



PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The “push-pull” approach to fast-track management development

A case study in scientific publishing

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how a medium sized business has addressed what it has termed a “push-pull” method of management and organization development, based around an action learning approach.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper sets out a methodology that other SMEs might look to replicate in their management and organizational development activities.

Findings – Fast-track development through push-pull ensures that staff are able to take on areas of enhanced responsibility as a firm grows – “pulling” them into expanded roles. Simultaneously, it develops an entrepreneurial “push” which develops the organization and thus creates expanded roles. This turns the talent management process somewhat on its head by enabling and expecting employees to drive their own fast-track development. Alignment with business strategies is sought, but there is also a realization that strategies can be created and changed.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is descriptive and exploratory, focusing on a single organization, supported by a brief review of relevant literature.

Practical implications – Action learning programmes within SMEs can reinforce the “right” behaviour that is required to grow a firm and provide foundations for the people and organization to succeed.

Originality/value – Introduces the concept of the “push-pull” method of management and organizational development, treating the two as linked and mutually supportive.

Keywords Management development, Organizational development, Fast track, Small to medium-sized enterprises, Action learning

Paper type Case study



Introduction and aims

The issue of fast-tracking and accelerated leadership development has been well explored (e.g. Tomlinson and Holmes, 2001; Koontz, 2004). But fast-tracking often

encounters the issue of unmet expectations (Krishnan and Varrkey, 2004) where an individual or cohort has undergone development, but their organization may not be able to put them into a position where they can explore and use their new-found skills and competencies. This issue is clearly exacerbated in a smaller organization, where the opportunity for placement in subsidiary business units or foreign-based offices, for example, to gain experience and maturity, is usually very limited.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a medium sized business, Emerald Group Publishing UK, has addressed some of these issues using what it has termed a “push-pull” method of management and organization development. We believe this is an important contribution in two ways. First, it sets out a methodology that other SMEs might look to replicate in their activities. Second, although the link between personal and organizational development has been made (Boaden, 2006), the “push-pull” classification we describe below is, we believe, an original concept, and we would invite further research on the topic. The case organization Emerald is in a somewhat special situation with its background and position in a knowledge-intensive and intellectual industry, but we would argue that an assertive approach to staff development is not only appropriate to SMEs but can act as a means of developing bottom-up growth and organization development in all types of companies.

The article is published in the Professional Practice section on the Journal Editors’ decision because it is essentially a descriptive and exploratory attempt concentrating on a single organization, supported by a brief review of relevant literature, and therefore neither a wide-ranging empirical study nor a deep literature review. The authors would welcome such studies to what we believe is an important and valid research and practice area.

Emerald and the SME sector

It is something of a truism of management theory that small or medium enterprises (SMEs) are the engine of any economy, the most important employers, and the generators of economic growth, energy and enterprise; but the majority of studies are derived from, and apply to, larger enterprises (e.g. Davenport, 2005, Hartley, 2002).

Studies dealing with approaches to people development, organizational development, and change management, are no exception (Masson, 1994; Raiden and Dainty, 2006; Harris and Wegg-Prosser, 2007). But these areas may be more challenging to managers of SMEs than they are in large institutions and corporations.

We can point to a number of reasons, drawing on existing studies (Irani *et al.*, 1997; Hawkins and Winter, 1996) and our own experience with Emerald Group Publishing, a firm of just below 200 people. In a SME there is a much closer connection between the doing and the managing. All of Emerald’s directors have executive responsibility, often at quite a detailed level. The phenomenon of scale is clearly reflected at a personal level – we know all of our staff and what they do, which is an obvious impossibility for an executive in a firm of 10,000 or more employees. People are generally quite busy with their tasks, with limited thinking and exploration time.

Emerald was established in 1967, as an offshoot of the Bradford University Business School. Today it is the world’s leading scholarly journals publisher in business and management, with nearly 200 journals in business, management and related fields, with offices in India, China, the USA, Malaysia and Japan. Partly due to the academic roots of the company, Emerald has long invested in internal staff

development activities, indeed on a more determined basis than most other SMEs. Most recently, the company set up its own development academy modelled on some of the work done in corporate universities that normally act in much larger enterprises (Stewart and Shaw, 2005). In 2007 the Emerald Academy was partnered by Leeds Metropolitan University, one of the UK's largest and most innovative business schools, to allow Emerald academy graduates to progress to a custom-designed Masters in International Management.

Push-pull development: great expectations

We have come to name the principle behind people and organizational development at Emerald as push-pull development. Essentially this means that as the company grows and changes the requirements of its staff, we are looking to pull people into larger and more demanding roles; but in addition, we are looking for these better-equipped people with their heightened expectations, to push the company into growth to accommodate them.

This, we realise, requires something of a balancing act. There is a classic fear of developing staff in that, once they are better equipped and educated, they might leave. It is important to clarify the development promise to the staff. In a SME, a promise that a "pull" role will be there at the end of a development initiative is normally unrealistic and is therefore somewhat dishonest. For a number of reasons, Emerald has a very low staff turnover rate and maintains a relatively flat structure, meaning that even during times of growth, opportunities for promotion are not plentiful. A key component of a successful "pull" strategy is a favouring of internal promotion – developing people for expanded roles, and then always filling expanded roles with outside recruits simply does not work.

The "push" element brings an interesting new dimension to the discussion. It makes fast-tracking into a participation activity rather than an approach where staff are (passively) selected to be fast-tracked. Push development says "we have equipped you with the abilities to take on bigger roles, now create a business opportunity which will enable you to exercise these skills. Essentially, fast-track yourself". This means that personal development and organizational development are closely linked. Again, it is unrealistic to make open-ended promises that any initiative will be accepted; but it is important to put structures in place to listen, consider, and offer finance and resources for well-constructed business cases.

Push-pull development and action learning

In particular when looking at "push" development, we have come to strongly favour the action learning (action-centred learning) approach (Marquardt, 2004; Pedler, 1997). Action learning is essentially based on the notion of learning by conducting real organization-based change projects in facilitated learning groups, as first codified by Revans (1998) in the 1940s and 1950s. The learning element is based more on reflections on what has been achieved, and how that process and the achievement felt, rather than a consultative exposition of what might be done. This emphasis on real change can, guided by a skilled facilitator and with a proper developmental scope, lead to entrepreneurial organizational "push" development.

A recent example at Emerald has been the creation of a social networking project which has metamorphosed from a technology weblog collection to a journal-based

community to an e-learning community support, to a commercial application, largely led by an Emerald academy graduate. The development of this initiative has been backed so far by the Board in terms of modest investment, but also by senior managers in guiding the initiative to line with our views on strategic market development. If this sounds somewhat organic and unstructured, it is deliberately so. Push development needs to be, by definition, pushed by the developer, rather than carefully defined by the organization (in which case it would qualify as an organizational “pull” initiative).

We have found the appointment of internal mentors or business coaches, as well as facilitators of learning, to be of great importance. An internal mentor can provide the guide to strategic alignment that may help a push initiative to be backed organizationally. Some skilled and deliberate internal influence and operating within the political and power-structure realities are a key part of a well-structured action learning approach. It is not appropriate to pretend that these do not exist; they do, and succeeding in any organization is contingent on understanding and working effectively within them.

Our Leeds Business School programme partnership adds another positive dimension of complexity. As well as contributing to organizational development, or fitting into an expanded role, this cooperation calls for an academically rigorous series of assignments capped by a dissertation, a process that serves three purposes:

- (1) creating the company’s future;
- (2) demonstrating the managerial competence of the learner;
- (3) demonstrating scholarly academic competence of the learner.

We have noticed that team innovation works better than solo innovation. Learning about management, which in itself is a social activity, is best achieved socially rather than practicing alone. At Emerald we have used “quartets” – cross-functional, self-organised and selected teams of four.

Push-pull development and change projects

As discussed above, an action learning approach to development has been the methodology of choice in the Emerald academy initiative, and action learning, by definition, relies on real change being created. The “pull” part of push-pull development is – as discussed above – largely a planned strategy, based on preparing staff for enlarged challenges. Two of the issues of this type we have encountered at Emerald are the need to develop staff to work effectively in our product management and development activity, and the need to manage central sales coordination. Both of these challenges have been answered well by Emerald academy graduates.

The “push” part of this kind of development approach, being a somewhat entrepreneurial activity, is likely to lead to unexpected (emergent) results, in common with Mintzberg’s (1994) observations on strategy:

All viable strategies have emergent and deliberate [i.e. planned] qualities, since all must combine some degree of flexible learning with some degree of cerebral control.

Within the Emerald academy equal importance is given to those projects focusing on the importance of reinforcement of current action (internalised improvements), compared to those focusing on creation of a possible disruptive change (see Christensen, 2000). Both are needed to develop the company; the goal being a company

that is able to both maximize its core business activities and recognize that tomorrow may pose different challenges. This again is broadly in line with Collins' (2001) statement:

Enduring great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. This is the magical combination of "preserve the core and stimulate progress."

Push-pull development and Emerald

Recent evidence (e.g. Stadler, 2007) highlights the need to exploit before exploring, but for the SME sector, adaptability and facing up to the unknown have long been keys to survival. The connections between personal development, organizational development, and change management must be strong. In creating the in-company academy the challenge has been to create a self-reinforcing catalytic process – one in which development projects are a catalyst between people, organization and opportunities within the business and the competitive world it inhabits. The academy process is only successful if it can make all that work.

An essential question for all businesses, but even more acute for those considering investing in developmental programmes, is what kind of staff does the company want? Within Emerald, this question has been much debated. Our conclusion is that we want people who are able to combine intellectually rigorous analysis with passion. Top-class people need to be both smart and passionate; they need to be rigorous in their analytical and decision-making processes as well as entrepreneurial and highly emotionally engaged with the challenges of their work.

Learning within the quasi-academic framework presented in this article gives people the confidence to say "I know what I'm talking about"; "I'm speaking from research and data, not just an anecdote". It is empowering, because it levels the playing field when arguing through the need to make changes or new investments. It provides even junior staff with a basis from which to pilot proposals through the organization's decision-making processes. SMEs, as all businesses, need the ideas and opinions of the sharp thinkers instead of those of the sloppy ones, and academic disciplines help with this.

The acid test is one of staff behaviour. When ideas are knocked back, the optimum would be a mindset asking "How could I have sold it better?" (a self-critical perspective focusing on the need for improvement and demonstrating heightened self-awareness) or "How can I have another go?" (a perspective that demonstrates persistence and self-belief), instead of negative mindsets such as "They never listen to my ideas" (essentially blaming others, blocked but not identifying the need for learning, showing a lack of awareness), or "That's the last time I'm going to try" (defeatist, not engaged, not interested).

In common with other SMEs, Emerald does not have a huge reservoir of human resources, and small organizations have few places to hide. SMEs need to perform well today, while doing the right things in relation to the future. An SME in a turbulent environment is no place for passive behaviour and reactivity. Emerald's push-pull approach has meant the organization is more assertive in asking staff to stand up and be counted, have the confidence to say what they believe, have the passion to believe in what they are saying, but also to base their arguments on rigorous analysis of both the

business environment and the organization and the needs of its stakeholders. Within the context of Emerald's push-pull personal and organizational development methodology this mindset creates the "push" for career and business development, in alignment with the "pull" that favours development and progression from within.

Summary

The "push-pull" approach is one that turns the talent management process that currently engrosses businesses of all sizes somewhat on its head. There is much less room for picking people for bureaucratic minding of just one's own well-defined tasks; once the challenge is laid down for employees to drive their own fast-track development, they themselves must set the pace, and will only succeed by driving the business forward. Alignment with business strategies is sought, but there is also a realization that those who created the strategies do not have all of the answers to the many unknowns facing the business. Simply put, where the case is carefully argued managers on development programmes are likely to get the opportunities to craft new directions for the business, ones that suit their aspirations.

Businesses need leaders at all levels, but the reality can often be that mere lip service is paid to this. Credible leaders care about their workplace, those around them and the customers whom they serve. They speak with confidence. Action learning provides a process in which teams can develop business-related projects. These develop the individuals and help Emerald both make improvements to the business of today and better understand the business of tomorrow. Intuition needs to be built up over time, embedded in a combination of experience and formal learning. Academic rigour, provided for Emerald by Leeds Business School, provides the foundations to the "push-pull" process. It helps develop the problem solving logic and comfort with complex analysis that builds the confidence on which employees can thrive.

The starting point for the academy process was essentially an identification of "what kind of people do we want working in the business?" In Emerald the answer that emerged is that development is about reinforcing the right behaviour, the type that is needed to lead the firm to grow, and about providing the foundations for the people and the organization to succeed. SMEs cannot invest speculatively in random learning and development; they need to spend wisely on achieving business goals, but learning can be a tool for that.

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