Meeting the Challenge of Connexions - Reflections on Organisational Change in a Careers Company

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The pace of change in the careers companies providing services to Connexions Partnerships shows no signs of slowing down. They are starting to develop new strengths as well as drawing on existing ones to rise to the challenge of Connexions. Since they were established in the mid-1990s, careers companies have shown considerable flair for innovation, flexibility and responsiveness to meet changing client and customer needs. This article examines leadership and management in a careers company during the transition process from 'careers service' to 'partner and sub-contractor in a local Connexions Partnership'.

Introduction

Careers Management Kent & Medway (CMKM) is an organisation currently in transition as a result of both internal and external factors. The most influential of these is probably external with the recent introduction of the Connexions Service for young people, a government initiative 'to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood, citizenship and working life' (DfES, 2001) through connecting up the various support agencies available for young people. The careers guidance work that the company delivers as part of this support has become subject to a sub-contracting arrangement with the local Connexions partnership, rather than a direct contract with the regional government office. These contractual changes are having an impact on business planning, targets and objectives, job roles, work practices, inter-agency working, and the size and make-up of local teams. In response, the company has created two new management support roles in each locality team. At the same time, there have been internal structural changes as a result of a corporate job evaluation exercise which has given new responsibilities to 'D' grade careers advisers. As a result of these and other changes, the demands on middle managers are changing significantly both in terms of role priorities and management styles, and it has become an organisational concern to support and develop these 'key players' through the transition process.

This article explores some key concepts of management and leadership to help explain how CMKM is changing and what else needs to happen to enhance organisational effectiveness through the transition process. In particular, it will look at some of the benefits of transformational leadership for an organisation undergoing rapid and significant change. These will be discussed in the context of four current issues which emerged from an analysis of interviews held with seven senior and middle managers, namely: delegation, role clarity, communications and team work. The interviews generated data about the effects of change on managers and their staff, and on perceptions of changing management practices and styles.

Key concepts and frameworks

The McKinsey 7S framework (Carnell, 2003 p.313) is one of a number of models that can be helpful in describing and analysing organisations. It was selected in this case as it considers both 'hard' and 'soft' features and shows graphically the interrelations between them. As an organisation with strong shared values from its tradition of public service and its ethical principle of client-centredness, CMKM can readily identify with a model which shows this as the crucial 'glue' that keeps everything together. An analysis of features plotted within the framework (see Figure1) can become a powerful descriptor and aid for organisational analysis and development.
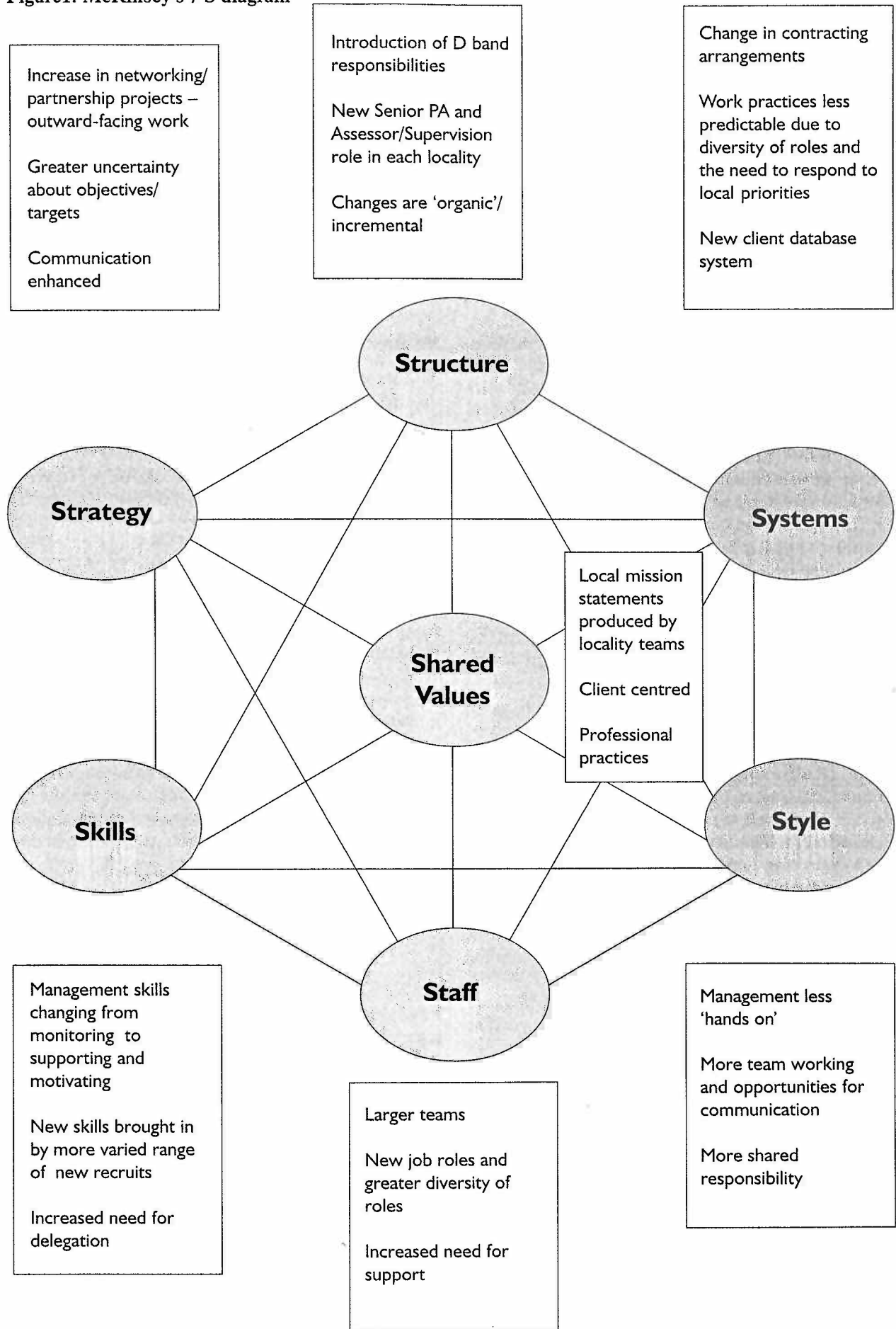
Older definitions of management focused on what managers do, e.g. 'planning, organising, directing and controlling' (Rollinson and Broadfield, 2002 p.60); and suggested a scientific set of skills and competencies aimed at maximising efficiency through these processes of planning, implementing and monitoring. However, a more flexible and useful definition in this context is framed by Pearce and Robinson (1989) in Hannagan (1998, p.4) as:
'the process of optimizing human, material and financial contributions for the achievement of organisational goals'. It moves away from earlier 'administration and control' descriptions which are more appropriate to a stable organisational environment; and towards a more dynamic and innovating model, more appropriate to 'increasingly complex organisations and a rapidly changing economic and social environment' (Hannagan, 1998, p.5).

'Leadership is a slippery thing to define' (Parkin, 2003, p.12), but Buchanan & Huczynski (1997, p.606) suggest that it is 'a social process in which one individual influences the behaviour of others without the use or threat of violence'

Figure1: McKinsey's 7 S diagram

Increase in networking/ partnership projects – outward-facing work

Greater uncertainty about objectives/ targets

Communication enhanced

Introduction of D band responsibilities

New Senior PA and Assessor/Supervision role in each locality

Changes are 'organic'/ incremental

Change in contracting arrangements

Work practices less predictable due to diversity of roles and the need to respond to local priorities

New client database system

Local mission statements produced by locality teams

Client centred

Professional practices

Management skills changing from monitoring to supporting and motivating

New skills brought in by more varied range of new recruits

Increased need for delegation

Larger teams

New job roles and greater diversity of roles

Increased need for support

Management less 'hands on'

More team working and opportunities for communication

More shared responsibility

towards a common aim. Its value within an organisation is as a 'cheaper, less obtrusive and more effective means of control than simply directing people's efforts and maintaining compliance' (Rollison & Broadfield, 2002, p.363) since leadership styles can 'directly impact on motivation, effort and performance' (Bass & Avolio, p.202). The contingency model of leadership 'suggests a requirement for leaders to develop a portfolio of leadership styles' (Bush & Glover, 2003 p.13), selected to suit 'specific circumstances and key situational variables' (Rollison & Broadfield, 2002, p.377). These include not only the relationship between leader and group, and the nature of the task, (Fielder, in Rollison & Broadfield, 2002) but also environmental factors (House, in Rollison & Broadfield, 2002).

There is also an interesting 'contractual ' element to leadership in that it 'is acknowledged and effectively "granted" by others' (Law & Glover, 2000, p.23). 'Leaders become so because other people confer the authority to influence their behaviour, … - leadership is conferred from below, not above' (Rollinson & Broadfield, 2002 p.361). There is an unwritten contract, independent of job title, whereby followers agree to follow. This is an interesting concept for organisations, offering them opportunities to diffuse influence widely beyond specific job titles, and also highlighting the need to monitor the value systems, goals and influence of emerging 'informal' leaders.

The notion of 'transformational' as opposed to 'transactional' leadership is particularly relevant to the current discussion. Transactional leaders identify the needs of their subordinates and adopt an appropriate contingent style; but, based as it is on the exchange relationships between leader and follower, it 'depends heavily on a stable situation' (Rollinson & Broadfield, 2002 p.394). Transformational leaders, on the other hand, 'help followers develop to higher levels of potential' (Bass & Avolio, 1997, p.203), based on their ability to envision and communicate this new social vision to the group. This type of leadership seems a particularly appropriate model for an organisation in transition. In promoting learning and change, transformational leadership has the potential to 'move followers to go beyond their self-interests to concerns for their group or organisation' (Bass & Avolio, 1997, p.202). The four 'I's of effective leadership (see figure 2) will figure in the analysis which follows, exploring how far they might offer useful evaluation tools or ideas for further leadership development.

Figure 2: The four 'I's of effective leadership (Bass and Avolio, 2000)

- Influence or charisma
- Inspirational motivation
- Intellectual stimulation
- Individual consideration

It is widely recognised that managers and leaders play a crucial role in culture creation. Their 'anxiety-containing function' (Schein, 1997, p.375) is especially relevant during periods of change and learning and can mean that 'learning' leaders assume a perpetually supportive role as followers go through the traumas of growth. Within 'moving' (as opposed to 'stuck') organisations, leaders will enable the acceptance of uncertainty, risk-taking and creativity (Law & Glover, 2000 p.121). Since culture is also a source of identity for an organisation, it becomes increasingly important as collective vulnerability increases in transition, and leaders must 'recognise their own role in creating, embedding and developing a transforming culture' (Schein, 1997, p.377).

Methodology

Middle and senior managers were interviewed for this enquiry including three Area Careers Managers (ACMs) (one of whom also carried an Assistant General Manager designation), a Senior Personal Adviser (PA), two Assistant General Managers (AGMs) and the General Manager (GM), giving a range of strategic and operational views. Brief semi-structured interviews explored perceptions of organisational and role change, and personal reflections on management styles. The interviews consisted of two main questions (figure 3) and were conducted at the end of May 2003, seven months after the launch of the Connexions Partnership in Kent & Medway, to give an insight into how both the preparation for and early effects of this change were affecting CMKM. Following reflection on the first interview, a third question was added in order to elicit perceptions of management style as well as role

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Figure 3 – Interview schedule

- How has the ACM role changed over the last year in response to the transition process?

- What would help you/ACMs to operate even more effectively in the current environment?

Third question added following the first interview:

- How has your management style changed?

Key Issues emerging from the data

There was considerable agreement among interviewees on a number of common themes, firstly, that the introduction of 'Connexions (was) broadening the range … of what we're suppose to do' (AGM 2) and that many of our changes were a 'response to the much more complex environment that we're in now' (GM). There was also little doubt among all interviewees that the growth in networking and inter-agency activities with partner organisations which pre-dates Connexions has had a huge impact on the ACM role, both in terms of time pressures ('I could spend every day going to meetings' - ACM 1) and the nature of the role ('it's gone from an inward to an outward facing role' - ACM 3).

As a result, delegation emerges as a common concern, with managers 'thinking (more) about how tasks can be delegated' (AGM1 and most other interviewees), often connected with comments about 'implicit trust in staff to ... know they'll get on with it' (ACM/AGM 3). Alongside this run concerns about making the 'D' grade roles work effectively (Senior PA, ACM 1), and looking forward to the introduction of the two new part time management roles in the locality – a permanent Senior PA and a Supervision/Assessment Co-ordinator (SAC).

The increasing diversity of staff was also a universal theme, associated with the need for role definition – 'actually developing the posts ... from scratch' (AGM1) – and 'enhanced support' (Senior PA) for staff in new situations. There was a clear tension between the reduced availability and visibility of managers and the increased need for support to staff.

Several interviewees commented on the decline in emphasis on monitoring. Whereas previously 'ACMs were able to be just overseeing' (Senior PA), 'now we can't just adopt a monitoring style because there are things that are not easily monitored' (AGM 2) – the nature of targets and objectives have changed significantly from counting activities to ensuring a contribution to wider objectives. Hence, there were also comments on the greater uncertainty among staff about objectives and the need for greater clarity – 'to ensure that what we need to be doing is really explained, shared and looked at locally' (Senior PA); and 'the need for SMT to be clearer about key priorities for area managers' (AGM 2).

Some individual perspectives should also be highlighted. The GM spoke of having a conscious communication strategy and the importance of shared values. One manager made reference to a 'model' of managing – a quality cycle of fourteen steps (ACM 3), akin to the 'interact ... and see what the outcome is' strategy of Rajan (in Barnard, 2003, p.15) - reviewing and revising after each move in unpredictable territory.

Analysis of key issues

Based on interviewees' comments, the analysis that follows will explore how CMKM is changing, and how the four 'I's of transformational leadership (figure 2) might enhance development on four fronts: delegation, role clarity, communication and team working.

An organisation in transition

The evidence from the research suggests an organisational going through complex structural, systems and cultural change with a corresponding need for managers to demonstrate leadership as well as management skills. As Kotter notes (in Carnall, 2003, p.147) 'management is about coping with complexity. Leadership is about coping with change'. Organisational characteristics and changes within CMKM, plotted on the McKinsey 7 S framework (figure1) show how change in one area influences another, e.g. the growth in locality team sizes (Staffing) has influenced the new posts created (Structural). The changes in targets and objectives under 'Strategy' have given rise to an increased need for support, and a requirement for different management and leadership 'Skills'. The 'Shared values' were not articulated by any respondents, possibly an indication that they are acknowledged as all pervasive, that there has been little change in this section, just a reinforcement through the production of locality mission statements.

There is also evidence that CMKM is losing some of its classical and bureaucratic features (e.g. a lone manager in each locality and prescribed targets and work practices) in favour of more organic and contingent characteristics (e.g. collegial management, team working and innovation to meet local needs). Human resource considerations have always been a strong characteristic of the organisation and the current transition has served only to strengthen this feature.

From the analysis of interview data, significant features of the CMKM transition process can be deduced (figure 4).

Figure 4: The CMKM transition process	
Pre-Connexions	Connexions era
Contracted directly with a government agency, with a track record of contract negotiation	Subcontracted to an newly formed, local agency, responding to central government agenda
Employed mainly technically trained, usually experienced, qualified staff	Employs a range of unqualified/trainee staff with wide range of different backgrounds
Management based on technical expertise, experienced in monitoring/counting, 'doing things right'	Management of changeNew leadership styles?'Doing the right thing'?
Comprehensive QA system gives policy, practice papers, procedures	New activities and work practices do not necessarily 'fit' procedures
Little diversity in job roles, one major contract to deliverDiversity of new roles responding to Connexions agenda, variety of additional contracts	Diversity of new roles responding to Connexions agenda, variety of additional contracts

It is in the light of these changes that the organisation has had to ask itself 'Are we organised effectively to deliver in this new environment?'

Delegation

Comments about delegation were unanimous, although there was no data on the models managers used and little on what tasks were delegated. The need to delegate has grown with larger teams; greater support needs for new, trainee and 'uncertain' staff; and with the requirement for managers to spend time networking outside the organisation. Time pressures and a more diverse management role have thus created the need to share more management functions, - not only planning, organising and monitoring; but also supporting, motivating and developing staff. Senior managers have identified and responded to this need, and structural change has created new posts in each locality with the aim of sharing management responsibilities, co-ordinating caseload supervision and support for trainee staff. These roles will further distribute leadership through all levels of the organisation. As in schools, leadership 'can occur at a variety of levels' (Murgatroyd & Reynolds, in Law & Glover, 2000, p.37). In his recent book, John Adair writes that 'leadership is a personal journey that all are capable of' (quoted Radford, p.37, *Management Today*).

In the absence of specific mention of delegation strategies, one suggestion to enhance effectiveness of this new development, might be to explore possible models with both experienced and newly appointed staff, promoting a shared understanding and common language in this new context. It will be important for ACMs to be clear about what is to be delegated, aims and objectives, and how much freedom of action is being given. For example, the Tannenbaum/Schmidt leadership continuum (in Wilson, 2000, p.43) could be a useful tool for managers. They could select a style, along a scale from autocratic to democratic, depending on the levels of managerial authority needed and freedom to be granted to act on initiative, based on the nature of the task and the skill level of the individual.

Delegation as a function of transformational leadership, should also be based on the needs of staff to develop their potential (Bass & Avolio, 2000, p.202), as well as on the needs of the organisation, thus contributing to the 'intellectual stimulation' element of the indicators. In delegating, transformational leaders encourage 'a questioning of old ways of doing things, a breaking with the past' (Bass & Avolio, 2000, p.204) helping followers to think about old problems in new ways and to consider creative ways of developing themselves. They will be looking to provide learning opportunities through 'individual consideration' of delegated tasks, building trust and motivating, by agreeing attainable goals and empowering the individual.

Role clarity

Some uncertainty was indicated amongst staff – an expected by-product of the transition process, but also intensified by changes in the nature of business plan objectives, the new contracting process with the Connexions Partnership and the proliferation of new Personal Adviser roles. Both interviewees and their staff were looking for more clarity in objectives and a clearer definition of roles, whether newly created, or subject to changing priorities, or responding to new demands.

According to Morgan (1986, p.23), tools and instruments for clarifying and communicating role tasks 'are mechanical devices invented and developed to aid in performing some kind of goal-oriented activity'. CMKM's response to the need for greater role clarity has been to develop a new format for performance review paperwork which allows individuals to see how their targets contribute to team and organisational objectives. It has also included more directive support materials for NVQ trainees, giving specific development tasks on a monthly basis, and increased emphasis on induction materials.

However, while bureaucratic controls may provide clarity on paper and assist progress reviews, there is a danger that checklists will stifle creativity. It will be through the mediating action of transformational leadership that the meaning of work roles can be clearly communicated using these tools. Bass & Avolio's second indicator of 'inspirational motivation' could also be a fruitful field for exploration in terms of all managers recognising appropriate symbols and images which might usefully be incorporated into communication of the company vision.

Communication

Communication was highlighted by the General Manager as a conscious strategy in response to the transition process and indeed is fundamental to all formal and informal processes within an organisation, e.g. performance review, induction, professional assessment, continuous improvement groups, team meetings and the informal transactions between team members. It 'has meaning beyond mere words and is a key attribute possessed by successful leaders' (Law & Glover, 2000, p.81). It is fundamental to the promotion of vision and its quality will either promote or hinder transformation.

Messages to staff need to be, like those of G.W. Bush (Thew, in Brown, 2003, p.15), 'clear, simple, consistent and sincere'. And as well as giving clarity about what we do, 'big picture messages' could also help to communicate the vision that CMKM is a learning organisation, successfully coping with change, through transformational processes embedded at all levels.

Effective leadership and communication depends on process skills – active listening, empathy and authenticity – to motivate, to promote reflection and self-development and to enable goal setting. At times of change, when there seems to be so much to *tell* staff, listening – "an active search for meaning" (Robbins, 1997 p 135) – becomes even more important. This was recognised early in the transition process and regular opportunities for sharing and listening were introduced, e.g information sharing and collective work planning became an important element of team meetings and staff days. Locally produced mission statements were encouraged, and senior managers made themselves available to listen to, and act on, concerns raised at team meetings.

Interviewees did not explicitly mention feelings and emotions, although the increased need for support to staff was clear. A leader needs to understand how people feel as they travel through the change process (Pollard, 2002) by picking up on spoken, or unspoken, cues. And, like a good career guidance practitioner, a leader will start from where staff are now, allowing them to grieve or celebrate before helping them to build energy for change by focusing of a future vision. Carnell (2003, p.255) describes this as the need to 'feel their way forward in a period of change'. This empathy, or use of emotional intelligence, allows a leader 'to sense the unstated feelings of everyone in the group and to articulate them for the first time' (Goleman, 2002, p.36) and thus build the trust and respect required for Bass & Avolio's 'idealized influence or charisma' (2000, p.202).

Team work

Team work was the subject of few comments by interviewees. This is possibly because it is such a fundamental aspect of the organisation and thus taken as read, or possibly because its strengths as a transformational strategy, and a source of support and learning, are not being fully exploited. It is included here as a key issue because a team based approach 'typically increases the adaptability of organisations in dealing with their environments' (Morgan, 1997, p.54), and is a 'sign of a more organic, less mechanistic organisation' (Morgan, 1997 p 34). It has also been suggested that 'effective teams are often a sign of an effective leader' (Law & Glover, 2000, p.84). Murgatroyd & Gray (in Law & Glover, 2000), 'identify four criteria related to the quality of the relationships which they see as important in evaluating ... the work of teams – empathy, warmth, genuineness and concreteness.' These should be readily recognised by guidance workers, as they are also key to effective rapport-building with clients.

Much has already been done to strengthen the operation of teams within CMKM including the recognition of functional groups through designations, like 'the Community Guidance Team'; support and leadership from senior and middle managers for a wide variety of teams across the company; and time officially set aside for team meetings. Effective interaction between team members can promote a range of 'healthy' outcomes, including role definition with reference to others, reflection and learning from practice (Schon, 1996), providing support and appreciating the capabilities of others. Woodcock (in Law & Glover, 2000) 'likens the team to a family which ... generates commitment and provides a "place to be", so meeting a basic human need to belong'. Effective teamwork could satisfy one concern raised in the research data about staff who operate remotely from company premises for much of the time – there is still the need for them to feel and be an integral part of the organisation.

The encouragement of team work is an important development strategy. It 'diffuses influence and control, allowing people at the middle and lower levels of an organisation to make contributions' (Morgan, 1997, p.54); and it provides a sense of belonging, of support and facilitates learning from colleagues.

Conclusions

Like career theory, management theory 'can be seen as a mongrel form of social science, borrowing as necessary (from a range of disciplines, including social and psychological) and, because it is concerned with people and their behaviour, there is an element of unpredictability about the whole process' (Hannagan, 1998, p.7). For this reason, successful leaders (and guidance practitioners and jazz players) have to improvise (Barnard, 2003). Like career theory, management and leadership models are being reappraised in these 'post-Newtonian, chaos times' (Barnard, 2003, p.15) and interpretivist rather than positivist approaches are being adopted (Killeen, 1996).

Transformational leadership takes organisations beyond the mechanistic management processes of planning, implementing and monitoring; and into territory where an unpredictable environment make vision, learning and feelings, influence and trust, humility and charisma, respect and consideration all major concepts and qualities for leaders to understand and harness. For CMKM, transformational leadership will be the key to enhanced organisational effectiveness in the Connexions era.

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