

House proud

Action learning is paying dividends at building firm Westbury, where trainers have put away their overheads and handed workshops back to the participants

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YOU DON'T OFTEN ASSOCIATE HARD-BITTEN BUILDING firms with the caring and sharing that comes with action learning. But over the past few years house builder Westbury has broken the mould in its approach to developing its senior managers.

It wasn't the result of a master training plan and it didn't happen overnight. Rather it has taken several years for Westbury to evolve and perfect action learning. More importantly the firm believes it is delivering tangible business results.

It began about six years ago when Westbury introduced a development programme for senior managers with the potential to make it to the top. "As a company we were looking to grow by acquisition," says HR director Cathy Hipkiss. "This strategy demanded that we grow our people too so that they could take on more senior positions.

"However, it is hard to find good people who can make it through to managing director in this industry. I interview lots of good people in house building but they are all underdeveloped."

The programme Westbury introduced is run once a year for about 12 managers and has two interlinked parts. It begins with a two day development centre to assess managers' skills against Westbury competencies. These centres attract tremendous commitment from top man-

agers in the firm – the chief executive always puts in an appearance while several regional manager directors and board directors take part as observers.

"However, it became clear from these early development centres that the consistent learning need among our managers was in their ability to influence others," Hipkiss says. As a result the firm asked Richard Hale, a vice president of the International Management Centres Association and author of *Impact and Influencing*, to run workshops for managers who had attended a development centre. This forms the second part of the programme and takes place several months after the development centre. It involves a two-day workshop followed by a final skills review three months later to assess what managers have got out of the programme.

It is in the influence and impact workshops that action learning has really come into play. Westbury was attracted to Hale because his approach focused on real business issues, but the early workshops were fairly traditional classroom based courses with Hale delivering content and participants loving or loathing it, but not necessarily investing much of themselves in it.

It was ok but it wasn't delivering quite what it was supposed to, suggests Hale, whose own thoughts on action learning had been developing. In addition, the follow up and the skills review that were supposed to

BUILDING BRIDGES:
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CASE STUDY

Disputes with local residents over planning issues are a part of the house builder's daily lot. But Rafiq Taylor, regional technical director for Westbury in the north-west, now sees them in a totally different light.

"Previously if we had planning permission, our view was that it was up to the local planning authority – the council – to smooth things over with residents," Taylor says.

However, having attended Richard Hale's workshop, he decided he could influence a particularly tricky dispute brewing with residents over access to a development.

"It was a technical problem but it required more than a technical solution. If I had just concentrated on the technical aspects of the case rather than looking at how local people felt, it would have gone down the legal route," Taylor says.

Taylor's solution was simple – he came out from behind his desk and made himself available to residents – in particular a local farmer. "We negotiated to buy a strip of land from him at a price we felt was reasonable. We then negotiated how we could manage the impact of all the traffic coming onto the site.

"We had discussions with other residents who were worried about a particular tree being knocked down. As a result we landscaped the tree.

"It was about saying, 'We are here too and are willing to listen to your concerns'.

"It wasn't an instant solution, the problems didn't go away and people didn't stop complaining to the local council," Taylor says. "But they did not make as much fuss as they would have done otherwise and they were happy that they had a point of contact in me."

complete the development programme were not happening as well as they could have been.

The appointment of Ashley Hawkins as training manager just over a year ago seemed an ideal time to look again at the senior development programme and the workshop in particular.

"People were coming off the programme clear about the learning points but we needed them to be clear about how to progress them as well. Only they could decide what the next stage was and make it happen," Hawkins says. "We also wanted to encourage them to share their learning more."

The result has been a shift in the way the programme is delivered. Hale has handed the workshop back to participants. He now starts with a short list of questions, such as: how are you currently influencing within the business? Where do you want to make improvements?

"We've changed the focus from being trainer-centric to learning-centric," Hale says. "We've moved from role-play to real play and it's been a shock to people who are used to classroom-based training. But they've been on the development centre and are clear about their learning needs."

This doesn't mean the workshop has become a shapeless, navel-gazing exercise. Participants are warned that they are expected to bring real business issues to the course. The idea is that they can use these situations to practise different approaches to influencing people as a means of resolving problems. They are also a starting block for discussing a range of issues surrounding, for example, conflict and confrontation, influencing upwards, managing business contacts and internal teams.

The other technique Hale has used to add structure to the workshops is to lay down a challenge when participants start – they must use the skills they acquire to provide Westbury with a 10-fold return on its investment in their training. So when managers return eight weeks later for their skills review they are expected to outline how they have used their influencing skills to make or save money for the firm.

They are starting to come back with the goods – from the £1 million-plus that Rafiq Taylor, north-west technical director, believes he has saved the firm (see panel), to the changes in management style that Chris Hagan, operations manager at Westbury's Space4 factory in Birmingham, believes he has achieved. "I came to Westbury from the automotive industry," Hagan says. "In my last company the prevailing philosophy was, you don't come to work to be liked. But 70 guys report to me at Westbury and I can't attract good people, keep good people or develop good people unless I can earn their respect."

The idea is that action learning for Taylor, Hagan and their colleagues should not end with the skills review. They are meeting every four to six months to continue sharing their learning.

What's more, so enthusiastic have the personnel and training team at Westbury become about Hale's take on action learning that they have introduced programmes for middle managers and graduate trainees, and they are planning something for the executive board.

"As an objective we would aim to get as much action learning as possible. Ultimately we want to get managers doing action learning with their teams as a way of coaching them. It's the culture we want to create," says Hipkiss.

But it's not paradise on earth and it presents other problems and challenges to Hawkins and Hipkiss. To start with, you cannot force people to learn, says Hawkins, even by handing learning back to the learners.

"We have to make it clear from the start that we expect people to do something about their own development if they want to make it to the next step," he says. "It's a form of contract – Westbury invests in its people, but it wants a return on that investment."

In addition, an all-embracing action learning approach is having a significant impact on Hawkins' own job. He can no longer judge his success on the number of training rooms at his disposal or training days he provides. He knows he has almost to turn his back on the idea of delivering courses and become instead a facilitator of other people's learning and development.

"Partly this is a mental shift. I've got to the position I'm in because I train well but now I have to sit back. Handing over control in this way is a bit scary," Hawkins says.

But Taylor adds that action learning has made senior management more fun than they expected: "The environment is better because we are encouraged to talk through problems and it's seen as part of the learning process. We aren't expected to carry the world on our shoulders." **PM**

FURTHER INFORMATION

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