context was the result. The programme is founded on clear principles and a pragmatic understanding of the real challenges facing managers, rather than theoretical models of leadership. It is a coaching based approach delivered by business consultants, all themselves experienced operators, and the programme has rigid connectivity with the business.

The objectives of the Leadership in Context programme are:

- To acquire and practice new leadership skills
- To help leaders to deliver consistent results under pressure.
- To translate leadership development learning back into the business
- To understand the causes of 'performance interference' and the leaders role in overcoming them
- To provide a secure, confidential environment in which key players can learn and develop new leadership skills

Prior to the programme attendees are invited to reflect on the challenges they face in order to develop learning objectives and better understand the context for their leadership.

The first element of the programme helps people to understand the type of leader they are and the sort of climate that they create around them. Armed with 'self-knowledge' attendees then undertake a series of experiential activities and structured group discussions designed to help them increase personal and team effectiveness under pressure. As part of the programme attendees will be coached to use practical tools and techniques that will help them to deliver a work-based project assignment with their team. At the end of the initial workshop attendees produce a personal development agenda that establishes priorities and the means of measuring personal progress.

During the first 6 weeks back in work, attendees are supported by regular coaching discussions and a face to face coaching meeting to review progress and plan next steps. After a further 4 weeks we run a second workshop which brings attendees back together to review performance and help them to sustain performance improvement. Each attendee will receive individual 1:1 feedback from a performance coach. We are also considering offering some 'electives' in the programme on topics like managing performance, effective meetings and communication skills.

Let's look at a better outcome for Jane and her employer:

The residential programme was stimulating and involved working on issues directly related to the challenges she faced managing her direct reports and her 'virtual' project team. Jane's development agenda provided a useful road-map that would help her over the coming weeks.

After three days... reality set in. Jane's first few days back in the office were challenging as she had to adjust to fundamental changes in the corporate transformation project. What helped was that she had used the project as her work-based project on the leadership programme and was better able to cope with the pressure of change, align people to a new set of outcomes and deal with the causes of 'performance interference'.

After three weeks ... Jane had distributed leadership to members of her team who were aligned with the project's new direction. Jane had an initial discussion with her boss and her coach to discuss her learning and how she was planning to apply it in practice. Her personal development agenda helped her to keep the leadership development programme 'on the radar screen' during a challenging period.

After three months ... with some coaching support Jane successfully used her transformation project as a vehicle for her development. Inevitably Jane had to re-prioritise some of her development needs, but was actively using over 75% of her learning on her day-job. With coaching support Jane was able to translate her leadership development back into the business, and the business was seeing results through the success of the transformation project. Jane had established a powerful network with high quality colleagues she had met on the programme, who she was able to use to review her progress and plan next steps.

Sykes Fairbairn's Leadership in Context programme builds on the premise that pressure and performance are inseparable; achieving high performance implies dealing with high levels of demand and delivering performance in the face of all the obstacles, setbacks and hurdles that besiege business today. In today's business world leadership development must, therefore, take place in context of the pressure of work if it is to deliver increased performance.

A final word from Mark Bouch: *"We designed this programme to attract some high quality people and to help them deliver consistent results at work and under pressure. By applying our consulting approach to programme delivery we are better able to help people deliver performance leadership and a 'bottom line' result back at work."*

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