

## How did the IMCA Socrates™ system evolve?

The business literature contains much anecdotal evidence about the difficulty of trading in the internet age. Indicators of corporate survival vary: the average life of a UK business was once thought to be around 50 years, yet in the US, some 40 percent of the Fortune 500 listed companies simply ceased to exist during the period from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. The former CEO of General Electric, US, Jack Welch made this prediction: 'Drive change or it will drive you.'

IMCA needed to heed this warning too. It was founded by educational pioneers at a time when access to higher education was limited. Then came the globalization period when universities began to export their brands and develop their overseas markets. Meanwhile IMCA had developed a global partner network, with tutored inputs from local action learning facilitators. But without a brand name - for IMCA has always sought to encourage its customers to find 'own brand' solutions - it faced a dilemma: Should it seek to compete with the myriad universities or align itself with one or more in partnership?

### What ideally, does industry actually want from an educational provider?

The notion that management learning should first and foremost meet the needs of business clearly makes sense. Hence it seems almost inconceivable that it has taken over 50 years, endless debate about organizational learning, and a virtual revolution in working attitudes, practices and environment, for the workplace-focused action learning approach to gain mainstream acceptance. The irony is that hitherto undervalued action learning, introduced as far back as the 1930s, literally mirrors business imperatives. It strongly promotes change. It actively encourages team working. It empowers and motivates managers. And, crucially, it brings a tangible return on investment because of its focus on tackling workplace challenges. What other management training concept offers this?

Perhaps the fundamental issue is whether or not management development is really worth the investment. This raises a series of questions: Is what is studied relevant to the business? Will it actually help managers in their jobs? How much time will it take? The perceived problem is that mainstream management education is overly broad in scope, expensive, time-consuming, takes managers away from their work and seems to offer few, if any, tangible benefits to the sponsor. It also tends to be excessively academic, focusing on static theories and past case studies. As such it almost inevitably offers yesterday's answers - hardly appropriate in today's fast developing and ever more competitive business world.

Our challenge was to craft an alternative and then use it to secure a unique market position where IMCA Socrates™ could play a meaningful future role in promoting action learning at work.

### Three key propositions...

As our starting point, we reflected on IMCA's pioneering concept of an 'own brand' enterprise school of management (ESM) to identify some of the key parameters that would address key contemporary challenges:

(P1) Training and learning can be used to accelerate change and development.

If the strategic goals for the enterprise are aligned and integrated with the pathways for training and learning, then 'value added' for each and every employee and for the enterprise as a whole will be created.

(P2) Internet technology can be used to provide associate support - any time and in any place.

The ability to disseminate new material quickly is now the expected norm. So with internet-resourcing, employees can learn 'just-in-time' and apply new knowledge to new tasks.

(P3) Radical learning solutions can be crafted from an own brand corporate business school structure.

An own brand corporate business school (CBS) can create a truly market-driven career development system, interlinked with external training and learning providers.

The ESM concept had been formulated and refined at MCB University Press (among other firms), a dynamic and rapidly expanding publishing company, and the emergent themes were the need for a learning process that:

- Is uniquely tailored to the organizational agenda;
- accelerated, building on existing experience, skills and training at all management levels;
- integrates career development and change management priorities;
- facilitates a measurable return on investment;
- is independently accredited, with recognized qualifications and professional standing;
- is captured as corporate insight for others in the organization to draw upon.

To systemize these and other ideals, we had to create a generic system that could be customized by the user and codified so as to ensure sufficient clarity and rigour at all stages in the action learning cycle. In essence, it had to be:

- Comprehensive, customizable and internet-resourced;
- capable of facilitating different access levels for managers at various stages in their careers;
- able to recognize prior learning and experience;
- flexible in learning design terms, so that busy practitioners would want to engage in action learning pathways, with credit accumulation for outputs and applications, leading to professional qualifications;
- positioned so that system is part of the infrastructure support - not controlling the learning process;
- capable of adjustment to reflect ever-changing organizational imperatives and enable the incorporation of proprietary training and development resources.

### From ESM to IMCA Socrates™

As we knew that the ESM concept had worked well in past, we set about updating it and defining the procedures for a single, installable educational system that would fit with the emerging corporate university movement. Among other projects, we benchmarked our credit accumulation system against traditional university providers and worked out a simple formula for converting credit to word equivalence so that we design outputs that are consistent and comparable to best practice at IMCA and elsewhere.

Along the way we also discovered that the term corporate university is not universally appealing and so we felt that we might best define our system as a complete corporate business school solution. Its purpose of course, is to support own brand learning, but we had to describe the essence of our new educational system to prospective users. Eventually, we came up with a name: IMCA Socrates™ inspired by the thinking of Socrates, the Greek philosopher who encouraged his pupils to reflect and to ask questions in their quest for knowledgeable solutions. IMCA Socrates™ is closely aligned with the training and development community, the needs of industry and commerce and via its outcomes focus, champions the emerging professional paradigm.

The main product development phase took place over two-year period, commencing in 2001 with several blue chip European companies, all of whom fully implemented the system. Among other aspirations, we wanted to create an educational system that could be embedded in the business so as to sustain long-term partnerships, characterized by widescale involvement at low unit cost. In so doing, we hoped to become integral to the dual activity of learning and working - IMCA past achievements at both Prudential and St. Helier NHS Trust respectively.

### Shaping a competitive edge..

Historically our work indicates that managers who use action learning to develop themselves are more loyal to their employer in the longer term. IMCA Socrates™ draws on this and on the strategic challenges of the user organization to create a framework that is:

- Tailored to the organizational imperatives, focused on the business agenda and on workplace challenges;
- determined by the issues, realities and best practices;
- able to demonstrate a return on investment, increasing managers' value to the organization, and offering measurable improvements to the bottom line;
- facilitated via internet-based resourcing and communications - this transforms the cost base and ensures comprehensive access to databases and other knowledge resources;
- integral to personal career development.

IMCA had devoted considerable time and resource to the task of developing with its customers, a next generation, international system with the capacity to promote and sustain an emerging professional paradigm for workplace education. This is much more broadly defined than academic, course-based frameworks and as such, it represents a step change in IMCA's work with industry and commerce. It is transforming our own structures and notions of action learning - and it has been difficult - as with any organization, we are proud of our roots but also bound by them. Where next then? The final two papers set out our view of the future.

Source: Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.