

Welcome to the latest edition of the microskills™ network for participants of microskills™ training around the world and a Happy New Year!

This edition includes:

- Learning to learn
- Groups and teams
- Question on the applications of microskills™
- microskills™ in schools
- An inspiring book
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Learning to learn

A combination of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences and an associated learning styles inventory is having a marked impact at the training college of one of our client organisations.

Previously, new recruits would have joined the college and undertaken the standard curriculum and teaching methods that had stood in good stead for many years. Incrementally, however, the success was waning as changes in how students think and learn were not being considered.

After detailed research, observations and interviews with staff and students, it was decided to move the teaching staff from being formal instructors to becoming more facilitators of learning.

It is now being considered whether all new entrants to the college, at the time of selection, should be given a learning styles inventory to complete and to discuss with their facilitators. As a partnership, they will then work out the best ways for each student to learn and will select from a menu of alternative learning methods.

The overall aims are to speed up the learning and make it more

effective and efficient whilst, at the same time, making it clear that each student is in charge of their own learning.

This will go on to help the new recruits to take on more responsibility for their own learning in future.

The particular learning styles inventory which impressed us is distributed by Memletics and can be accessed at www.learning-styles-online.com or at www.memletics.com.

Such an approach has obvious possibilities for new recruits joining any organisation in any role and working with company coaches and mentors.

Groups and teams

We were recently asked to review a draft copy of a new book which considers the difference between 'groups' and 'teams' and suggests we often use the wrong approach in managing them.

Essentially the writer describes a 'group' as when managers have several staff reporting directly to them and group members do not need to have in depth involvement in each other's work. If there is one

manager and five staff reporting, the number of meaningful interactions is five – the manager with each staff member.

In a 'team', everyone needs to be heavily involved with everyone else. The manager is now in the middle of a spider's web and each member needs to communicate with every other member. The number of meaningful interactions now explodes to fifteen.

The book proposes that we use teams only when it is essential to do so. Otherwise we should use groups and dramatically save time and frustration that team meetings and activities can sometimes bring.

Questions on the applications of microskills™

Many thanks for the following question from a reader. Please keep them coming.

"How should I deal with a member of the public who tries to hijack a public meeting I am chairing?"

Public meetings are some of the hardest to manage. Lots of people want their say, some are not too good at expressing themselves and some want the attention of the audience.

The first stage is to make it very clear to everyone present what the purpose of the meeting is and to have a published, written agenda detailing the objective of each agenda item.

There are usually three possible reasons for a public meeting:

1. to announce and explain a decision that has already been made

2. to gather information and views before making a later decision
3. to actually make a decision

The third reason is extremely risky as those present may not have a mandate to decide, they may not be representative of the whole population affected and they may be influenced more by group pressure than by logic.

The problem with some public meetings is that the attenders often assume reason 3, when the real reason is either 1 or 2.

Having explained the purpose of the meeting and drawing people's attention to the written agenda, the chairperson should handle difficult participants by using the *EAR* to allow the individual to speak and then, as soon as the contribution has been understood, using the *Summarising* microskill™.

Because some people's emotions might be high when they speak, through passion or through nerves, their logic may not be too good, so they may not be expressing themselves as cogently as they would want. The chairperson will need to be understanding.

If the speaker continues to hold the floor once their contribution has been accurately summarised, the chairperson should be seen to be writing down the summary so that the speaker recognises that it has been noted. They should then use *Giving Information* to confirm that the point has been recorded and to reiterate the purpose of the meeting.

Most people will have sat down by this time. If they still persist, the chairperson should ask them to take their seat. In normal circumstances, if the speaker feels that their esteem has been lowered, they will go to the group, the rest of the audience. If, however, it is clear to everyone else that the speaker has been handled respectfully, the audience will not want to support a person who they feel is being awkward.

microskills™ in schools

Pilot studies in the use of microskills™ have now been conducted in both Australia and the UK. The aim was to see how the skills could help senior school children to handle their classmates, their teachers, their families and potential employers.

The feedback has been extremely positive with most teachers involved even asking if they could be trained how to handle difficult and demanding parents!

An inspiring book

A really good read is the current best seller, 'Blink', by Malcolm Gladwell, the sequel to his huge success, 'The Tipping Point'.

'Blink' is the antidote to the normal way we are trained to solve problems through logically structured analyses of the symptoms, causes, alternatives and evaluations. Gladwell suggests that some of our best decisions are made in the 'blink of an eye' and we often do all the logic stuff just to satisfy other people should we be questioned or criticised.

There are some clear links between 'Blink' and our own problem ownership™.

new ways of working™ 'Trends'

A popular feature of the microskills™ network is taken from our new ways of working™ consultancy. Each edition usually contains some 'facts' and statistics picked up from various sources around the world. (No guarantee is given on the accuracy of these.) As this is the beginning of the year, we are listing some apparent trends in employment issues. Whilst they are mainly from UK research, they might have relevance in other countries.

1. Flexible working practices and reward systems are becoming more common, but the initiative is coming more from employee requests than from management seeing the opportunities and benefits. In Australia, Toshiba has produced an excellent 58 page guide called 'Flexible Working'. In the UK, Nationwide Building Society is doing some pioneering work. In Singapore, the government agency, Spring, is advising on and promoting best practice.
2. Stress and longer working hours are increasing with one in five Scottish workers putting in more than 70 hours a week. 40% of workers feel they are being asked to do unreasonable amounts of work and 50% believe their companies are understaffed. 60% of UK employees failed to take their full leave entitlement causing a windfall saving of £1.2 billion to employers. 1 in 10 City (business district) workers claims to be too exhausted to work and two thirds admit to taking illegitimate sick leave.

3. Employee fraud is on the rise and has almost doubled in the past two years. £72 billion was lost last year alone. Meanwhile salaries for top job holders are increasing, with the average CEO being paid 113 times the pay of the average worker. The BBC awarded bonuses of £546,000 to top executives whilst retrenching 4,000 staff.
4. 22 of the UK's top 100 companies have no women on the main board. Women at all levels are still feeling discrimination in job opportunities and paid less than men for the equivalent job.
5. Less than half UK workers are happy in their jobs, with 20% having lost interest and just doing the minimum to get by.
6. Skill shortages are limiting the growth of companies, with 8 out of 10 companies struggling to fill job vacancies. 27% of British companies expect to recruit from overseas this year. One bus company is recruiting 100 drivers from Poland. HR staff are increasingly likely to be made redundant and the UK Civil Service saved £4.7 billion by laying off 18,000 staff. Experienced call centre staff are in such high demand that some from the UK are being poached to work in India!
7. Ageing populations, pension crises and a shortage of younger workers and still companies are practising age discrimination. 59% of older staff claim to have been disadvantaged by their age, although fixed retirement ages are being phased out,
8. There is a growing use of electronic tagging of staff to ensure that they are where they are supposed to be, but Marks & Spencer is putting all 55,000 employees through inspirational dancing and fancy dress classes
9. More people are looking for 'profound meaning' in their jobs. Accenture have set up a 'not-for-profit' consultancy that allows staff to do just that. 1 in 5 UK business high flyers is thinking of down-shifting and taking a job in the caring professions. A third of 18–29 year olds (12 year span) is considering a career change as opposed to under a quarter of 30–50 year olds (21 year span).
10. Two thirds of graduates applying for their first job were upset by the way they were treated. Conversely, companies complain about the lack of communications skills in fresh graduates.

Experiences, comments and questions

We'd love to hear from members with any views and experiences they have either for publication or for reply off-line.

microskills™, problem ownership™ and Supportive Manager™ are part of a stable of methods used by the Tim Russell Group to train staff around the world in interpersonal skills. User organisations come from finance, travel, hospitality, retail, manufacturing, government, health services and telecoms. Applications range from customer service to management development, team-building to support skills, negotiations to managing meetings interviewing to selling.

new ways of working™ is the consultancy service to work with organisations on how they will be operating in areas of staff management in the future.

For more information

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