Searching for the Holy Grail

Patricia Hind and **Viki Holton** outline four principles of effective management development

The organisations most of us live and work in are many and varied. They may have a commercial, educational, social, sporting or other focus but they are the life blood of our society. Most of us spend our lives, whether working or relaxing, within some sort of organisation and to meet the needs of those within them, all organisations need to be managed in ways that are effective, efficient and sustainable.

However, it is often difficult to ensure that organisational management is as valuable as it can be, yet developing effective management is crucial to organisational success. We know that management development, when it is good, looks effortless. It delivers energised and enthusiastic participants, motivated and committed faculty, and a good return on investment for sponsoring organisations.

However, ensuring successful management development is complex.

For a start, success means that it must meet its "objectives", yet the objectives of management development are diverse. Ashridge Executive Education asked a number of programme participants and their sponsors the question "What is management development for?" Some of the answers were that management development is to:

- broaden the skills sets of managers who want to up their game as a leader or manager
- reward past performance – high flyers receive the "prize" of a business school programme or personal coaching
- ensure that organisations score highly on "best place to work" rankings – developing people is a good thing
- help managers to drive business results
- help organisational leaders to speak the same language at all levels of their organisation
- to "fix", or correct, personal faults

So, given the breadth of management development objectives, alongside its importance, we really need to understand how organisations can be sure they are getting true business value from the management development investments they make. What should we be looking at to ensure it really works?

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There are many different designs, philosophies and delivery methods for management development programmes, some of which will meet all expectations and objectives, but it is fair to say that not every programme is effective.

Most business schools – as well as experienced clients – can instantly recognise and appreciate an effective programme but it is also true that few providers devote sufficient time to understanding the various different and sometimes contradictory factors that guarantee success.

Many of the well-established ways of assessing success, such as review sheets, may not be conducive to creating a true development experience – a point that is reflected in the fact that such reviews are often known as "happy sheets". The purpose of too many programmes is to keep participants entertained rather than to provide an environment that challenges assumptions and encourages managers to experiment with ideas and innovate.

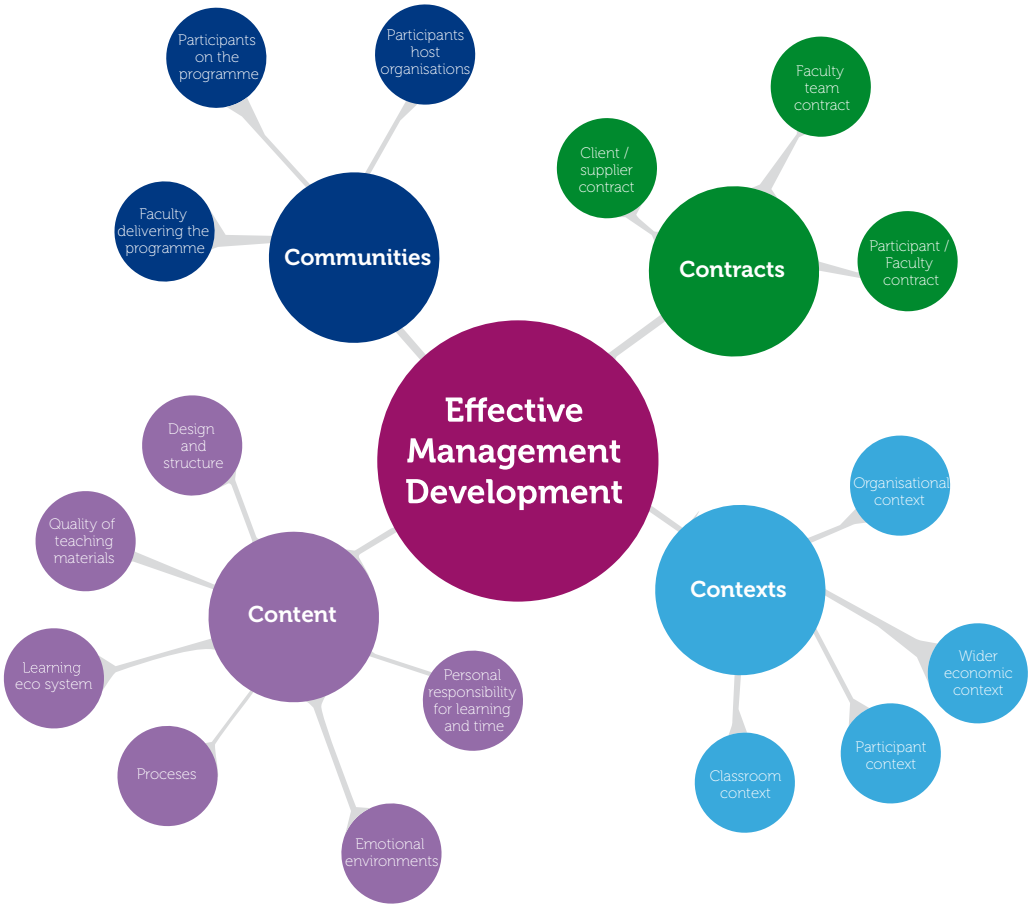

Figure 1

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Our research study conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 experienced faculty...

Research findings

Our research study conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 experienced faculty and found that effective management development pays equal attention to four key issues, or principles, relevant to both design and delivery. These are:

1. The Principle of **Communities** concerns the communities of both learners and providers. This is not simply the community of participants on each programme but more broadly includes, for example, the community of the host organisations and the faculty delivering the programme

2. The Principle of **Contracts** concerns both commercial and psychological as well as explicit and implicit agreements involved in the provision of the development. There are obvious contracts such as those between the provider and the buyer of the service but also more subtle ones such as those experienced within the faculty team

3. The Principle of **Content** concerns everything that has impact during the learning experience including the material delivered, learners' emotional response to the learning and the time allowed for reflection on the learning

4. The Principle of **Context** concerns all the environments within which the learning takes place. This includes the classroom and the context of the participants' personal and organisational life. All of these contexts were reported as being relevant to facilitating or hindering learning. Most interviewees felt that finding a variety of ways to manage the atmosphere and dynamics of the learning space to create an engaging experience is at the heart of the learning context.

There is a clear interconnectivity between these four principles, a little like a game of dominoes where successful play relates each domino to others in the set. We have conceptualised each principle as a connected circle with the key issues identified for each area (see Figure 1).

Our study confirmed that the process of adult learning is complex and dynamic but perhaps more importantly it identified what can be described as a symbiotic relationship

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between all the key players involved in both the commissioning, design and delivery of management development.

The key players – the business school (or other provider), the client, the host organisation, the teaching faculty and the individual learners – all have their part to play in ensuring that the development intervention delivers value to both programme participants and their organisations.

Take, for example, the relationship between the key faculty and the client. This may be a major determinant for success but is not always included in any formal discussions. There are subtle cultural dimensions to this relationship, such as how management development is viewed throughout an organisation. This can translate into important perspectives such as how faculty are viewed – whether as "experts", "partners" or "suppliers".

Drilling down a little more, we can see how important this is. For example, if faculty are seen as "partners" does this mean senior managers from the organisation will want to co–deliver? If so, what is their level of skill for doing this? Answering these questions might reveal a need for a "train the trainer" intervention over and above the participant programme. Will this be acceptable or will there be additional developmental work needed to ensure that it is? If faculty are seen as "experts" will they need to deliver the "right" answer to organisational dilemmas? And, finally, if faculty are simply "suppliers" what effort must they put into relationship building?

Another key relationship which emerged in connection with the faculty role is the importance of the partnership between faculty and individual learners. This was frequently mentioned by interviewees and again it is not a straightforward teacher/ learner partnership. Faculty must

> *"The level of excellence in terms of design, delivery and management of a programme needs to include post-programme transfer and evaluation when learners are back at work*

simultaneously be both a "guru", an expert on the subject matter, and an "edu-tainer" with that rare talent to simultaneously educate and entertain.

But they also need to be able to fulfil a multiplicity of other roles, which may include being advisor, mentor, coach and confidante as well as some more directive aspects associated with a leader in the organisation. Faculty must be able to "work with the experiences or issues that emerge once you are in the room..."

Other issues in the "learning journey" that must be addressed include:

- "hygiene" factors of the physical learning environment – too hot or cold or no hot water will disrupt and undermine even the best designed and delivered programme
- pace of learning, the variety of content and levels of energy in the room – building in sufficient "white space" for reflection and review is agreed to be important but in practice it is hard to achieve, partly because some clients confuse a packed schedule with value for money
- motivation levels and the willingness to learn among individual learners – one individual described three types of participant – a "prisoner" who does not want to be there; a "tourist" who is very pleased to be there but not for the learning; and a third type, the "learner". Participants' readiness to learn is a significant factor in the success of an intervention
- The level of excellence in terms of design, delivery and management of a programme needs to include post-programme transfer and evaluation when learners are back at work. This last phase is a perennial problem and few providers have found successful solutions for this "Cinderella" phase

Conclusion

The most obvious implication of the study is the fact that learning has to be everyone's business.

In theory, most of the different groups involved in executive education know this, though it is a point that is rarely specifically spelled out. In both the classroom and during contracting discussions

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with clients, more could be done to clarify this "ownership" of learning and to find ways to apply the learning.

Key questions on the client side should include identifying the learning for both individual participants and the organisation. How does it link to both the programme objectives and to organisational objectives and how will this be demonstrated after each programme? What are the measures of success once executives are back at work and, more importantly, who will help them to apply what they have learned?

Established ways of measuring success are often problematic and it is critical that we devise better and more rigorous ways to establish return on the investments of time, energy and money that all management development involves.

One key issue for business schools and clients concerns developing senior support. Challenging senior managers to be involved and to stay involved in the learning process is not always easy. Yet, this makes a significant difference to the likely success of executive education, whether this is delivered in the classroom, blended or completely virtual.

Going forward, all the key players such as individual participants, clients, faculty (and faculty teams) and business schools involved in executive education need to come together and co-operate more effectively to allow learning to have both organisational and individual impact.

To enhance collaboration between these partners, professional organisations such as EFMD, the Association of Business Schools and UNICON (The International University Consortium for Executive Education) have a significant part to play. Awards for successful learning programmes (EFMD's "Excellence in Practice" is a good example) show what good looks like. Winning entries are great for the reputation of those who win but also serve a dual purpose – to encourage other providers to up their game and either match or excel them.

Some of our findings may well confirm what is already known but we believe that, uniquely, our report offers a unified model of the principles and pedagogy of learning that can be shared by organisational managers, learning and development (L&D) professionals and those involved in the delivery of management development.

The findings provide L&D and HR professionals with evidence for understanding what lies beneath the surface of excellence in management development. The shared understanding of the four key areas (the principles) of the model will help clients and faculty to work more closely together and ensure that the learning journey for individual participants is a holistic one, offering relevance, personal insight and organisational impact.

The findings have many practical implications for executive education providers, teachers, individual learners and for those who are commissioning management and executive education. Not least of these is the importance of clarity and honesty when it comes to the "contract" as shown in the quote below from one faculty member:

"Almost everything that goes wrong in a programme is a problem of contracting. I mean legal contracting and I also mean the psychological contracting. If it's not right, we turn up in the room trying to do something that actually can't be done."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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This article is based on a study by Ashridge Executive Education to examine the key factors in effective management development. The title– Searching for the Holy Grail – reflects just how difficult it can be to achieve such success. For a copy of report please contact Rebecca Coatswith, Research Manager at Ashridge Executive Education. Rebecca.Coatswith@ashridge.hult.edu