Outdoor Management Development
in The UK

by Chris Loynes

Beginnings

The first outdoor course deliberately designed for people in work to run in the UK, and therefore possibly in the world, was at the Brathay Hall Trust in 1946. Brathay was founded as a charity by the owner of an insurance company to provide one month long courses for apprentices from the urban areas of northern England. The intention was to enrich their lives and broaden their horizons. It is true to say that having more interesting young people in work perhaps led to better workers. However, the purpose as it was envisioned by the founder of Brathay, Peter Scott, was more in the Quaker business tradition of doing something of value for the people who work for you for its own sake as part of the wider responsibilities of business in the community.

From the start the course was not exclusively outdoor oriented combining drama and the creative arts in its programme. Brathay still has a drama theatre, pottery kiln and screen printing workshops within its facilities. In other respects the programme was similar to the early Outward Bound courses started a year later at Aberdovey. Groups were taught the skills for water and land based journeys culminating in a final, self reliant expedition in the Lake District fells.

Over the years this programme broadened out, as did OB's, to encompass personal development for young adults. Some of the themes of today were established at this point:

- the ability to work together;
- leadership skills;
- communications and problem solving abilities;

all leading to an enterprising and responsible citizen.

Developing a Curriculum

It is not clear exactly how the next steps were taken but a partnership between Brathay and some of their clients, especially Securicor, led to the introduction of programmes for graduates recruited for management positions. These courses were shorter and more sophisticated. Trainers from the companies involved introduced group work and reviewing skills into the programme.

The early involvement of John Adair, writing at the time on Action Centred Leadership, introduced a foundation of theoretical models including the idea of presenting a conceptual framework with which to explore and reflect on practice during the activities. Creative minds invented or imported the command tasks of Army officer training now called variously dynamics or initiatives to illustrate points of theory or practice.

A Spiritual Foundation

These ideas, developed in the late sixties and early seventies, found a linking educational model in Kolb's learning cycle. This was quickly adapted to the circumstances to become a spiral of application between contexts, especially the contexts of outdoor training and work, something never intended by Kolb. This all pervading model of learning has been adopted widely by the industry. It has never been proven by research but much anecdotal evidence exists to support it.

A free newspaper company turned around form making a loss to being consistently in profit.

A chemical company saved itself a six figure sum each quarter as a result of better interdepartmental relations.

An assembly plant reduced its supply costs and won a major contract.

A printing firm learned to meet every deadline instead of missing most.

An apprentice described how a week long personal development course brought him out of his shell. His supervisor claimed it made the difference between keeping him on and letting him go.

A team leader described how a weekend using outdoor exercises to explore the breakdown in communications between the accounts and sales teams resolved the issues as if by magic.

A chief executive, when asked to put a value on the benefit to his thinking skills of a weekend outdoor programme, wrote out a five figure check.

The Development Training Concept

At this point the concept of Development Training was born:

a blend of training events and big experiences facilitated and with an underpinning conceptual framework designed to develop people in a wide range of contexts.

One of the early premises of Development Training was to teach people how to learn. It was an explicit aim to do oneself out of a job by creating an empowered and resourceful learner. It was also intended as a whole person approach affecting and, perhaps,

influencing every aspect of the self in order to influence the quality of that person's affect on the world.

This spiritual foundation can be expressed as a desire to help people achieve what Development Trainers believe is a universal human aspiration: to want to make things happen, to want to make a worthwhile difference to the quality of life for oneself and for others. Maslow is often quoted by Development Trainers as a model of needs that expresses this desire for self actualisation. Development training, as an approach, can therefore be appropriately defined as a version of adventure based experiential learning.

A Military Version

During the 70's a separate development occurred based on military approaches to officer training. These programmes work by using the activities to instil self discipline, draw out hidden potential and develop competitive behaviours. The outdoors is often used as a hostile environment in which to survive. A number of providers still offer this approach including the military providing such courses for civilian groups. These providers are perceived as having a different value system from others in the field, both about people and about the outdoors. However, they are still popular with their clients.

Current growth in this approach is partly fuelled by redundancies in the military and by the success of ex military officers as managers working in the public and voluntary sectors including training organisations.

A Wealth of Solutions

Initially relatively few organisations copied the early providers. This changed through government intervention in a problem that might have been thought to have the opposite effect. The recession of the late 1970's creates an unemployment problem and a subsequent response called the youth training scheme. This scheme included government funding for residential experiences and many schemes took up this option at outdoor centres. This led to a massive development in both the number of facilities available and the number of people competent in the approach.

Introduced to a new market place providers new and old rapidly developed their new found links with businesses by offering outdoor management development especially team building and leadership programmes.

The growth in provision continued until the early nineties proving to be recession proof a second time with a continued expansion during the recession of the late 80's. Currently I am aware of over 250 specialist providers of outdoor management development with their own residential facilities in the UK with many more operating without their own base. In Cumbria alone, the home of Brathay, over 200 training companies offer outdoor approaches to management development on the national market making it the highest density of training providers in Europe and probably in the world.

This has led to a diversity of programmes built on the original model. They fall into 3 main categories. The first two have already been discussed; the military version and the approach based on developing the whole individual. These have been complimented by a third approach based solely on task achievement and appraising 'work done' rather than 'person doing'. This third approach has been much in favour during the Thatcher years of profit before people. Of course time will produce a mix of hybrids from which the whole field will learn and develop.

The Recipe for Success

Current practice is still based on the main ingredients established by the early pioneers:

- big outdoor experiences requiring involvement with others in commitment to a common enterprise with an uncertain outcome,

- self awareness activities and tests,

- major challenging tasks set in the outdoors but modelling work place situations,

- training activities to explore the various management skills to complete these tasks,

- a conceptual underpinning of management and learning theory,

- time for structured reflection and learning transfer.

Many people have wondered how it all works. The current UK thinking is that it has to do with the way the human brain works. From birth we try to make sense of everything and create mental maps of our experience that enable us to give a quick response on limited information. Some people argue this ability is the main reason for the success of our species. The trouble is that when things change we still force them to fit into our old maps and come up with the old response. Adults fall back on strategies developed as a child, privatised companies on methods developed when they were public sector.

People need a process that doesn't fit their previous experience and so cannot be fitted into the old maps. They also need a process that will help them to wipe clean the old maps. This requires emotional 'heat'. Outdoor programmes provide both these ingredients. The experiences are radically different and high impact providing rich new opportunities for learning.

Yet, despite the differences, it remains based on individuals involved in collaboration and committed to a common enterprise. The potential for metaphors between the training event and the work situation is tremendous. This process of transfer must be managed. All too often the feedback is 'I've changed, but no one back at work will let me be different.' The further you take people from what they know the greater the potential for learning but the more it is necessary to manage the transfer of that learning back to the work place.

The really smart programme will do all of this in a way that leaves the delegate aware of the process so that they are competent to continue to manage their own learning.

The early applications of personal development programmes reflected in course titles such as 'Responsibility at Work' and 'Training for Leadership' has also progressed through team and interteam dynamics to organisational objectives such as Total Quality and SMART cultures.

The following example shows how all three levels of approach have been applied to introducing quality service into the hotel industry.

Team Work Interventions: A Case Study

Client: a multi facility leisure complex in Scotland with a new management team and expanded operations.

Aim: to develop team work throughout the organisation with the particular objective of implementing a quality service initiative.

Strategy: a cascade model starting with the senior management team followed by department team leaders and then department teams. The programme ran alongside another training initiative aimed at ensuring quality service. The two programmes were seen as interactive.

The Senior Management Team

The objective of this event was to develop working relations between the team members to enable effective strategic decision making and planning.

Pre event work: Profiling to establish preferred team roles for each delegate. These insights applied to understanding of task and relationship issues in the work place. Group work to clarify the purpose of the organisation and to undertake the setting of corporate objectives.

The Event: A three day residential in another tourist area and using outdoor projects as a basis for shared experience (see diagram 1).

Day 1
Evening: A challenging outdoor activity at night for small groups. Each individual set a personal objective and attempted to make it happen in the activity. Objective: familiarisation with making the event work for you.

The setting of team and personal learning goals for the event. These were largely based on the information arising from the pre course work.

Day 2
Morning: Key language and team work models were presented and illuminated by reflection on short and simple problem solving exercises out doors. This was intended to create a language for the course and beyond. A personality inventory was also undertaken to provide a basis for discussion of relationship issues.

Afternoon: A longer outdoor project and review designed to act as a test bed for ideas evolving from the morning. The focus was placed on strategy rather than operations.

Evening: A visit to a local leisure complex for comparative study 'in cognate'.

Day 3
Morning: A second major outdoor project designed to explore inter group as well as intra group relationships especially the relationship between management teams and operational teams. A second theme was the relationship between team and individual goals with the emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to manage this tension.

Afternoon: Review and development planning:
a) as a senior management team for the team;
b) as individuals contributing to the team.

Post event: Appraisals to review and facilitate the implementation of intended developments.

Department Team Leaders

The main objectives of this event were:

a) to teach the delegates how to team build;
b) to develop self management skills and to encourage greater initiative.

The MD attended the course as their line manager. The main differences between the first event and this one were:

- different concepts and inventories were chosen to support the awareness of others in a team rather than focussing on the self;

- the first task was designed to draw out issues related to operational management eg achieving targets, best use of resources especially people, problem solving in planning and 'on the hoof', managing and not doing peoples work;

- the second outdoor project focussed on the development of self management skills. Delegates were expected to implement their own development plans and support those of others within the context of the exercise.

Department Teams

The objective of these events was to develop a sense of common purpose towards a high standard of performance.

One day events mixing short outdoor projects with briefings and reviews were designed. These took place at the work place. The focus was placed on understanding the strengths you and others brought to your role in the team. Development plans were aimed at drawing out and capitalising on these strengths.

Summary

The awareness created by the opportunity for reflection:

- enhanced a sense of common purpose;
- clarified roles and responsibilities;
- developed interpersonal skills that increased performance;
- built on personal strengths and so on individual effectiveness.

The implementation of a quality service initiative gave the programme a context. It a work based project on which delegates could focus and against which the effectiveness of the training intervention could be measured.

Further workshops supported the skills necessary for quality service to internal and external customers.

Versatility: strength or Achilles heel?

As the high ropes course is for North America so perhaps the enduring image for the industry in this country is the raft building exercise. It has been suggested that on certain days it is possible to cross England's largest lake, Windermere, dry shod on the rafts built by managers! As an activity it appears to the outside observer as unchanging yet it demonstrates the versatility of outdoor training in that it can be front loaded, oriented and debriefed to develop a myriad different outcomes for corporate clients.

All Aboard: A Case Study

Making a journey by raft is a common task in Outdoor Management Development programmes. This particular example has 5 stages in its structure. These are illustrated in Diagram 2.

Before the task begins various inputs will have occurred. These might include;

- a personality inventory
- leadership models
- project management workshops
- team work and team roles workshop

- reflection on a work problem
- Problem solving models.

Stage 1 The Briefing Variables with which the facilitator can work here include who is briefed and how much support is given by the tutor with the interpretation of the brief. Guidance on key management issues (eg. financial or time control systems) help build the isomorphs. The objective plays a key role and can be changed to suit. In this example a common issue that arises is conflicts between the team goal of optimising profit and the personal goals of making the journey. By adapting the brief other metaphors can be made such as shift handover, interteam relations, negotiation skills, etc. This stage is all about gaining understanding, communicating strategy and goals, and establishing controls.

Stage 2 Raising the Revenue The length and complexity of this stage can be varied at will with units being easy or hard to acquire. Units are earned by undertaking tasks. these vary in length and style some being cognitive, others physical; some in groups some individual in nature. This is the first chance for the leaders to implement and test out their controls. In this example there is a plethora of opportunities to raise money. The design focuses on how these choices are made and how units are negotiated. This explores risk taking in decisions, negotiation skills and issues of task achievement versus personal interests.

Stage 3 Construction In this example 2 groups are building a raft for each other. This continues the exploration of negotiating skills and setting standards/targets for achievement. It also explores inter team as well as intra team dynamics. At stage 1-3 the various possibilities of department or organisational relations, customer relations and competitor relations can be explored by varying the structure and wording of the exercise.

Stage 4 The Journey Again this can take many forms. It can put the groups in co-operative or competitive situations. In this exercise the journey explores the management of change by introducing new business for the group at a late stage.

Stage 5 Presentation After reflecting back to the project goals and to individual learning goals established at the beginning, groups present on their outcomes for the day. Tutor support can vary in amount. By inviting the groups to present they hear each others points of view, a valuable process in itself, and it develops the core skills of learning to learn.

Parallel Threads Leadership. By varying the structure it is possible to explore different issues. For instance leaders can run concurrently or sequentially. Alternatively with large courses a management team can be appointed for the whole project. Groups of real teams may be placed in real relationships or role reversal.

Staff Development. An added task for the participants to manage can be the implementation through the day of a staff appraisal scheme or a quality improvement circle. This can explore the issues of building in these functions on the job.

Flexibility Of course stages can also be dropped, shortened, enlarged or altered at will, this allows modelling of different work situations. It also allows the event to adapt to time and location factors.

In this example it is possible to see how the event could be adapted for the use to:

- build a new team (consolidation of existing competencies)
- learn new approaches (development of competencies)
- alter attitudes and patterns (transformation)

(Loynes; 1991).

A Mixed Future

In 1990 the Association of Management Education and Development (AMED, 1991) commissioned a report into the future training and development needs of managers and the strategies that were likely to be used to meet them. Outdoor approaches ranked 30th in a list of 89 strategies and was predicted to hold this position over the next five years. The top 18 training needs, listed in table 1, are all needs currently being addressed by outdoor management development programmes in the UK. Whilst the main providers continue to offer the staple products of personal development, leadership and team building many smaller and imaginative training companies are applying the outdoors to this wider range of training outcomes.

The outdoors is also increasingly integrated into other approaches to training. Development trainers are learning new skills or setting up collaborative ventures with management schools or other specialist providers.

A wealth of small independent consultants has led to the diversity of applications listed by AMED being met and surpassed. Some current trends stand out:

- Using the outdoors to communicate corporate vision and culture especially at times of change. This approach is being largely provided by the corporate entertaining field.

- Applying outdoor training solutions to attempts to develop the learning company concept.

- Using adventure and challenge to develop personal mastery for managers. These programmes combine Ti Chi, yoga and meditation with adventure challenge activities involving focus and balance.

- And to prove their is nothing new under the sun, in a country that certainly does not have a sunshine culture, we have just discovered the link between health and performance. And the booming health and fitness industry has just discovered outdoor

management training. They are marketing it under the healthy body, healthy mind banner.

Despite the AMED findings that the outdoors will remain a popular area of training for some years some people are already predicting that it has now reached its peak. The future of the industry now depends on its ability to sustain a standard product to the base of the corporate development pyramid and on its ability to communicate its versatility as a precision tool to address key issues in personal and corporate change whatever these may be.

Overall the industry has gone through a steep learning curve. Much of the mystery of outdoor experiences has been stripped away in the attempt to understand the process sufficiently to control the tool. As each trainer has gone through this transition of cognitive awareness so each delegate is taken through it demystifying the management function. Self managing, process aware, systems thinking, self learning people are the backbone of the learning company of the future.

I can't help thinking though, that when we apply some systems thinking to the leaning process ourselves, we might discover that the future will lie in gentler tools rewrapped to retain their magic and mystery. I suspect there is more to management learning than the rational and mechanical tell, show and feel approach we are currently espousing.

Whatever happens the industry has spawned some of the most creative practitioners currently operating in corporate development. This legacy of professional development will have been worth the effort alone wherever these people will now lead us.

References

Loynes C; 1991; Structured Experiences; in Training Tomorrow.

Boydell T. et al; 1991; Developing the Developers; AMED.

Further Reading

Banks J;

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