

The Innerwick Experience: transformational leadership in action

By Esther Walker

Introduction

Since 2007 the Corporate Management Team at East Lothian Council has set about transforming the organisation's culture and approach to leadership. Central to this process has been the creation of a set of qualities and values that express "the way we do things round here" or *The East Lothian Way*.

The East Lothian Way developed organically through a process of engagement with managers and the CMT. It represents the first time that the organisation has articulated what form of leadership it wants and what it expects from its leaders.

The Impetus for Change

Historically, the organisation had been disjointed. Senior managers did not meet as a whole group and although there was a good understanding of what 'management' meant to the organisation, little attention had been paid to the meaning of 'leadership'.

The impetus for cultural change came with the appointment of a new Chief Executive. With a background in community education, Alan Blackie brought a new ethos and style of leadership based on involvement and shared ownership.

At an initial conference (Challenge for Change) senior managers and leaders were brought together to go 'back to basics': what is the organisation's purpose and how can the genuine involvement of all employees be encouraged?

The Innerwick Experience: Transformational Leadership

The process of cultural change was facilitated by a transformational leadership approach which was designed to challenge preconceived ideas about leadership and enable people to see themselves and their role in a new way.

The Board of Directors together with Heads of Service identified what they wanted their leadership approach to look like. It should:

- Use an experiential approach (involving the outdoors and creative methods)
- Be cross-departmental
- Use internal expertise wherever possible
- Use available funds to buy in external experts where necessary (and not waste money on expensive hotels and catering)

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- Make the most of the time spent together.

A two-day residential was designed in which experiential learning was the central focus – a combination of activities using drama and the outdoors – supported in the months afterwards by action learning and project work.

This programme became known as “The Innerwick Experience” after the place where the residential experience was held. The organisation’s cultural transformation is ongoing. However, what is evident so far is the integral part that experiential learning has played in shaping and sustaining that transformation.

The Innerwick Experience - Objectives

The residential experience was devised by Graham Sharrock and Tess Allen from Forum Interactive together with Marina Naylor (learning and development specialist) and Bill Stephen (outdoor learning specialist) from East Lothian Council. They created a unique combination of activities designed to enable participants to move towards an understanding of transformational leadership by:

- noticing and capitalising on each other’s strengths
- exploring the meaning of ‘integrity’
- learning to trust one another
- getting to know one another as people
- taking the risk to be vulnerable
- learning to depend on one another
- engaging in constructive disagreement
- relaxing
- working as a team
- having an opportunity to lead
- experiencing unconditional positive regard.

A Space to Grow: using drama to explore transformation

The management team provided the first cohort to go through The Innerwick Experience. From their work with Graham and Tess using drama, they developed a metaphor which they called ‘A Space to Grow’. This metaphor became the foundation stone for *The East Lothian Way*.

“The senior management team was working with Graham and he asked them to create an image (using their own bodies and the 7ft bamboo canes they’d been using in the complicity work) to describe how they wanted the organization to look and feel to those on the outside and to those on the inside.

“That was a really powerful moment for them. They created an image that helped them to start verbalizing what the East Lothian Way should be. A year later I used that image to remind them of the journey they had made.” (Bill)

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“Yes, as they were exploring the image they talked about what they wanted it to be. They wanted it to be like an open door that people could pass through. They wanted to create this idea that we’re always growing but you need to give people the space to grow. And whatever level we’re at, we’re all part of the same community.” (Marina)

By using theatre and drama techniques participants are involved in a narrative of their own making which is itself a journey of transformation. The group was prepared with a series of complicity exercises to relax and create connections between individuals. Peter Handke’s famous wordless play, ‘*The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*’ was then used as a starting device for the whole group to create stories from a collective list of words that people had offered. The narratives were then developed further on day two in sub-groups.

Each piece of theatre was presented to the others at the climax of the session. A review followed in which each individual charted their own experience and learning. This was then mapped on to their individual objectives for the subsequent action learning sets.

The value of using this kind of drama process

As you might expect, people benefit from the experience in different ways and to different degrees. However, the strength of using drama is that it requires individuals to find internal resources and express qualities that are often under-used and under-valued at work (e.g. courage, stamina, creativity, playfulness and mind/body connection).

“The drama activities require a lot of emotional investment. People take risks in what they reveal of themselves and how willing they are to show vulnerability. There are different degrees of discomfort but everyone is out of their comfort zone at some point. They’re able to perceive themselves in new ways and to discover things about their colleagues. They couldn’t achieve this without this kind of experiential approach.” (Marina)

*“The beauty of that session – *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* – is that it’s about the here and now. People are not being asked to deliver something about current management speak or theory or the past or planning for the future. They bring whatever they’re feeling or thinking in that moment. And we’ve been very surprised by the kinds of things that they’ve revealed. Engaging emotionally like that is a real leveler – it brings everyone to the same level no-matter where you are in the organization hierarchy.” (Bill)*

“It isn’t the case that this kind of experience only suits those who are extroverts or who are natural performers. In my experience, some of the most introverted and shy people have been the ones who have come forward and taken the risks. They recognize that here is an opportunity to do something they’ve never done before and they take it. In this way the experience challenges the assumptions we make about one another (as well as about ourselves). It’s delightful to see the look on someone’s face when they’ve taken a risk and come out triumphant, and in the process, confounded all expectations” (Marina)

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“Of course, this kind of experiential learning will never suit everyone. There are always those who struggle with process and they have to either accept the challenge or not. For some it won't work, they don't see the relevance. However, the positive outcome for those individuals is that they become aware of other people's styles and that can be really useful. I had someone the other day say to me 'I phoned someone up to say well done and I would never have done that before Innerwick.'” (Bill)

The Innerwick Experience: outcomes

A high proportion of people at senior management level within the organisation of East Lothian Council have now gone through The Innerwick Experience. Over the last two years its influence has been demonstrated in a number of key organisational developments.

- Different parts of the organisation have chosen to integrate *The East Lothian Way* so that it has naturally become the standard across the organisation. *The East Lothian Way* is used as part of the Performance Review Development process (PRD), Customer Care and Equality and Diversity work. As a consequence for the PRD process, for example, managers now use this as focus to have useful dialogue with employees.
- Strong connections have developed between senior managers across the organisation, allowing different ways of working to emerge. For example, one manager reported that, as a result of networking at Innerwick, he solved a problem for a client in a matter of days when such an issue would usually take weeks to resolve. This was possible not only because he now understood how other areas of the organisation worked, but because it was now culturally acceptable to take direct action rather than following some convoluted system.
- Cross-department working groups have been established, allowing more effective systems to develop and workable solutions to problems found.
- Many of the cohorts continue to meet together and corporate projects have come out of their action learning involvement.
- Open doors meetings are held regularly where employees have the opportunity to have dialogue with Executive Directors on issues they raise.
- The experiential nature of the programme has developed new insight and awareness among leaders of the strengths and skills of their colleagues and of the degree of internal expertise that exists.

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Success Factors

Commitment from the top

The first people to go through The Innerwick Experience were the Chief Executive, the Executive Directors (n=4) and the Heads of Service. Because their experience was so powerful, their enthusiasm for the programme was communicated to those further down the chain. The Executive Directors *wanted* to be cohort sponsors and have really encouraged and supported their groups.

Involvement and engagement as central values

Many organisations desire to involve and engage employees and those who use their service. However, there is often neither the know-how nor the patience to carry this through in practice. In the case of East Lothian Council, the Chief Executive's belief in the value of involvement and his first-hand experience of how to do it well, have been critical success factors.

Ownership over *The East Lothian Way*

As a result of that involvement process, people have ownership over *The East Lothian Way*. The words that are used to describe it – words like initiate, relate, explore – were chosen because they would support the right kind of dialogue between people and their managers. Because they went through The Innerwick Experience, these words have a history and a meaning for managers.

Facilitated experiential learning

Experiential learning methods – like drama and outdoor education – can have a reputation for being 'gimmicky' or even counter-productive. This is largely because, in the past, insufficient attention has been paid to the provision of a supportive, facilitated framework which will help people to derive learning from the experiences they have. As Bill explains:

"If people are put into a challenging environment on a leadership programme – for example, they're put in the sea and there are waves, swell, rock, changes in depth, different ability levels – there's a danger that they remember the programme because of the fear they felt and their relief when it was over.

"People need support to reflect on that experience and understand how it's relevant to their work. You cannot just assume that people will manage this on their own. That's why skilled facilitation at the residential, followed by action learning, have been so important to this programme's success."

Marina goes on to say:

"It's the conditions that are set by the facilitators that enable the learning to take place. Graham and Tess set the scene really well. The trust that they develop with the group enables

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people to take risks. They know that they are free to choose the level of challenge. They can say 'no' if they want to. A supportive environment is created in which individuals trust that the facilitators and their colleagues are there for them."

Summary

Many organisations do not go 'back to basics' to debate and clarify what leadership means, let alone attempting to do that through genuine consultation and involvement with employees.

What the experience of East Lothian Council shows us is that this is possible when there is commitment from the top and when people are supported to challenge their own assumptions, create strong connections with one another and experience benefit in trusting and valuing the contribution of others. Experiential learning has played a significant role in enabling leaders to understand and begin to implement a practice that is transformational.

This is not, however, a story of seismic shifts. It takes hard work and commitment for an organisation to change its culture and for that to be sustained. As Bill says "one Director told me recently that The Innerwick Experience 'is having a positive influence on the culture of the organisation' well, that's pretty good as far as I'm concerned!"

ⁱ *Complicity* describes a state of sophisticated interaction in a group. That state is developed through a series of exercises that gradually build a level of trust and synergy between individuals. It enables individuals to assume the taking and giving of responsibility as an unplanned, spontaneous, supportive and creative process.

The various exercises we used at Innerwick involving 7ft bamboo canes were developed by *Theatre de Complicité* (www.complicite.org).

For more information on *complicity* exercises, see our document *Tips for Serious Play: leadership as a relational process* which accompanies this Spring Newsletter.

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