

# Business-led management development

*Bruce Nixon*

## **The Authors**

Bruce Nixon, *Bruce Nixon is an Independent Consultant based in Berkhamsted, UK.*  
*Tel/Fax: 01442 864856*

## **Abstract**

Organizations face a tidal wave of global economic, technological and social change. To survive and thrive in this situation, leaders need to engage the intelligence and commitment of the whole workforce and other stakeholders. Traditional management development is not up to the job when the name of the game is survival. We need new approaches, which focus on the real opportunities and problems of managers, deliver direct benefit to the business and provide a model for empowering the whole workforce. Describes an approach called "real time management development", which meets these criteria.

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## **Traditional approaches**

Traditional management development tends to focus on knowledge and skills. The knowledge and skills offered are usually based on some kind of analysis of need or, more commonly today, core competences identified as crucial to the success of the organization. A panoply of methods may be used to teach managers or, more properly, "facilitate their learning", including talks by authoritative speakers or top managers, lectures, discussions, role plays, case studies, psychometric instruments, outdoor exercises and a variety of other contrived experiences.

We do not wish to belittle this sort of approach. It has a value, particularly when basic skills are lacking. Such experiences may be a stage in a manager's journey. But these ways of working do present a number of problems. To a large extent the manager is disempowered in this scheme of things. The trainer, not the manager, is the star (sometimes becoming the fallen star). The trainer is cast as entertainer, magician, even guru. The relationship is one of dependency, not a partnership of equals. The situation mirrors the hierarchy back in the organization. The trainer is in control, not the manager, despite worthy efforts to involve her or him. These efforts are not enough, as the manager, the customer, needs to be responsible for and in charge of his or her learning; she or he needs to be the star. We live in a world where the workforce has to be empowered and leadership widespread and at every level. Learning design needs to reflect these new conditions. If it is incongruent with empowerment and essentially reflects the ego or control needs of trainers it is conveying wholly inappropriate cultural messages.

There is another problem with the old methodology. It makes the assumption that there is a body of knowledge and skill that needs to be taught and, often, that everyone's needs in

a group are essentially the same. This is reflected in a programme or curriculum, which is divided into subjects that need to be taught. Neither of these assumptions is true. Today we are in a situation where things are changing fast, where there is uncertainty, confusion and chaos, and where people are starting to value and come to terms with the importance of diversity. We need to be in *discovery*, not teaching, mode and the best thing trainers can do is facilitate and join their customers in a partnership of learning and developing - get off their pedestals like everyone else needs to do.

There are other problems too! Today the name of the game for people and businesses is survival. Survival requires continuous improvement and learning. We simply cannot justify any development that does not obviously and directly contribute to the survival goal. Traditional methods are confronted with the problem of transferring learning and, consequently, evaluation. Neither, in my experience, is ever tackled satisfactorily, nor can they be with the didactic model. The onus for evaluation is usually placed on the trainers, not the managers. If the benefits cannot be demonstrated, it is the responsibility of the trainers; they got it wrong, not the managers! So the managers can avoid taking responsibility - which is just the opposite of what is needed in business today. We need an approach that is completely different, is not didactic, puts the managers in charge and is focused on *business survival* from the start, and the learning comes out of that - not the other way round.

Finally, there is another flaw in traditional approaches: the assumption that in order to develop, managers only need knowledge and skill. This is hopelessly incomplete. To thrive, learn and do good work involves heart and soul, spirit, attitudes, energy, intuition, emotions and feelings. All these need to be included in our quest and, finally, if we are to move mountains and succeed against the odds we need to plan, act bravely, get support, celebrate, agonize, review honestly what we have done and make paradigm shifts. In my experience there is not much of all this in the traditional course. Different ways - real time management development.

Revans[1] saw the inadequacies of these approaches long ago and started a shift in a different direction, but his action learning became a bandwagon, almost "the way" and a good source of income for followers. It has limitations and does not seem to have developed. No one way can be sufficient. We need constantly to search for, discover and develop ways of working that are in tune with our times - rather than worship at one altar. There is a burgeoning of creativity at the moment: community building[2]; future search[3]; open space technology[4]; real time strategic change[5].

I should like to describe a method I have been evolving over the past 20 years or so in a wide variety of settings: insurance, avionics, information technology, higher education, retail, the probation service, the prison service, local government, pharmaceuticals, health care and consulting. It does not fully address the difficulties I have described but it goes some way towards doing so.

### **Principles for real time management development**

We start with some principles or guidelines:

- The stars or heroes are the managers.
- The content of the drama is their own work, their businesses, their opportunities, their vision and enthusiasm, their issues, their triumphs, their energy and excitement, their new insights and learning.
- That subject matter is the richest seam from which to learn and there is no need for any other speakers, instruments, role plays, case studies or any other contrived exercises. Between us we have the necessary resources and need no external authorities.
- There needs to be both a degree of structure and huge flexibility. Relatively little needs to be pre-planned - apart from a core structure - or prepared for, and as safety grows the whole thing needs to be spontaneous and get out of control.
- The job of the trainers is to be partners with the managers, set the scene, brief, reassure that it will work, offer ways of working, facilitate and increasingly step aside. It is important that the trainers behave congruently with empowering their clients and do not indulge their ego or control needs.
- We need to create a community and a laboratory in which we can try out new, different ways. If they work well we can take them back to the organization, and learn (with delight, not blame) when they do not.
- We are *all* responsible for what happens and for securing major benefit to the business. No scapegoats!
- There needs to be both an initial and a follow-up workshop - after sufficient time to implement plans for change - one workshop is not enough.
- Mechanisms for continuing long-term support need to be created, such as networking and support groups.
- Start small with a pilot group and let the strategy emerge, evolve. No grandiose schemes. Where you start and with whom matters greatly. Go with the energy.

#### Tools

**Tools** I use a few key tools. These are not only for me. They are tools for my clients - tools for working in times of uncertainty, chaos, confusion and huge pressures. The first I call the "empowerment model" (see [Figure 1](#)). It underlies all the work I do with my clients - work with individuals, groups or teams. They can use it similarly when they need to facilitate one another or their teams.

**The Empowerment Model** The model helps managers take responsibility, trust their own thinking, discover the richness and brilliance of their own knowledge and wisdom, review what is going on out there and how well they are responding, be visionary, take powerful action, be honest with themselves and others about their difficulties, and get the help and support of colleagues through all the inevitable set-backs a pioneer faces. Working through this model in small groups is a powerful source of learning and inspiration. Perhaps the visioning stage is the most powerful, provided the vision is based

on an accurate perception of reality - we seem to gain more from applying our energy to how we want things to be in our business rather than putting our energy (sapping our energy perhaps) into difficulties, problems and obstacles. The model starts in a relatively safe area - the situation out there. The rigorous review of how we are responding is tougher because it requires complete honesty with ourselves and others. The really hard part is stage 5. There are three kinds of key issues or obstacles: those out there; those in the team or group we are in; and those within ourselves. The latter are the hardest to admit to and address but, in my experience, they are the most crucial of all. They are the only ones in our power yet paradoxically the ones we are most likely to deny. Yet if we do not tackle them we are only pretending to work on our development. The second category requires a high degree of awareness and willingness to look honestly below the surface.

**Useful Questions** Another model I use I describe as "useful questions":

- What is going well?
- What are the difficulties?
- What are you not happy with?
- What is your thinking about the current situation?
- How do you want to change things?
- How would things be if everything were going well?
- What will get in the way if you do not tackle it?
- What will you do and what support do you need?
- How can I help?

I believe in the elegance of simple models that are memorable, easily accessible, unpretentious and likely to be widely used by people at any level.

This model is useful for collecting data, building relationships, helping people review their performance, learn and decide the way ahead. It can form the basis for the design of a follow-up workshop or for a support group meeting. "What is going well?" is an important place to start. It helps if people realize just how well they are doing despite the difficulties they face. Most people (not all) underestimate themselves and are over self-critical. They will think far better and find it easier to be open if they affirm themselves first by acknowledging their triumphs. "What is difficult?" provides important data about obstacles and issues, but it also provides a much-needed opportunity to share and express feelings. Feelings are important data but, also, most of us think a lot better after "getting things off our chests". Our energy tends to come back too. When we share our difficulties and feelings we gain a great deal of relief from realizing that we are all in the same boat. The other questions gently move the person to a commitment to act and seek the support that may make all the difference.

I believe that one of the most important skills that leaders need today is the art of giving and getting a good listening to. We can do this on a "co-counselling" basis, i.e. each in turn listening to the other, sharing an agreed period of time equally. This model provides a useful basis for such meetings. They can be quite short. They also model partnership - a key form of relationship in modern enterprise. A strategy for introducing real time management development

**An Evolving Strategy** In helping my client organizations develop an evolving strategy I try to keep the following well-known consulting model in my mind and function as a consultant, not as a trainer:

- gaining entry;
- developing a clear agreement;
- collecting data;
- making a diagnosis;
- planning a change;
- implementing change;
- evaluating, monitoring, and reviewing;
- withdrawing.

Note that ownership will be strongest when the key stages of bringing about change are carried out by the client with the support of the consultant.

**Partnership** Early on in the relationship with the organization I try to identify a partner - probably someone in human resource development who thoroughly understands the organization, is astute, respected, has the courage and vision to embark on a bold enterprise and has good facilitating skills.

**Initial Stages** We meet and plan the initial stages of an intervention. Essentially we too work round the empowerment model. We decide where to start - where and with whom we are most likely to have an initial success which will really contribute to the surviving and thriving of the enterprise and bring the intervention a high degree of credibility. A useful maxim is "start where the energy is". We choose another partner, this time a respected, astute and otherwise suitable representative of the target client group who will work with us as a fellow consultant in collecting and diagnosing data, developing a proposed intervention, presenting it to the client group and preparing for and facilitating the work. The first stages of a typical initial or pilot intervention are:

**1 Planning meeting with internal partner.** Her/his diagnosis, vision, strategy, planning initial intervention, choice of facilitators.

**2 Contracting with chief executive:**

- Her/his diagnosis, vision, expectations.
- Is she/he willing to stick with a long-term intervention?
- How willing to be open and have others be open with her/him?

**3 Planning meeting with facilitator team.** Diagnosis, vision, strategy, "charter" on how we will treat one another, team building, initial plans, selection of participants.

**4 Consultations with participants.** Their diagnosis, what they want to change, key issues, expectations and their advice.

**5 Involving other key stakeholders:**

- informing them;
- asking for their data, diagnosis, advice and support.

**6 Design of Workshop I:**

- based on key issues of participants;
- skilling of facilitator team.

**7 Presentation to chief executive, her/his team and other stakeholders.**

**8 Presentation to participants.** Their diagnosis, the workshop and how the team designed it, objectives, approach and methods.

**Initial Strategy** In my experience it is folly to develop more than an initial strategy as long-term strategy needs to emerge.

The first eight steps in this strategy are about gaining entry with our clients, the participants, and any key stakeholders such as the chief executive; developing trust with them; collecting data from them; diagnosing together the key issues faced by the organization; helping them build a picture or vision of how they want things to be; consulting them fully about how we will work together; preparing them for the fact that it will be a completely different experience; getting the data we need to create a good design and to prepare ourselves, and helping them prepare themselves fully to take advantage of the opportunity. Contracting with the chief executive and his or her team so they can contribute to the thinking and see clearly how the work will benefit the business is likely to be crucial.

**The subsequent stages of the initial strategy are:**

- Workshop I;
- implementation;
- support groups meet;
- further consultation;

- design Workshop II, based on current diagnosis of needs and key issues;
- Workshop II;
- continuing implementation and support group meetings;
- facilitator team reviews and plans emerging management development strategy, consulting participants and other key stakeholders.

These provide a structure to support the managers in bringing about long-term changes and improvements in their businesses or parts of businesses. The support groups need some explanation. They are self-selected small groups, formed during the workshops, which continue to meet between and following the workshops to provide long-term support. The bulk of the work in the workshops is done in these support groups. The workshops

**Workshop I** can be shown as:

- building the climate - contracting and forming support groups;
- rigorously reviewing the current situation and our/my response to it;
- developing a vision for the future;
- deciding key strategic actions;
- identifying and working on key issues - the "flexible programme";
- planning action including support;
- commitments and review.

**Workshop II** The structure of Workshop II is:

- recreating the climate;
- rigorous review of progress since Workshop I - successes, difficulties, changes in the situation, learning, what now needs to be done, best use of workshop, i.e. new issues;
- core programme for common issues;
- "flexible programme" for individual issues or issues shared with others;
- further planning, including support;
- final commitments and advice on next steps in management development strategy.

It will be evident to the reader that both workshops reflect the consulting model; that Workshop I is based on the empowerment model ([Figure 1](#)) and Workshop II on "useful questions" (see list of questions in the "Tools" subsection).

**The first part of Workshop I is spent creating the sort of climate in which the managers will work best and learn most.** Significantly, this is almost always the climate they want back in the workplace too (i.e. a climate of partnership and community rather than competition). They also declare their goals for the workshop in terms of both business and personal development. They introduce themselves in a way which involves sharing more openly and deeply than is usual. This requires taking big risks and trusting others. It enables people to choose who they want to work with in support groups. It is almost always an inspiring and uplifting process. The participants then work round the model in small groups (the support groups) led by a tutor, often facilitating one another and giving feedback. Managers value enormously the sharing of experience that takes place in this way. We come together at the end and beginning of each day to share benefits and learning and review whether the process is working well and, if not, decide what is required. We also carry out reviews whenever they seem to be needed.

**The "flexible programme"** - some people call it "open space"<sup>[4]</sup> - is an interesting process. It comes into play at stage 5 of the empowerment model. At this point participants identify key issues (or, simply, work they want to do) in the total system of the organization, in their own group or team, or in themselves. We ask them to speak briefly on the issues on which they most want to work and post a simple summary in "picture gallery" form. The tutors then offer a simple framework of time slots and places and point out the options of working alone, working in pairs, working in groups or working in the whole group. We then step aside and let people create what they want. Now they fully take charge of their learning and organize it. Experience has taught me to keep out, not to attempt to organize it but let it emerge. It is exciting, frightening and, thus far, it invariably works.

**One managing director went off into the nearby hills for half a day** and came back clear about what he had to do. Another top executive worked with a tutor on his relationship with his son, which was also a way of working on his relationship with his team of highly-paid professionals. In another situation the whole group wanted to work on gender issues and how they held back the top team. This took the form of a woman and a man sorting out their relationship while the rest of the team simply gave their individual attention. We all learned a lot. On another occasion it involved the male directors learning to listen to their women colleagues! Another whole group worked on resolving how the need for individual accountability and corporacy could be reconciled. Often people take the opportunity to resolve or start resolving key interpersonal issues which nearly always boil down to changing their own attitudes or behaviour. Sometimes people use the chance to pick brains, acquire expertise that is in the group or simply build bridges and forge alliances.

Managers find it exciting and refreshing at last to be in charge of their own learning. It releases their enthusiasm. Why has it never happened before?

The nature of Workshop II is probably largely self-evident. We need to spend some time recreating the climate, or "getting there", after a gap of three to four months. The "rigorous review of progress" takes place in support groups - then we share key issues in

whole group and start a new flexible programme, in which we make the best possible use of the time. It is remarkable how both the most important individual and corporate issues which are getting in the way of the business can be addressed and, at least largely, resolved.

Usually in the second workshop people are ready to work on far more fundamental issues and with greater honesty because, by then, sufficient safety has been created. At the end of this second workshop, which has usually been a profoundly valuable experience, we ask the participants for their advice on how we should take this initiative forward.

**Subsequent strategies** for embedding change throughout the organization could be:

- further programmes at same level;
- network events for all past participants;
- facilitator workshops (to enable participants to become facilitators);
- further programmes at higher or lower levels;
- work with top management team;
- cascading through team programmes in participants' units;
- further work with specific corporate key issues that have emerged;
- work with individuals;
- large-scale workshops involving representatives of all stakeholders at all levels.

**Programmes of this kind can transform an organization and its culture** I believe programmes of this kind can transform an organization and its culture, but they need to develop organically over a long period of time. They cannot work miracles. That requires committed, energetic, positive people who take responsibility. I believe we need empowered workforces and that means programmes of this type need to embrace people at every level of the organization. This is where we need to be innovative and bold, and find new ways of engaging particularly those who are closest to the customer and engaged in providing the product or the service. Otherwise we are being élitist, self-indulgent and fooling ourselves that we are equipping the organization to survive and thrive. We have to involve the core workers in these processes, turn the hierarchy upside down and see ourselves as stewards and partners[6]. Difficulties and learning.

**Things can go severely wrong** I have portrayed a picture of excitement, energy and managers claiming and demonstrating major benefits to their businesses. More often than not this is what happens. But, as in any pioneering endeavour, things can go severely wrong and sometimes unexpectedly so:

- If the contracting and relationship building with the chief executive has not been done sufficiently well - and sometimes it is not possible to do it well enough - she or he can feel threatened and put a stop to the whole thing.

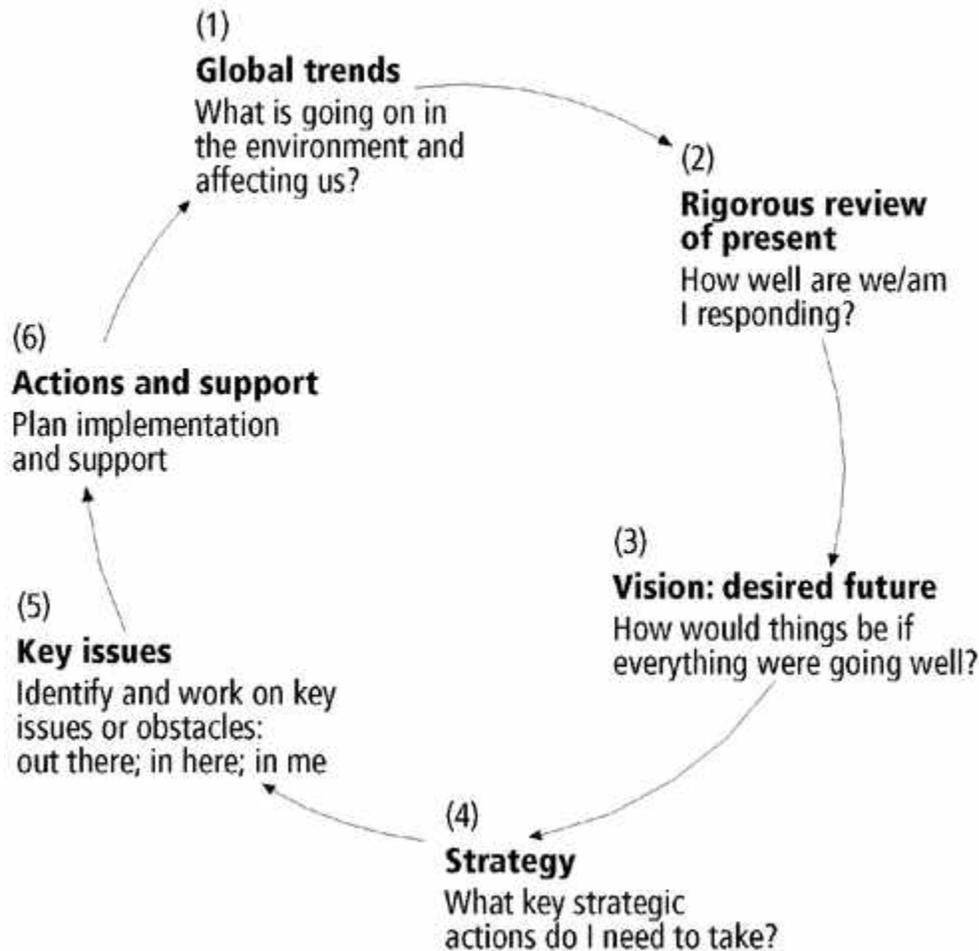
- Despite our best efforts, someone in the tutor team or among the participants with negative energy or egotism can behave competitively or take the focus away from the purpose. As a result, the carefully built credibility of the work can be damaged and set back a long way. We have to acknowledge there is a dark side to the human character and it can emerge unexpectedly.
- Some clients will be resistant, will deny their needs and avoid working on them. As part of this they will blame and criticize and avoid responsibility. To avoid responsibility they may seek out a scapegoat - probably the external consultant! Sometimes it only requires a few people like that to spoil a whole programme. They cannot always be identified beforehand.
- It is easier to start an initiative than to keep the momentum going. People get tired and discouraged. Yet consistent, long-term support over many years is needed to turn round an organization and change the culture from dependency to empowered partnership. The leader of such an initiative needs to transfer ownership astutely to her or his clients and get excellent support and maybe supervision to sustain her/himself; otherwise exhaustion will result and she/he will feel burdened with the responsibility of keeping the momentum going. Inevitably she/he will encounter resistance, sometimes of the most unpleasant kind. It is an inevitable part of paradigm shift. It is hard both to "be there" for people and at the same time to stand outside sufficiently to see it all clearly and remain unscathed. Yet when the most difficult things are happening is precisely when the opportunity is greatest to tackle the most fundamental issues of the organization - if people are willing to do so and the consultant can stay clear and calm.
- The more you involve stakeholders at every level in designing and facilitating workshops and other events, and developing an emerging strategy, the better it works.

## **Conclusion**

I have been describing methods, which I believe can be used at any level to facilitate the continuous improvement and learning essential for organizations to survive and thrive in the global economy, and at a time of major change and re-adjustment. My experience has been with groups of managers or teams - usually ranging from eight to perhaps as many as 30 but more typically about 12. Usually not more than three levels have been involved in one workshop. The work has evolved organically through the organization - trickling upwards, downwards, outwards. It has not usually involved shop floor workers and others face to face with the customer. In other words, my work has been within the hierarchical mode. I am not sure this approach works well enough. I believe if we really want to solve our problems, grasp our opportunities and create truly productive and inclusive workforces we need to find ways of working in one room with all stakeholders (including customers and suppliers) or their representatives and very large groups - so that we can work with the whole system of the organization and engage everyone's (or almost everyone's) hearts and minds. How else can we take seriously the idea that the people closest to the work know most about it? Somehow we need to bring all the many

stakeholders into dialogue. Much greater learning all round will result from this process. That is the next stage for us.

**Figure 1 The empowerment model**



**Figure 1 The empowerment model**

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