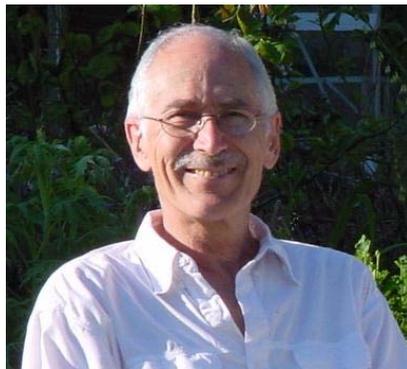# CUTTING EDGE

REAL TIME MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Bruce Nixon

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Organisations face a tidal wave of global economic, technological and social change. To survive and thrive they need to provide quality and value through continuous improvement. I find growing recognition amongst leaders that to achieve this they need to engage the energy, intelligence and co-operation of everyone involved, especially those closest to the customer, product or service. I believe hierarchical, top-down approaches don't work well enough and need to give way to inclusive, whole-system ways if everyone's potential to contribute is to be tapped. In a much quoted statement, Konosuke Matsushita, founder of Matsushita

Electric, argued that the notion that the essence of management is getting the ideas out of the heads of the bosses and into the hands of labour is deeply flawed and outdated. The implication is that we need to engage the whole workforce and other stakeholders (e.g. customers and suppliers) in developing vision and strategy for the business as well as in their implementation. We need to create an empowered workforce in which people understand their interdependence.

Ken Lewis, Ricardo Semler and others have written about the revolution that is going on in how the most progressive organisations do business. Yet, I believe, our methods of developing managers lag far behind. For the most part we are still locked into top-down, didactic, classroom teaching when what is needed in times of chaos and uncertainty is learning, experiment and discovery. Managers are confronted with the incongruity of being urged to create empowered workforces whilst their own development typically consists of being taught pre-determined competences (what entrepreneur or free spirit would put up with this?), talks by experts, top managers or gurus, a variety of contrived experiences and the use of various psychometric instruments. All this can encourage dependency and detract from the idea of finding authority within and using the intelligence of the whole workforce to transform the enterprise. And none of this can be shown to have a direct pay-off for the business at a time when the name of the game is *survival*.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

I have developed a very different approach to management development. It's called Real Time Management Development (RTMD) because the learning comes from working on the real opportunities and issues each manager faces. This is the richest seam for learning. It differs from conventional management development as seen in Figure 1.

I acknowledge that these are two ends of a continuum but I believe we have to push our efforts over to the right hand side. If our goal

Conventional Management Development	Real Time Management Development
The subject matter is predetermined competences and a neat and tidy body of knowledge	The subject is each manager's business and her or his exciting ideas, vision and decisions
Learning has to be transferred to the business afterwards	Learning comes out of working on the business
The trainer is entertainer, guru, magician (and potential `scapegoat', even charlatan	The stars and heroes are the managers
Managers are passive	Managers are active, creative
Trainers in charge and responsible for outcomes	Managers in charge and responsible for outcomes - trainers for method
Everyone's needs are similar	Everyone's needs are different
Pre-planned, prepared and predictable programme or curriculum	Apart from a core method, little is planned - spontaneous, exciting, energising
Unlike the real world	Like the real world
Under control, inflexible	Flexible and gets out of control
Trainers are teachers, experts	Trainers are facilitators and co-explorers in learning and discovery
Benign hierarchy	Interdependent community and laboratory
Methods disempower	Methods empower
Encourage dependency on outside authorities	Encourages inter-dependence and belief in authority within
Business benefit is indirect and speculative	Benefit to the business is direct and observable
Trainers evaluate	Managers evaluate themselves

Figure 1   *Conventional versus Real Time Management Development*

is to create an empowered workforce then our methods of developing people must be congruent with that aim - not methods which encourage dependence. Developers must walk their talk. The rest of this article describes how I have been trying to do this.

STARTING THE PROGRAMME

It is wise to start with a pilot initiative, to be followed by an emerging long-term strategy to transform the organisation. Where and how you start is important. You need to start an RTMD programme where there is the greatest probability of a pay-off. That means targeting potential participants who are ready for change, opinion leaders and people who will make the best use of the opportunity, drawn from as many different parts of the organisation as possible. But include some cynics and sceptics as their views are important. As well as the participant, different stakeholders at various levels need to be involved in planning the RTMD programme, especially the chief executive (or top manager of that part of the organisation) and her or his team. Rigorous contracting with the CEO and the top management team is crucial in most cases. The programme needs to be linked to a key business goal from the start so that everyone can clearly see the programme's relevance to business survival and prosperity. A design team needs to represent participants and ideally other stakeholders. A few facilitators will be chosen from this group. As part of the design work the facilitators need to consult with the participants, collect data, and start helping them to diagnose their key issues and opportunities and think about how they will use the programme. We are building trust, commitment and readiness for change and making sure we get the objectives and design as right as we can. We are also starting to model partnership and empowerment in the way we initiate a programme by involving participants - often after years of imposed courses.

THE METHOD

The core process is based on a simple, easily remembered model (see Figure 2).

The overall design of a typical programme consists of:

- the individual consultations already mentioned;
- half day meeting in which participants and facilitators get together to validate the diagnosis, objectives and design and start building a community;
- a first workshop to develop vision and strategy;
- an initial period of implementation in which members network and meet in support groups;
- a second workshop to review progress, learn from what has happened, work on key issues, plan further changes and propose how the programme should evolve to transform the organisation;
- continuing networking, support group meetings and implementation.

The model provides a basis for all these activities.

First workshop

In a typical first workshop, participants and facilitators begin by building community and partnership. This involves contracting clearly about goals, process, roles and responsibilities and the agreements needed about climate and behaviour that will really support effective work and learning. This aspect is absolutely critical as the workshop can be an inspiring model and laboratory for a more productive way of working back in the workplace. This stage also provides an opportunity for people to start getting to know each other at a deeper level than ever before and learning to be authentic - breaking through the `pseudo community' characterised by superficiality, politeness or niceness that prevails in many organisations.

Participants next create together a picture of the global trends that the organisation faces and their diagnosis of how well it is responding. They then continue to work through the model in pairs or small groups, rigorously reviewing their own response to the situation they face, developing their vision for the organisation, their part of it and themselves, and developing a strategy that will make a decisive difference.

(1)
GLOBAL TRENDS
What is going on in the environment and affecting us?

(2)
RIGOROUS REVIEW OF PRESENT
How well are we/am I *responding*?

(3)
VISION: DESIRED FUTURE
How would things be if everything were going well?

(4)
STRATEGY
What key strategic action do I need to take?

(5)
KEY ISSUES
Identify and work on key issues or obstacles; out there; in here; in me.

(6)
ACTION & SUPPORT
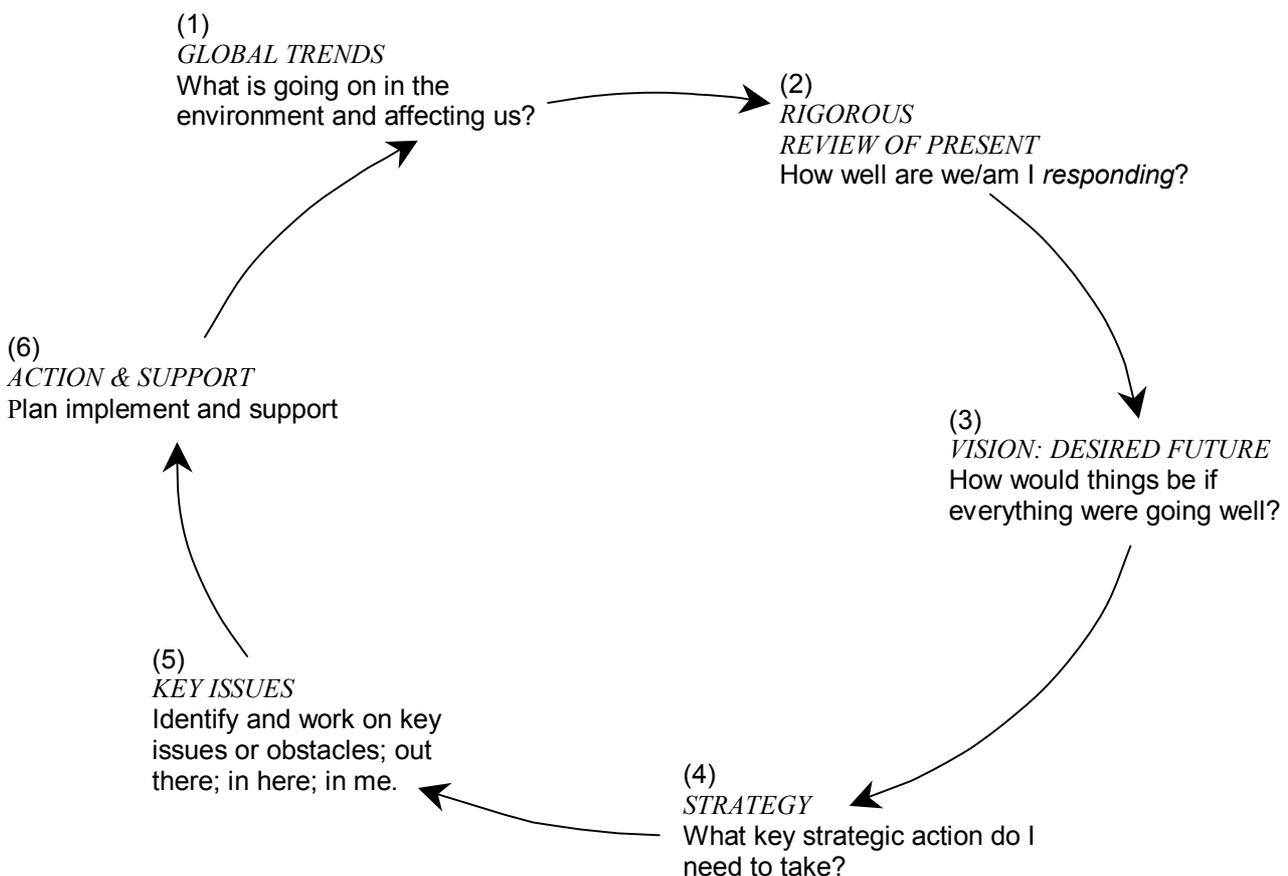Plan implement and support

Figure 2 *Empowerment model*

Then comes stage 5 of the model - identifying and working on key issues. This is where people have the opportunity to be really honest with themselves and with others, and where important personal and organisational learning can take place. It is the point at which participants empower themselves to take charge of their learning and the workshop gets out of control! The facilitators have to resist the temptation to organise. The less they get involved (other than setting the scene and offering themselves as resources) the better it works. Harrison Owen calls this Open Space Technology; I call it a `flexible programme'. People pair up, call meetings, make offers, make requests. Corporate issues get dealt with; relationships get sorted; skills are exchanged; people resolve difficulties; make momentous decisions, or even take a much needed break.

In the final session of the workshop, people make plans for decisive action and share commitments. Reviews are important to make sure everyone is on track. So is letting go at times and having some fun or relaxation. Silly games can relieve tension or spark creativity.

After the first workshop there needs to be a period of several months in which to implement the strategies and plans for change and improvement. During this time the participants are encouraged to network and meet in their groups. This enables them to get the support they need to overcome the inevitable set-backs and difficulties involved in bringing about the desired changes.

Second workshop

The second workshop takes place after this period of implementation: participants and facilitators rebuild the community together; tell stories about what has happened; draw conclusions and learn from that; identify the key issues now to be worked on, and work on them using the flexible programme. Finally, new plans and commitments are made and the group works together on how the development programme should be extended into the rest of the organization and how the participants could be involved in that.

HOW DOES RTMD CHANGE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR?

The method and processes help people adopt new attitudes and behaviour by practising them during the workshops, in support groups, in networking and back on the job. In the workshops and support groups participants develop and use many skills and practices that are vital for survival, among them:

- continuous improvement and learning;
- taking a view that is both global and strategic;
- being visionary;
- welcoming change and upheaval;
- valuing difference and seeking common ground; · adopting behaviour that empowers others;
- creating a challenging and supportive climate;
- using energy, understanding the importance of feeling and using both hemispheres of the brain;
- being really authentic with others;
- using process abilities and helping skills;
- trusting, letting go of control and seeking balance.

Between the first and second workshops people apply these skills to real organisational issues, thereby making important changes which provide them with evidence that this new way of working is more productive, and it gradually becomes part of their everyday working life (see Figure 3).

CREATING CRITICAL MASS AND EMBEDDING CHANGE

This first programme is just the beginning of something that has the potential to transform the organisation. A strategy needs to evolve in an emergent way to change how the organisation does business and it needs to include ways of sustaining and developing the impetus for change. There are all kinds of possibilities. For example, running similar programmes for managers at the same level; cascading the approach down through all levels of the workforce; extending it upwards if it has not started at the top; training managers and other members of the workforce to co facilitate workshops or events for each other's teams; holding large-scale events for past participants (alumni) to provide support for continuing change and improvement.

However the most radical approach is to involve all stakeholders (i.e. the whole system), not just in a `trickle down' process, but in large-scale events that get the whole system together in one room (Weisbord, 1987; Weisbord & Janofi; 1994; and Jacobs, 1994). This is likely to be the direction for the future. Better strategic decisions are made when all stakeholders have built together a common data base and there is likely to be greater commitment when everyone has been involved in the decision-making process. And much new learning comes out of listening to such a diversity of views and being in a position where a leader's credibility depends upon reacting appropriately to them. All eyes are upon you, watching to see if you are genuinely trying to do business in a new way -
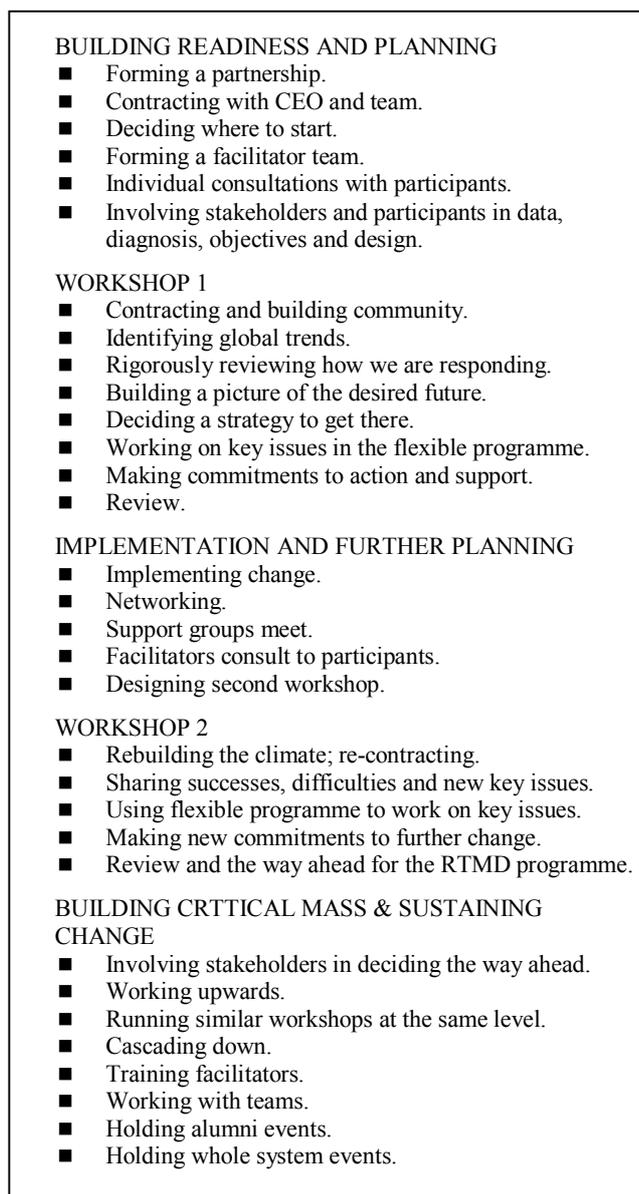
BUILDING READINESS AND PLANNING
- Forming a partnership.
- Contracting with CEO and team.
- Deciding where to start.
- Forming a facilitator team.
- Individual consultations with participants.
- Involving stakeholders and participants in data, diagnosis, objectives and design.

WORKSHOP 1
- Contracting and building community.
- Identifying global trends.
- Rigorously reviewing how we are responding.
- Building a picture of the desired future.
- Deciding a strategy to get there.
- Working on key issues in the flexible programme.
- Making commitments to action and support.
- Review.

IMPLEMENTATION AND FURTHER PLANNING
- Implementing change.
- Networking.
- Support groups meet.
- Facilitators consult to participants.
- Designing second workshop.

WORKSHOP 2
- Rebuilding the climate; re-contracting.
- Sharing successes, difficulties and new key issues.
- Using flexible programme to work on key issues.
- Making new commitments to further change.
- Review and the way ahead for the RTMD programme.

BUILDING CRTTICAL MASS & SUSTAINING CHANGE
- Involving stakeholders in deciding the way ahead.
- Working upwards.
- Running similar workshops at the same level.
- Cascading down.
- Training facilitators.
- Working with teams.
- Holding alumni events.
- Holding whole system events.

Figure 3 *Overview of typical RTMD programme*

sharing power, leadership and control and acting on feedback. Compared with `trickle down', this approach gives far stronger encouragement to managers to behave in an empowering way and to the rest of the workforce to express their views honestly and take responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

The RTMD approach has worked in a wide range of industries including insurance, local government, avionics, higher education, information technology and retail. However there are pitfalls. This method is not magic and its productiveness depends entirely upon on how well everyone uses it and what they put in. Contracting properly with the CEO and gaining her or his understanding and support is crucial. You need a team of facilitators who understand how to work with resistance; who are not self centred or egotistical; and who are really committed to the principles of RTMD and won't slip back into old, didactic ways. You need someone in the organisation with credibility, courage and long-term constancy of vision and purpose to see the project through. When the going gets rough there is such a temptation to give up and try something else just when people are starting to tackle the difficult issues. Organisation development is bedeviled by a succession of fads and fashions. Learning and development is helped by committed partnership, not by a succession of affairs. Despite the pitfalls, given a courageous enlightened leader who is prepared to go down the path of sharing power and control with the workforce, RTMD could be the start of a transformation of the enterprise.

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