

Case Study – Combining Action Learning & Peer Group Learning at Domino

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To support the development of technical leaders into strategic leadership roles

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CHALLENGE

The company recognised that it had a high level of technical talent at senior level. They wanted to encourage team learning and to develop leadership perspectives and skills. They decided to provide peer-coaching support for some of their key project leadership teams.

This work took place during a period of significant change at senior management level, so participants were challenged with new work pressures, and varying degrees of support (or lack of) for the peer group learning.

During the peer coaching, team members used a structured and facilitated process to look beyond the technical challenges for the project teams to consider broader objectives such as:

- How can I be an influential leader and guarantee the success of the project?
- How can we maximise learning from each other?
- What leadership challenges are holding me back from contributing to the team?
- How can I make project meetings and team meetings the most effective?

- How can I improve feedback skills and honesty in the team?

Our work was with three project leadership teams, two of which were well established, and one was embryonic.

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METHODOLOGY

We worked towards achieving 3 set objectives for the programme:

1. To encourage individuals to lift their perspective from a purely technical / functional one to a more strategic leadership view
2. To have the teams be better able to solve / resolve issues themselves, without the need for escalation
3. To work more collectively across organisational boundaries

We began by initiating a 'getting to know you' session to ensure team members felt at ease with one another. This helped to promote trust, an important consideration to enable participants to immerse themselves in the process and participate at a level where learning was more likely to take place. The participants were then encouraged to present work related challenges to their group and to receive coaching from their peers.

Each of the 3 groups met six times in total, for one full day followed by 5 half days. These took place at approximately six-week intervals. Between each meeting the team members were required to apply what they had learned and report back on progress during the following session. They were also required to notice their own personal progress against their leadership goals, set by themselves at the start of the process.

RESULTS

Participants were asked what benefits had been gained personally and for the project they were part of. These included:

- A strengthening of relationships within the group
- Achieving a much better understanding of the group's strengths and weaknesses
- Encouraging the individuals and the group to take more of a leadership stance
- Building confidence to raise issues with group members
- Helping to create a greater sense of ownership
- Removing barriers to team effectiveness
- Improving communications and effective functioning of the group
- There was also overall improvement in the three key skill areas of listening, questioning and personal effectiveness across the groups.
- The programme also highlighted the need for improved relations to promote better collaboration and eradicate 'silo' working and to improve inter-departmental communication.

- During the evaluation stage of the programme, one person reported: "I have valued every session and am grateful for the time that each person has invested to listen and coach each other" whilst another commented: "I really enjoyed the challenge of open questioning, I think it's a core skill to anyone aspiring to management and leadership and felt I really have benefited from this element of peer learning."

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Further responses included:

- "A better knowledge of my peers' personalities and working preferences, resulting in closer collaboration"
- "Improved questioning resulting in more informed decision making"
- "Better open questioning skills, hopefully empowering others to contribute rather than pushing my ideas and views on individuals"
- "Provided a space to reflect and rationalise, to see the bigger picture"

The transition from technical expert to leader is not always an easy one, and this programme was able to identify and address the challenges faced in a way that was non-threatening, collaborative and purposeful. The evaluations summed up the value of peer learning as an effective development intervention, where changes were felt at a personal level, to the overall benefit of the organisation.