Work-Based Learning Partnership: a case of learning and talent management intervention for developing future leaders and managers

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Introduction

This article describes a collaborative project between the University of Portsmouth Business School and Dorset Fire and Rescue Service (DFRS) initiated in 2012, to provide opportunities for accreditation and award of academic qualifications in parallel with in-house leadership and management development through Work-Based Learning (WBL). This initiative is part of a strategic HR and organisational development (OD) approach to meet the challenge of developing future managers and leaders at DFRS.

Leadership and management in the UK

UK government growth reviews have emphasised the role and contribution of effective leadership and management in facilitating sustainable economic growth and prosperity. The Department for Business Innovation & Skills Leadership reports that although the quality of leadership and management has been improving in the UK over the past 10 years, the UK is falling behind many competitor nations in terms of leadership and management capability, undermining organisational effectiveness and productivity (2012). Analysis by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills indicates that good management skills are crucial to high performance working (HPW) and that there is a management, with the UK needing 544,000 new managers by the end of the decade (Wilson and Homenidou, 2012). A better leadership and management capability is a core theme of the UK’s skills policy; the message is that good leadership and management makes a difference to organizations and their stakeholders, including UK plc. DFRS is an organisation that recognises the contribution effective leaders and managers make and, is employing learning and talent management strategies to create development and progression opportunities, and to shape the culture of the organization in the future.

Developing leaders and managers

It is widely accepted that leadership and management skills can be learnt and, that learning is essential for individuals to translate knowledge and understanding into practice. Kouzes and Posner (2002: 366) state that leadership is an ‘observable set of skills and abilities…and any skill can be strengthened, honed and enhanced, given the motivation and desire, practice and feedback, and the role models of coaching’. Leadership capability can be considered an outcome of an individual’s inherited qualities and a result of what they learn, i.e. a combination of nature and nurture. An important question follows on from this – what should leaders and managers learn?

Research into leadership and management practice coupled with reviews various models and theories, allows ‘generic’ competency sets to be specified, e.g. Sadler-Smith (2006:317). Such distillations of leadership and management capabilities provide useful frameworks for the design of learning and development interventions. The National Occupational Standards
in Management and Leadership (MSC, 2004/2008) is an example of a UK competency-based framework which employers and learning institutions utilise in the design of such interventions. Many organisations refer to the above standards in specifying ‘local’ leadership and management standards, e.g. NHS and UK Fire and Rescue Service, which providing a ‘road map’ for employee learning and development relevant to their unique business environment.

**Learning and talent development**

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) identifies ‘capability-building’ as one of eight strategic themes that are important for long-term organizational sustainability and performance, defining it as ‘equipping the people in the organization with the skills and knowledge they need to meet both present and future challenges. Also, identifying existing necessary and potential capabilities, ensuring they are accessible across the organization. Capability-building applies not only to individuals but also to teams and organizations’ (Miller, 2011).

The implications of leadership and management capability-building in specific organisational contexts are significant in terms of how organisations faced with this challenge respond. Learning and talent development (LTD) is described as ‘strategic HRM’, i.e. people management strategies that influence organisational performance (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). These strategies to build capacity can also be considered to be part of an organisational development (OD) approach: strategic and systematic interventions at individual, group and organisational level to influence organisational culture through social learning processes.

LTD is an organisational strategy that falls within a broader business and HRM strategy, that describes workforce capabilities, skills and competencies required for long-term sustainability and success. LTD strategy also defines the means required to achieve the desired organisational outcomes. Leadership and management development will be one facet of LTD and some organisations will target high-potential individuals who are identified as being critical to long-term success. Other employers prefer a more inclusive approach by providing opportunities for the whole workforce, and it is typical for employers to do both in a blended manner. The value of LTD can be realised in succession and workforce planning, where specific learning and development is explicitly linked with career opportunities, e.g. the acquisition and application of specified knowledge and learning is a pre-condition of progressing to the next level/role. The creation of learning opportunities linked to career development can play a vitally important role in influencing employee engagement and commitment (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2008).

**Work-Based Learning and accreditation**

Work-based Learning (WBL) continues to develop as an important area of engagement between higher education and employers in the provision of ‘customised’ learning solutions which meet the needs of individuals (employees) and organisations. WBL can be described as ‘all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises out of workplace concerns’ (Lester and Costley, 2010: 562). There is broad consensus, in line with the studies mentioned above, that there needs to be a significant increase in the proportion of the UK
workforce which have higher-level skills normally associated with higher education (HE) provision (e.g. Leitch, 2006).

Effective learning and development interventions aimed at building leadership and management capability should facilitate and support learners through the learning process within the context of the learning and its application, i.e. be work-based or work-related. Such interventions are also likely to provide a meaningful and rewarding learning experience by enabling learners to engage in ‘live’ organisational challenges in real time, i.e. challenges that the individual, team and organisation are currently faced with.

Work-Based Learning also provides an opportunity for students to gain recognition through accreditation for experiential learning, i.e. knowledge and understanding in a subject that has been acquired in the workplace, e.g. performing a role and professional development interventions. Universities involved in WBL provide accreditation opportunities of this type through ‘accreditation of prior experience and learning’ (APEL). In addition, courses provided by professional bodies such as ILM, CMI and CIPD can also provide a basis for accreditation through APEL, by mapping the acquired knowledge and learning gained from these courses against the learning outcomes of units/modules that make up a university course, and awarding the appropriate credit towards an award. The award of credit as a consequence of APEL will be on an individual (student) basis but the method for establishing APEL can be considered from broader ‘corporate’ perspective, as in the case of DFRS, where in-house management learning and development provides the basis for APEL of its middle and senior managers. Accreditation of prior learning and experience is highly valued by mature managers (and their employers) and provides an attractive proposition for many to return to education later in life, thereby, facilitating widening participation in higher education.

‘Work-Based Learning Partnerships (WBLPs) between employers, employees and universities provide formal arrangements, structures and processes which facilitate WBL and accreditation, providing higher-level learning and development opportunities which benefit all stakeholders involved (Hall, 2008). The case below describes such a WBLP between DFRS and Portsmouth Business School (PBS) that supports the employer’s approach to learning and talent management, and achieving its broader strategic aims.

Dorset Fire and Rescue (DFRS) case study

Dorset Fire and Rescue Service employs just over 800 personnel based at their HQ, Training Centre, Area Office and across 26 fire stations. DFRS recognise that its middle and strategic managers face a period of unprecedented change and that the future Service may look and feel very different to that of the past and present. The changes DFRS face will be challenging and managers will need to help and support others through this period of uncertainty, while simultaneously facing change themselves.

In addition, recent workforce planning at DFRS indicates that that over the next 5 years a high number of rank holders (Crew Manager to Area Manager) will be retiring. Such anticipated staff churn has been recognised as a corporate risk and one of the measures identified to manage this risk focuses upon the development and preparation of the next generation of future leaders.
While DFRS prides itself on staff development intervention and has carried out leadership development in the past, there was a need to review the approach taken to leadership development and to ensure a legacy was created that could be embedded within the workforce. The leadership strategy required a delivery mechanism and as a result, the DFRS leadership framework was created. The latter includes a number of initiatives such as skills pathway, talent management, assessment and development centres – all vital elements of the new approach to developing leadership at DFRS. In view of future challenges facing the organisation, the Strategic Management Team took the view that future leaders needed academic rigour to enhance their existing skill set. In view of structures and workload, the ideal solution would be for academic achievement to be incorporated into individual's everyday work duties, so that their studies were grounded in realistic role-related subject matter.

Investigations into possible learning solutions led to PBS, where academic courses based on Work-Based Learning are offered. Understanding the benefits and organisational 'fit' of such a learning and development approach led to the creation of a delivery framework outlining a vocational and academic pathway. Working in partnership with the PBS, a project based on APEL principles enabled mapping of the Fire Service National Occupational Standards specified in the DFRS ‘Group Manager’ development programme (which newly appointed Group Managers are expected to complete), against the learning outcomes of PBS’ Postgraduate Certificate (PgC) units in 'Leadership and Management' and 'Leading and Managing Performance' of the PgC Leadership and Management course (see Figure 1).

As a result of the mapping process and subsequent approval of the APEL application, DFRS Group Managers, who have completed the Group Manager Development Programme are eligible for direct entry to the Postgraduate Diploma (PgD) in Leadership and Management, when they complete further units in 'Leading and Managing Change' and complete a leadership and management report. As these units are based on a Work-Based Learning approach, individuals can target their studies and focus upon an actual organisational issue. This benefits both the individual and the organisation, providing real value and a return on DFRS’ investment.

Figure 1: APEL mapping of DFRS management training
By studying for these qualifications, experienced DFRS managers are able to further develop their critical skills, based on analysis, research and interpretation of information to reach sound conclusions. The PBS postgraduate courses in leadership and management are self-directed, using blended learning techniques and assignments are based in the workplace, addressing real organisational issues. This approach also enhances individual skill sets, in relation to self-discipline, personal organisation and workload management. Importantly, this practice 're-sets the psychological contract' ensuring the individual takes responsibility for their own learning and becomes empowered to identify means by which they can lead organisational effectiveness and improvement.

By providing a blended learning experience, consisting of academic study in an organisational context, DFRS managers will become equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills that can be applied directly in the workplace. This approach is aimed at supporting and enabling these managers to perform better in their current role, in readiness for future organisational and leadership challenges. The virtual learning environment means individuals do not have to spend time away from work attending the University. However, they are still able to network with fellow students from other organisations (virtually) and to be fully supported by PBS tutors, as well as a work-based DFRS mentor, the latter providing a further internal development support.

Funding such qualifications enables DFRS to send a clear message that it expects its future strategic managers to strive for academic excellence, as well as demonstrating a clear progression pathway for its middle managers. Future plans to roll out an accelerated development programme to top DFRS performers will also be enhanced by this programme. The DFRS Vocational and Academic Pathway supports the development of leadership capacity while providing individuals with learning opportunities to gain recognised awards.

Conclusions

Learning and talent management as part of a strategic HRM approach provides a framework for developing future leaders and managers. Work-Based Learning can be an effective intervention for guiding individual and group acquisition of knowledge and understanding within the specific context of an organisation. Accreditation of experiential learning using APEL acknowledges the expertise individuals have gained in the workplace, and enables mature individuals to enter university courses at the appropriate level, which is an attractive proposition to employees and employers, and assists to widen participation in HE.

DFRS and PBS is an example of a learning and development intervention that is designed to meet the needs of the employees and employer. Work-Based Learning Partnerships between universities, employers and employees provide formal arrangements for WBL and APEL at an organisational level. These partnerships bring universities and employers together; producing benefits for all stakeholders involved and contribute to UK plc's aim of increasing the number of employees with higher level skills. WBL is an exciting and challenging area, that presents a significant opportunity for the HE sector in a period when its business environment is changing rapidly and, universities are 'redefining' their purpose and the relationships they have with their stakeholders.
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