Leadership Dimensions

This article is a review of a leadership course that I was part of recently. I was a bit hesitant to write about this at first. It's nothing particularly to do with data management, and because it was tailored to our own company setup, it may well be that you will not encounter anything quite like it. However, many of you are potential leaders who will be participating in or even commissioning training, and I thought it might be of general interest.

Twenty members of the management team of my company (including some of the most senior officers) were selected to participate. This was neither routine nor just a lip-service exercise. We were split into two groups of ten, that being considered the maximum that could work together comfortably. The course itself consisted of four separate sessions of two-day offsite meetings, conducted over the course of five months.

Before the actual sessions commenced, we had to do an online personality test. This was a version of a "forced response" test. If you've ever done one of these, you'll know how frustrating they can be. You are presented with four statements, and have to put them in order of how closely they resemble you. Sometimes there are no good answers at all, and you are left squirming around which is the least-worst answer to choose.

Despite the difficulties, the profiles that came back were fairly accurate. An interesting twist that I had not come across previously, was the way in which this questionnaire teased out the "home" you from the "office" you – the way you modify yourself to your work environment, and the way you would be without that influence. A few participants were exactly the same in both places, but most of us had distinct variations, indicating that we were able to "turn up" or "turn down" various aspects of our personality.

You can see this in both a positive and negative way. Doing this takes energy – you may not always be able to keep it up at difficult times. Hence the test report highlighted the sort of failings you might have in stressful situations. However what this illustrated for me was that there <u>is</u> a point in personal development. It is possible to modify your personality, to add "tools to the toolbox", without having to change the underlying person. Most people do this unconsciously anyway, so doing it deliberately is probably going to work even better.

All the off-site sessions were led by a facilitator from Anne Shaw Consultants, assisted by a member of our own HR team.   Sessions tended to revolve around a series of exercises or questionnaires. A few examples; one lesson was designed to look at learning styles (are you an Activist, Reflector, Theorist, Pragmatist or some combination?); one was based around Transactional Analysis, a Freudian view of communication styles; another looked at theories of motivation; another looked at Belbin team roles. There were lots of others.

The point of all these lessons was to look at whether you could take something personal away – what could you learn about yourself, what might you be able to modify or develop. There was no pressure to accept everything put to you. I found some of the tools used rather suspect, possibly even being applied wrongly. However, even when there was little there I could personally relate to, another participant might well find it of use.

The evenings were given over to lighter-hearted exercises or games. These were still quite challenging. During the first session this consisted of making a collage of our life stories and aspirations, which we then had to present. Does the thought make you cringe? It certainly did for me, but alcohol was offered for the faint-hearted and somehow we all managed to survive through to dinner. Other games were less stressful (although the political behaviour game managed to make me blush a little - I won't say why).

The sessions ended with, for me, the most valuable part of the course. We were divided into five-person support groups, who remained constant.   The final part of each session was then devoted to these small groups, where individuals would be placed in the spotlight.   On the first session, this was extremely uncomfortable. We took turns to stand up and talk about what we felt was good about our own abilities, but also problems and difficulties we encountered. Aspects of our personalities or abilities that had resonated with the previous day's activities could be discussed in a confidential and supportive atmosphere. Direct and honest feedback was sought from the other members of the support group – both positive and negative. I'm still not sure which of these I found more disturbing! It was certainly difficult at first to give that feedback, never mind receive it. However, the honesty and trust that was displayed during the group work was rather humbling, and demanded full participation. Subsequent support group sessions focused on checking whether people had acted on their intentions, giving feedback on where they'd succeeded or fallen short. Over the weeks, these for me became the highlight event.

At the end of each session, our homework was to work on a personal development plan. You were encouraged to pick up on specific skills or traits you wanted to work on, and find small steps towards developing those. The one that I focused on most strongly was long term life/career planning. I found the template plan provided rather lacking in detail - I am after all a data manager at heart - so found one on the web that I liked. I can certainly recommend it, very simple to read and apply, but allows for nitty-gritty detail if you need it. Cost $9.99 from http://www.mftrou.com/personal-development-plan.html. No, I don't have shares in it, and I'm sure there are others out there that would suit.

What have I done with this? I've applied the same basic template to developing a homelife plan (extremely successful – have detailed plans up to November, and more pencilled in as far as June 2009), personal traits (including proactivity and balanced learning) and even team traits (resilience, maintaining form). Quite a lot of the learnings from the course I've passed on to my team members. These have been received with quite a lot of (if not universal) enthusiasm. Comments from both the support group and others make me think that some of this effort is genuinely making a difference.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this was a tailored course, designed for the individual circumstances of my company, so are there any generalisable lessons? I think there are. First, when opportunities like this arise, jump in feet first and participate. Even if your natural inclination is to be cynical (dare I admit it?), be as open-minded as you can and consider how this might benefit you and those around you. Secondly, you can change the way you manage yourself and others. Maybe not all the time, and maybe not perfectly, but big gains can come from small improvements. Thirdly, a sustained leadership course over a long period is definitely more effective than quick-burst one or two day courses, since you are forced to actually do something rather than letting good intentions slide away in the face of the everyday avalanche of work.

Can you learn to be a "Leader"? On that one I remain somewhat sceptical, but I what do believe is that everyone placed in a position of responsibility can benefit from deliberately learning and applying some of the traits and skills of leadership.

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