

Drama helps Exeter University on the road to 'Top Ten'

A case history by Tash Khan-Davis,

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OUR CHALLENGE

In March 2008, the University of Exeter formally set a goal to become one of the UK's 'Top Ten' universities by 2012. This was in response to the demands of a new HE funding landscape post the Research Assessment Exercise 2008.

Our aim is to improve performance across all our identified 'Top Ten' key performance indicators, a change that we feel will require strong leadership at all levels, and across every School and Department. We also recognise that for the proposed changes to be successful, leadership styles must adapt to focus on influencing the people dimension, improving standards and creating a workplace climate which values and promotes dignity and respect. Leaders and Managers will need to inspire, energise and motivate their teams, and this will require a period of awareness building, as well as supportive training and coaching.

GATHERING SUPPORT

Our first and primary goal was to gain the support and buy in from leaders and managers, as well as raise awareness of our collective aims, and the processes required to achieve them.

The University Senior Management Team decided to make a major investment in a programme bringing together the top three hundred leaders and managers, both academic and professional, with the aim of challenging them to think about what they need to do to help staff strive for 'Top-Ten'.

In particular:

- What do we build on?

- How should these aspects be reinforced? – There is undoubtedly good practice that has allowed the University to take great strides forwards.
- What barriers do we need to challenge? How do we cope with these?
- What **new** mind sets and practices are needed? Where will they come from?

Over course of the programme delegates would:

1. Have the opportunity to have a detailed discussion with members of the Vice Chancellor's Executive Group about the University's post RAE strategy, the recalibration of the University's key targets and the outcomes of University's 2007-08 Staff Survey.
2. Explore and develop the skills Leaders and Managers need to engage staff in both improving standards and creating a climate, which values equality and diversity.

This programme became '**Engaged Performance**'.

The programme was aimed at Heads of School and Service as well as key professional and academic staff. It was designed primarily to help delegates to understand their role in providing direction and purpose by engaging and empowering teams and individuals to achieve Institutional goals.

It was also designed to assist leaders and managers develop more confidence in driving individual and team performance, as well as creating a shared understanding of what it is to be entrepreneurial, a thread of thinking we wanted to instil within the management system.

LEADERSHIP WORKSHOPS

In all, there was a series of 19, 1.5 day workshops delivered between March and December of 2008. A half day was spent looking at the University 'Top Ten' strategy - recalibration of key performance indicators; university league tables; the university's post RAE strategy and plans; staff survey results.

Day 2 was focussed on leadership. The leadership workshops were outsourced to a learning and development consultancy called Forum Interactive, who have worked with the University for a

number of years. They introduced a leadership development program with facilitated drama case studies as the central methodology.

We felt these techniques would be an effective way to engage and inspire our managers, as well as tackle the potentially tricky issue of individual performance management and leadership style. As we will discuss later, Forum Interactive's workshops delivered a new and refreshing approach to learning and development, and focussed on 'transformational leadership.'

Forum Interactive's primary role was to address the day to day issues around leadership, such as inspiring staff and engaging with culture change. In essence, the workshops allowed us to challenge participants to think about what they need to do as leaders to motivate and support their staff in reaching for 'Top Ten.'

LIVE ACTION SCENARIOS

Forum Interactive's 'Live Action Scenarios' provided the centre piece for each of the 19 Workshops.

Glen Robertson, Director of Forum Interactive explains:

'The Live Action Scenario is an interactive play that allows participants to influence and change the storyline as it unfolds in front of them. At various stages during the scenario, the participants give feedback to the protagonists on the action they want them to take in a situation. The actors then take the action suggested and the consequences, costs and benefits of a particular course of action are played out. If the resulting reactions do not move the scenario forward constructively then the action can be 'erased' and a different set of actions suggested. In this way the learning process develops.'

‘We felt that case studies in the form of the Live Action Scenario would be the most appropriate platform for this programme. It is not only an effective way to raise awareness of leadership issues, and to test out leadership skills and techniques, but also engages and motivates the participants.’

Forum Interactive researched and created a case study focussing on a fictional Higher Education Institution and department. It explored how staff within the department react and deal with the demands of intense cultural change, and how the leaders can impact on this process. The Live Action Scenario explored many of the issues that universities are dealing with today, particularly regarding performance in the changing funding landscape post RAE.

Through this interactive approach using drama, our leaders and managers were able to test different leadership skills and scenarios, and see in real time the consequences of their actions and decisions. This process took place within a controlled ‘laboratory’ environment, and so our participants could feel safe trying new ideas and techniques. This provided a useful way to develop confidence, and demonstrate the skills required to effectively lead through cultural change.

The Live Action Scenario also involved group discussion, question and answer sessions and coaching, so that the key issues and leadership approaches could be fully explored with the group.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

One of the central aims of Forum Interactive’s Live Action Scenario was to demonstrate and explore a ‘transformational’ leadership style, an approach which is distributive, collaborative and focuses on people. Improving standards and creating a workplace climate which values and promotes dignity and respect can generate the cultural change that transforms an organisation.

Glen comments:

'This approach recognises that leadership, rather than being dependent upon a specific authority role within an organisation, or related to a set of personal characteristics, is more usefully defined as an activity. This enables leadership from multiple positions in an organisation (see Ronald Heifetz, Leadership Without Easy Answers, Harvard University Press, 1994). The implication is clear that leadership is the responsibility of everyone in an organisation embarking on a process of significant cultural change. The behaviours, challenges, conflicts and complexities suggested by Ronald Heifetz's leadership 'activity' were explored through the case study scenario.'

Having worked with Forum Interactive through the research and development of the 'Engaged Performance', programme we felt this transformational approach to leadership encompassed many of our values, and complemented our existing strategies. We need to motivate and generate common purpose and partnership working between and across all academic, professional and support staff at all levels, if we are to realise our 'Top Ten' goal and maintain it.

The case study scenario successfully explored this transformational approach to leadership in Higher Education and how improving standards and the quality of staff interactions can assist teams to make positive progress through a period of upheaval and change.

METHODOLOGY

We divided our target leadership group of academic and professional staff into groups of about 15 per workshop, so by December the vast majority had been through the program. In total, 246 senior staff attended the workshops including 138 Academic Staff (104 Professors and Associate Professors) and 64 Professional Services Staff. Each workshop ran for approximately a day and half.

We agreed with Forum Interactive that it was important to keep the groups small to allow a more in-depth and inclusive approach, so that participants felt their individual needs and concerns could be addressed. With the exception of 3 occasions (for reasons of non-availability of space), each workshop was delivered within the university campus. The case study used a realistic Higher

Education scenario researched and developed with us as clients. It was critical that our leaders and managers could relate to the action and the characters portrayed in order to generate engagement and to challenge current thinking, attitudes and behaviours.

ADVANTAGES OF DRAMA BASED LEARNING

There is little doubt that using a Live Action Scenario as a case study, adds a new and refreshing dimension to more traditional leadership training initiatives.

On a practical level, drama got to the heart of our training need simply, quickly and effectively. The Live Action Scenarios engaged and involved our leaders and managers, and this, coupled with the fun factor, delivered a fast learning curve. Drama based training has been helpful to us in realising our goals. Particularly, in addressing the approach required for effective people interactions and how leaders, managers and staff need to relate to each other in transforming our organisational culture in a new and demanding landscape .

The point of engagement is also an important one. What we were proposing required our leaders and managers to support and engage with the process. Without a collective effort, we would not succeed. Drama introduced an interactive element to the program which really involved people, and inspired greater team work. This helped us achieve the buy-in we were looking for.

Often leadership training uses models presented, probably through 'Powerpoint', where participants are expected to listen and absorb theories or new methods. Through drama we could bring the training process to life, and this had a positive effect on the majority of participants.

The 'laboratory' concept was also interesting. The Live Action Scenarios would allow participants to try out transformational approaches and see the consequences of their actions. This inspired confidence in many of the participants. They could see how their decisions and actions could

influence a situation, meaning that in real life, they could approach a similar situation with more confidence and belief.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of using drama really lie in the perceptions of the commissioning client. Drama based learning is becoming more of an accepted tool for training and development, but is still a relatively new concept for many organisations, There is a danger that organisations may not understand the methods. They may commission an inappropriate provider or training and development package, compromising the impact for the target group. A drama based intervention will only work if it is designed to address the appropriate training and development need; specifically where the quality of people interactions and the development of understanding and the need to adjust attitudes and behaviours in the workplace is central.

The quality of the scenarios and skill of the actors and facilitator is also vital. They should accurately reflect the values, language and culture of the commissioning organisation otherwise the drama will have little credibility in the eyes of the participants. Effective drama based training must be well researched and professionally delivered, reflecting sound learning and facilitation principles if it is to avoid missing the mark.

Another limitation is cost and time: to be fully effective, some drama based learning works better with smaller groups. For our training needs, exposing large groups to the process was not going to create the desired impact. As we had 300 leaders and managers, this required a lot of workshops, which took time and some expense to complete. However we do believe that if you find the right agency who truly understands the issues and training requirements, this is money and time well spent.

FEEDBACK

To get an accurate assessment of the 'Engaged Performance' programme, all participants of the workshops were sent an on-line feedback questionnaire two weeks after attending a workshop. 71% of the respondents rated the event either a 4 or 5 on the scale (5=excellent) and 84% stated that they would recommend the workshop to one of their colleagues.

69% of the respondents said that the workshop had helped them gain a better understanding of the 'Top Ten' Goal and 57% of respondents felt more confident about adopting a more transformational leadership style. The respondents were also asked how much they had learned and 57% rated the event a 4 or 5 (5=a lot)

At the start of this process, many of the participants did not know what to expect from Forum Interactive's sessions. However as the workshops progressed, the feedback was very positive. One of the comments we heard regularly is that participants found it very useful to reflect on *behaviour* in relation to management of change and performance.

With the range of leaders and managers involved in the programme and the range of history and experience they brought to the programme, some participants were uncomfortable with both the notions of cultural change being required and the drama based methodology used. Inevitably, there was also negative feedback which we also recorded and added to the final programme evaluation report. There was a feeling that some of the 'Top Ten' messages delivered through the workshops were already known and understood. Other concerns ranged from the workshops being too long and taking too much time out of the working day. There were some concerns that discussions during the sessions need to be focused more on systems and less on leadership, as well as some anxieties over what happens next.

OUTCOMES

For the first time ever, Exeter achieved a Top 10 ranking in one of the national league tables, 3 years ahead of schedule! This is a real measure of the progress that is being made towards achieving our goal, but much work still needs to be done to consolidate and build upon that progress.

Maintaining our position is clearly an ongoing process, so the outcomes of the Engaged Performance workshops are yet to be fully realised. It is widely recognised that dispersed leadership will take time and that senior leaders and managers need to sustain their efforts to bring this about.

However, the interactive, drama based approach to learning has definitely helped us raise awareness of our first and primary objective - what needs to be done. Generally participants have been very supportive and I feel the workshops have given them the opportunity to see the bigger picture, as well as consider the development of more transformational leadership styles. This approach to leadership is key to galvanising our teams, and creating a culture where improved standards and a climate which values and promotes dignity and respect are at its heart.

-ENDS-

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