Reflections upon Change Management and the use of Action Learning

This report reflects upon the change to the traditional learning environment at Casula High School. To assist this, Change Management Principals and Action Learning were used to engage staff in the design and implementation of the new system. This paper will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Action Learning as well as outline and discuss what would be done differently next time Action Learning was used.

Action Learning has proven itself to be a very successful way of implementing change due to its strengths. The particular strengths that assisted in the change to the traditional learning environment and the implementation of the MOODLE Learning Management System (LMS) have been identified as Action Learning's structured framework, its engagement of participants, structured collaboration by using Change Management Set meetings and the concept of learning while doing. Concerns were identified during the course of the implementation included problems comprehending and using Action Learning on a system that may be foreign to most participants. These strengths and concerns, in regards to Action Learning will be discussed in detail.

Structured framework

Having a structured framework to follow assisted with the change by giving clear guidance to the participants. Action Learning assisted in guiding the participants through the development and implementation of the new LMS. It was of great aid and gave guidance when problems or confusion was encountered because the

action learning process could be consulted. This had been of great assistance when deciding how best to implement the change and again when the change had been approved and the design had been agreed upon. In both instances the process stalled as the Change Management Set was unsure what to do next. By consulting the Action Learning process outlined by Pedler (1997) directions on how to proceed became clear and the process was able to continue.

Engaging the participants

An important strength of Action Learning was that it greatly assisted in engaging the participants in the change (McGil & Beaty, 2001). Creating a Change Management Set where the members were considered equal and allowed to openly discuss their ideas for the change allowed fresh ideas and different perspectives to be brought forward (Marquardt, 2006). By engaging the participants' staff created a genuine attachment to the work they were doing on the MOODLE; they felt empowered to change procedures that they had become used too (Mumford, 1991) and this encouraged them to work harder on the change. Their attachment to it drove their will to see it succeed. Additionally as the participants developed their skills and knowledge, individuals then took on leadership roles in developing and sharing what they learnt by using their own initiative. Action Learning's ability to develop leadership skills in participants has also been identified by Lachlan and Maldonado (1998).

Structured collaboration

In busy school it can often be difficult to schedule team meetings however Action Learning's regular meetings, along with the meeting structure quickly became a key strength. Spence (1998) suggests a time limit of 30 mins where the typical rules include each team member discussing their progress and challenges since the last meeting and then allowing the Change Management Set to reflect upon this with open-ended questions. Spence also recommends that Set meetings be ended with a summary of the progress made and each member writing a set of action items for themselves.

This process was used by the Change Management Set and greatly assisted in the success of the change; following these rules allowed a level of control to be applied to the Set meetings. When discussions went off track or discussions became long winded, the rules, along with the time limit, allowed the meeting to be brought back on track.

Learning while doing

The final strength of Action Learning seen during the change to the new LMS was the ability to implement a change while learning about it (Revans, 2007). As Set members learnt about the MOODLE while implementing the change, a considerable amount of time was saved as only the essential skills were learnt.

The implementation action learning process did also throw up some challenges as participant had to learn about the MOODLE's back-end (server management) and front-end (user interface) while actually implementing the new system. This created a lot of trial and error testing to find out what would work best for the new system. Working in this manner potentially slowed down the implementation as little or no progress was made while members were trying to figure out how to best achieve a

specific goal. If participants had a strong understanding of the MOODLE LMS system prior to implementing the change, perhaps from prior projects or training, progress may have been quicker.

These problems need to be put into context with the corresponding strengths of action learning. If participants' attendant MOODLE implementation/management courses prior to the implementation there would have been a substantial cost and time aspect. Prior training may have removed delays but the learning while doing that took place also ensured that staff learnt only what they needed to know at that point in time. So there is a trade-off, learning 'on the go' may cause some delays in progress, but learning only what was needed saves time (and money).

Reflections on Action Learning

The concept of Action Learning was also a challenge to the Change Management Set. Action Learning's introduction as a methodology for change cased confusion about what it actually meant. Initially it was seen as the same as "learning through doing" and may have initially been discounted as such. However further explanation and focus on the principles and control Action Learning provides helped to highlight the differences. Prior to this the lack of understanding was a weakness in that Action Learning was seen as a gimmick with little meaning or substance. Wallace (1990) discusses this same issue in his article 'Can Action Learning Live Up to Its Reputation?' This problem was not helped by the fact that Revans, the creator of Action Learning, has never given a concise definition on what Action Learning is (Koo, 1999).

There were also concerns about applying untested principles, such as Action Learning to a new untested and critical system, such as the new LMS. Learning

about the system while implementing it, was seen as dangerous, prone to failure or at least budget and time blowouts. This was overcome because there were experienced system administrators and even MOODLE administrators available and active within the Change Management Set, this with the fact that the MOODLE was to be used as an "add-on" feature to the schools traditional learning environment, meant that the risks were nominal.

Upon reflection of the Action Learning process and the feedback gathered, it was agreed by the Change Management Set that the use of Action Learning was successful.

Concerns in using Action Learning

Since the use of Action Learning in the implementation of the Casula High School MOODLE was seen as a success it was difficult for the Change Management Set to point out what would be done differently next time, however there were concerns identified in the meetings. These were working involve; the rigidity of the action learning process, how critical the system that is to change, and if prior training is need.

The rules and principles of Action Learning can be applied to rigidly and at times it can be difficult to conduct the Change Management Set meeting in the allocated time, which in turn generates a lot of informal meetings that all members may not be privy to. A more flexible approach to Action Learning may be needed such as the one discussed in "*What is Action Learning?* (1996)" which adapts the principals to better suit the needs of the Change Management Set participants.

The Set agreed that using Action Learning on a critical system may not be ideal as it drastically increases the pressure to the implementation team (Set). Extensive testing can help but with the lack of experience the participants may doubt their abilities and skills because they are learning while doing (Dick, 2000). It was decided that if Action Learning was used again, it would not be on a mission critical system unless Set members had extensive knowledge in the area.

Knowledge of the system to being implemented or changed was also identified as something that should be of concern. Otherwise action learning participants must partake in learning through books or the Internet, in an informal manner or if time and or money are available, a level of formal training in the subject matter. As mentioned by Spence, (1998) having a subject matter expert as part of the Set or on hand to consult would also assist.

In conclusion Action Learning has shown itself as being an effective method to enhance change management. It is especially useful when implementing and managing change were the participants' understanding of the change is limited. Keeping this in mind, it is also important to ensure that enough support and time is provided to the participants. The strengths of Action Learning assisted in ensuring that the change to a MOODLE LMS at Casula High School was successful and in particular, ensured that participants were engaged in the change.

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