How is IMCA Socrates™ helping to shape the future of learning at work?

> My proposition is that each and every enterprise must institutionalize its workplace learning systems and opportunities in such a way that it radiates what it has already achieved, and from such a well-understood platform moves on to realize its full potential. There can be no self-doubts. *The enterprise itself is the key.* There is no other cost-effective way to motivate managers to learn, or to provide the opportunities to learn, that are the inescapable requirements for today's and tomorrow's successful enterprise.
> Gordon Wills, Your Enterprise School of Management, MCB University Press, 1993, p.9

Full circle?

We hope that it is evident to the reader by now that the emergent IMCA Socrates™ system and its applications are closely aligned with the early work and influence of Reg Revans and with what he encouraged IMCA to do. It is a flexible system that is customized and applied by the users themselves, without the constraints of tutors or outside experts attempting to discern what is / is not good action learning. Reg Revans held the view that the only action learning experts who really matter are the action learners themselves and our role at IMCA and Revans University is to support, encourage, facilitate and certify their achievements.

In our series of papers we have set out the guiding principles and experiences with our customers that have helped to shape our thinking and the gradual evolution of a new, international system that is capable of elevating the status of workplace education – still the world's largest, almost entirely untapped educational market. The reality of course is that it is not remotely possible to sustain academic style educational partnerships in the fast-paced commercial world. We know, as we have spent more than a decade attempting with only moderate success, to bridge the divide between academic and professional perspectives. Yet, corporations are rich in resources, insights, experience, systems, knowledge and individual as well as collective intellect. Our mission at IMCA Socrates™ is to build broader definitions of educational accomplishment, based on the realities of the marketplace with the aim of integrating learning and work so that the two become one. This marriage is founded on the enterprise itself, its know how and the deep reservoirs of managerial skill and intellectual capacity that are rarely tapped, let alone engaged for the benefit of the individual and the employer.

The essence then of the IMCA Socrates™ international system is best described in relation to the key generic benefits that it offers. These are:

- Accredited learning that is customized and tailored to the business agenda and workplace challenges. It supports organizational change, enhances performance and yields a tangible return on investment.
- A customizing tool (the CPD Ladder) that recognizes prior experience and adds value to existing training, learning and development by placing emphasis on captured learning (outputs). Credit is given for application not recall.
- Dramatically reduced unit costs for accredited personal and organizational development.
- A web solution (IMCA SiteServer) that provides associate support anywhere, at any time.
- A corporate learning solution that was designed in consultation with large companies, with the aim of responding first and foremost to real organizational priorities.

In his article The clamour for content is crazy', published in his column for the *Training Journal*, the European learning specialist Dr. Peter Honey, comments:

> The IMCA Socrates programme combines three elements; the idea of a truly customized corporate business school, an action learning approach (i.e. the action learning projects become the 'curriculum') and accreditation whereby the participants gain credits that eventually result in a degree. This is a stunningly simple formula with something for everyone. The organization 'wins' by getting practical solutions to operational problems and a highly motivated workforce committed to successful implementation. Each participating individual 'wins' by getting a worthwhile qualification. Essentially, the organization is helped to create the best sort of corporate business school where 'students' apply their knowledge to raise performance and where the 'faculty' are successful managers within the company. The effect is nothing short of a quantum leap towards becoming a learning organization. The IMCA Socrates™ approach invites organizations to behave as if learning through work is king.

In our view, Peter Honey is right to question the obsession with content, curriculum and even tutored inputs when so much more can (and will) be achieved if organizations are encouraged to envision the possibilities for learning at work, using the work itself as the main vehicle.

Ultimately, in our experience there is no better way to experience the transformational power of action learning than to try it for yourself. We also find that our associates then become evangelists in their own right, partly as they reflect on the personal growth that has occurred – confidence, purpose, direction, new skills, insights, experiences, clarity of thinking – the list is an endless one. Here are two recent testimonies that illustrate this:

Dynamic quality assurance (DQA)

IMCA's philosophy is that quality improvement is best viewed as a dynamic process, founded on self review of what is going well and not so well. If there are problems, it is important to know what they are in real time and just as important, what corrective action is needed to enhance the learning experience for each and every associate.

IMCA Socrates™ uses a quarterly progress review mechanism to track applications, part of an annual re-certification cycle that concludes each year with an annual operational report and meeting. One system user went a step further than the annual review cycle documentation. The lead team kept a corporate learning log and wrote a book about their own learning journey, with inputs from many of the stakeholders. Here is an extract (written in the form of 'action learning lessons') from 97 contributions to the book: 'Performance-based degrees earned at work' now reprinted, in second edition format and available from www.Amazon.com. This extract capture the experiences and reflections of 'hands on' action learners as they discover for themselves its power and potential.

Action learning lessons learned: 62 – Learning versus training
The author of this action learning lesson is general manager of a large facilities management customer account, Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

During the past twenty-seven years I have had the opportunity to manage several large custodial, maintenance, and ground operations, employing in total over 4,000 people. I realized early in my career that, in order to be successful, I had to make a sincere commitment and effort to assist my team in developing the requisite skills necessary to effectively reflect the company's purpose and mission. I strongly desired to create an environment where employees contributed all of their talents and skills to the success of organizational goals. I have always believed that there is workplace stress. In that spirit of thinking, I have embraced dozens of training programs and philosophies intended to create this desired result.

Throughout my career, I have spent hundreds of hours implementing and participating in training sessions and have always found the results to be the same: nobody really seemed to learn anything. Of course, there are always a few employees that take something positive from the training sessions and attempt to apply it, but eventually they seemed to always return to their old operating habits. Quite frankly, this outcome always puzzled me. I could not understand why nobody learned. This phenomenon plagued me for years until, recently, I was introduced to the Sodexho University and the process of action learning. Let me qualify my position with a few examples. During my seven years with this company, I have witnessed first-hand what I have considered to be some the best training manuals and training initiatives. I soon realized that most of this great information is fragmented throughout several different manuals, and that no one centralized training philosophy existed. It seemed to me that great minds were working independently to formulate what they believed were training concepts that would accomplish our company's goal of operational consistency. However, the results were always the same: no real learning occurred.

Perplexed by their own inability to effect desired results, I overheard many trainers, human resources (HR) professionals, and above-the-unit level leaders express why they felt their training was ineffective. They realized that the information was fragmented and had to be extracted from dozens of training manuals and compiled into one source, taking the best of all ideas and practices to create training concepts that would accomplish their goal of operational consistency. Soon thereafter came the birth of project B.U.I.L.D. Many of our company's greatest minds contributed their talents and skills to create this training initiative. I was also involved in the early stages of project B.U.I.L.D.'s development, and many of our best practices from our Providence Facilities account are evident throughout this training program.

Upon completion and review of project B.U.I.L.D., I personally considered it to be one of the best training programs. I believed that this program was going to work, as it was geared towards providing tools and management concepts that would eventually have all of our managers and general managers operating on the same level. After months of preparation and implementation, and a great deal of enthusiasm, I excitedly made my observations. Disappointingly, the results were still the same: no real learning had occurred. Quite honestly, I could not believe it myself! How could this great work not be effective? Other outstanding programs followed, such as S.S.L.P. and train the trainer, created by individuals that have a real passion for developing people. Brilliant professionals with great ideas, attempting time and again, to create programs that hopefully would be effective; however, again: no real learning occurred. Soon came 'the blame game,' especially geared towards the facilities groups. I heard some say, 'The facilities groups are resistant to change. They are tough groups that simply do not want to be trained; they are difficult to reach.' Although there is some truth to that belief, it does not adequately explain the training failings, nor does it solve the problem. Our managers did not engage the 'web of influence' necessary for operational success; there was great inconsistency from unit to unit regarding community outreach policies, political affiliations, being vulnerable at renewal time, the inability or unwillingness to work together to accomplish our company's mission and goals. I would repeatedly ask myself, 'What is the problem with `traditional' training? Why aren't people learning?'

Over the past few years, I have engaged in numerous conversations with my peers from different units, have recalled my past experiences from training sessions, and have formulated the following opinion as to why traditional training is ineffective. My first observation is what I call, 'choke-on training.' For example, project B.U.I.L.D., S.S.L.P., and train the trainer took hundreds of hours to develop and hundreds of thousands of dollars to implement. The intention was to roll it out across the country in 2-3 day training sessions. How can we take hundreds of hours of great work and cram it into someone's brain in just sixteen hours? Most people cannot compute that amount of information in such a short time. The end result is my second observation: 'boredom and frustration.'

Ask most managers and trainers what obstacles they face in participating and conducting what we hope will be effective training, and you are likely to hear 'boredom' and 'frustration' as the top reasons. Simply stated, most workers are bored with most training sessions. The result of this boredom is that employees fail to retain important information. Even the trainers learn to take up this position and excuse the process. They know nobody really wants to be there. They make comments such as, 'If everyone cooperates, returns from breaks on time, and actively participates, we will do everything we can to get everybody out of here as quickly as possible.' What is wrong with this picture? Well, it assumes on every level - from the trainers to the trainees - that they are simply carrying out rote functions with the sole purpose of finishing as soon as possible. While I think we would all agree that most employees genuinely appreciate training and the sincere efforts of training coordinators, my experience has shown me that most people are bored and frustrated with current training formats and programs. For some trainers, boredom and frustration may not appear to be significant obstacles to a training environment. After all, how many students enjoy every course they have to study, and what is wrong with a little boredom anyway? Not everything can be fun and exciting, right? Wrong! The problem with this line of reasoning is that boredom and frustration usually result in poor retention of important information and a subsequent lack of learning. Failure to learn important information is harmful to operational integrity and our future as a company. It was not until this past year that I understood the difference between a 'training environment' and a 'learning environment,' and I have learned this through the action learning process.

Our company began its action learning program in our Providence Facilities account in June of 2002, and over the past year the results have been amazing. Our management team has grown intellectually, and now has more respect for each other's ideas and contributions. We have learned that, to be successful, we need each other's cooperation and support. We have learned that working together to solve real work problems not only creates the necessary solutions, it also makes our jobs easier. For years, I have heard the 'team concept,' 'the team, the team,' but I have never really seen it work until now. Our team now understands that we must be in a continuous learning node and that our previous style of training no longer applies. We have to accurately assess our operational needs and plan learning accordingly. Creating relationships and strategies for account retention has always been at the top of the list of training initiatives. What better way to evaluate the effectiveness of training than to have our participants demonstrate, in writing, what they have learned? We are always concerned with whether or not our managers are doing everything possible in the process of renewing our business. Through action learning, we are required to demonstrate what actions we have taken, and submit, in project form, a team plan in order to secure the renewal of the account. The same applies to all of our other training objectives: they can all be achieved by having our employees prove what they have learned.

We now have custodians writing comprehensive business plans and facilities smart books, creating training videos, understanding the importance of our company's mission and values, and, as they themselves have stated, attempting to 'clearly understanding the big-picture,' and sharing it enthusiastically with their peers. We have a new level of excitement at our unit, something that I have never experienced before. I am proud to be part of an organization that has figured out how to properly educate its people. To have a workforce with a learning state of mind will certainly separate us from our competitors. Through this initiative and the action learning process, we will soon have a workforce unlike any other - one that is truly receptive to learning. Sodexho University is a forum where all the great work that has been developed by our leaders in training can now be utilized through the concept of learning instead of simply training.

Is the customer always right?

Most workplace educators would agree with this question, but do testimonials, tracking systems and even books written by IMCA Socrates™ users provide sufficient evidence that a return on investment in learning has been secured? In our view, this is a key question, as our quest is to integrate learning and work so that they interdependent. If business leaders truly believe that they can design their own action learning pathways to find solutions to their own problems, using their best and brightest people, then they will lead from the front and champion the power of accredited action learning at work. Who can argue with that?

References

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