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The role of action learning in personal, professional and business development

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions and experiences of senior hotel industry practitioners in relation to business imperatives, career development and organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses an interview discussion format to explore the challenges, benefits and outcomes of organizational development by action learning.

Findings – The paper observes that action learning provides an effective way of retaining, developing and enabling people to realize their potential at work and that this process is wholly beneficial to the host organization.

Practical implications – The paper provides senior leader insights on the potential for learning at work and the underlying themes that enable organizations to develop as authentic learning organizations.

Originality/value – The paper reveals the benefits of embedding and cascading action learning so that participants can develop themselves and at the same time, their workplace environment.

Keywords Workplace learning, Action learning, Leadership development, Human resource development, Tourism

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In this viewpoint paper, Richard Teare facilitates discussion with four senior managers at Sandals Resorts International. They are: Wayne Cummings, Group Director, Business Processes and Administration; Marsha-Ann Donaldson-Brown, Director of Resort Sales; Louis Grant, General Manager, Sandals Royal Caribbean, Montego Bay and Howard Spittle, General Manager, Beaches Boscobel, Jamaica.

The discussions range across a number of topics but the central theme is access to workplace learning for staff (team members) so as to enable self-directed professional development and the related benefits for other stakeholders – especially the company, its brand and for guest retention. Self-directed development also strengthens the level of engagement and connections with customers and the brand by better enabling team members to consistently deliver the brand promise through each and every interaction with guests. Customers feel that this emotional connection are more satisfied, more loyal and more apt to become ambassadors for the Sandals brand.



The process and potential for action learning

Howard Spittle shares his insights and experiences with Louis Grant

Howard Spittle: I have spent the last 12-14 years developing people in Jamaica and in hotels where we did not have anything like the resources of Sandals. I began using action learning for my own professional development in 2003 and I have continued the journey. It is an extremely powerful process because as the action occurs, the learning takes place. By using Sandals Corporate University (SCU) and the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL) to introduce the process more widely throughout the company, it will enable us to advance. I believe that GULL can help us to successfully navigate many of the challenges ahead by providing pathways for the staff so that they can begin to solve the challenges that they deal with on a day-by-day basis. As it becomes better established, managers will readily see and understand the benefits of empowering and coaching their team members so as to help to create a stable, proactive learning environment in their property.

Contrasting class and work-based learning

Louis Grant: I have been in the hotel business for 54 years and during this time; I have observed a lot of people who have completed formal study in hotel and hospitality management at institutions in the Caribbean, Europe and North America. Overall, I have a rather negative opinion of these programmes because their graduates do not tend to stay in this business. I have often wondered why – what is your view?

Howard Spittle: Most people who have worked their way through the ranks to senior management will have encountered this phenomenon. The majority of university graduates we employ have studied hospitality management and it tends to be a rude awakening for them when they join us. Typically they will have accumulated a lot of factual information – mostly good facts that they can use – but comparatively limited industry experience. Furthermore, they do not expect to have to start their career in operative positions, they would prefer to arrive with their Bachelor degree and before long, assume your position or mine – that is their plan. A lot of what they learn is by rote: You learn it; you are tested on it and you move on. By contrast, action learning is ideally suited to those who are already established in a job – at any level – whether it will be a sanitation gentleman working hard on his pots and pans every day or a senior manager. The action learning process helps you to reflect on existing work experience and strengthen your skills through practical projects. In essence, the difference is that action learning offers a unique opportunity to advance both employee and employer. I have a good number of people in my hotel who are working through the GULL professional Bachelor pathway and their projects and the outcomes can only enhance the business.

Louis Grant: I attended a GULL briefing session last year and was impressed to hear participants being encouraged to think for themselves and to consider ways and means by which they might improve and at the same time, help the company they work for.

Howard Spittle: Could you imagine the difference it would make if all our staff were involved in projects? Beaches Turks & Caicos is well advanced in this respect – they have something like 150-170 staff engaged in GULL professional Bachelor and Master pathways and senior management must see benefits for the resort.

The potential for action learning

Howard Spittle: The beauty of action learning is that anyone and everyone can participate and given the significant differences between educational attainment and prior opportunities for learning that characterize hotel work, it is important. The action learning process works equally well for a gardener who may have been with us for 25 years as it does for a well-qualified manager. The gardener can base his/her GULL entry-level work on specific aspects of the grounds and bring it to the next level. The benefits that accrue for our guests are numerous. For example, action learning facilitates: advances in staff performance and professionalism; projects that can and will directly or indirectly impact the guest experience and greater efficiencies (which in turn yield opportunities to save or re-direct revenue).

Louis Grant: Could action learning could be implemented in high schools?

Howard Spittle: Yes, it is possible, but Sandals is already working with school leavers via our six week Hospitality Training Programme (HTP). Many of the participants have come through the educational system but have relatively little to show for it. They now complete the GULL professional Bachelor pathway entry level during their training, and they do this very successfully.

Louis Grant: We should do all we can to encourage them to enter the hotel sector because it offers the single largest number of career opportunities now in Jamaica.

Howard Spittle: Yes, and additionally there are so many Jamaicans who are called to work overseas on cruise ships and in the USA and Canada that if we could enable them all to attain a similar level of professionalism in preparation for their migrant worker interview we could help to open that door more widely for them. GULL is not for profit; it is Christian-based (but not exclusively so) and offers development pathways for school leavers through to seasoned professionals. For me, the most appealing aspect of GULL is the fact that it is more directed at those who have had limited or no educational opportunities. The success of HTP is self-evident – we have been able to bring youngsters in, train them for six weeks and thereafter they are available to work for us. If nothing else, it gives them a foundation training, self-respect and certification so they have some professional skills on which they can build.

The role of action learning in career development

Louis Grant: One of the things that I would like to see emerge from GULL is a re-think of the age old assumption that if you teach a subordinate and prepare them for advancement, then that person is probably going to take your job. My view is that if I am teaching younger managers, then the company has more people to move and promote as expansion occurs. This message needs to be reinforced among Heads of Departments especially as we seem to be losing people from this category.

When I started in the business, career aspirations were lower and in contrast, today's hotel employees view the workplace rather differently. Hotel work no longer enjoys the status that it once had and so I really like the fact that those in the lowest skill level jobs can participate in action learning and develop themselves. For me, that makes it a fantastic programme.

Howard Spittle: We do have some challenges in advancing our people. In some circumstances, we just do not seem to be able to find the right people, which is curious in a country like Jamaica with a high level of unemployment. So perhaps the answer is to focus harder on training and retaining our people.

Learning outcomes

Howard Spittle: When I wrote my learning review, I started by reflecting back on my personal learning statement (the very first document) and my career review (a later document) and, what I realized was that the journey reinforced much of what I had been doing. There has always been a central theme of learning and development – advancing people – so my GULL professional doctorate reflects a long journey that will continue because it has to continue. It is not possible to sustain a career in this industry and certainly not in a Sandals environment unless you are interested in advancing people. One of the many things that Sandals does well is training, but in view of the challenges we face in recruiting the people we need now and for the future, we may need to re-focus our training so that we develop an even greater proportion of those we employ and in doing so, action learning has a key role to play. The past year has given me a chance to consider what GULL and action learning really means to me. Above all, GULL gives me an opportunity to play a meaningful role in developing people – providing that they have a desire to develop themselves. As long as they can determine what they need to learn, I can guide them, assist them to select a project that they are capable of doing and, step-by-step they will be advancing themselves. As a result, an active learning culture takes root – and that is what I think will happen more widely. This will provide an awakening for a lot of people and for many, the opportunity to earn their first ever certificate.

To encourage workplace learning, I ask job applicants if they will need to use a stapler when completing their application form and those who have not got photocopies of certificates to attach to their application generally do not need the stapler. This helps to make the point that we should all find ways to continue and sustain our own personal and professional development and it is a powerful reminder!

The role of action learning in facilitating brand development

Marsha-Ann Donaldson-Brown

Prior to GULL, I had completed academic degrees up to Master's level and when I entered into this, I found that the most candid thing about it is accountability for every working moment. I mean by this, really measuring your success on a daily basis and then assessing for yourself: What could I have done differently? How could it have worked otherwise? GULL action learning forces you to raise the bar and although I tend to do this anyway, I find that the weekly and monthly summary work challenges me to advance. My own insights indicate that through GULL our team members will have a framework to develop themselves and gauge their own progress in relation to the company's professional and organizational goals. It is a magical combination because Sandals is number one because of the product and its people and we will remain number one – beyond the Caribbean – because we are developing our people in a rich learning environment founded on action learning. It is a gift for me to allow my business vision to become a reality.

The dynamics of our educational system as in most countries are not wholly equitable or ideal and there are many in Jamaica who have missed out – yet here is GULL – a genuinely affordable option and a perfect work-related development opportunity. In this context, we are opening a new door with on-going pathways for development. It challenges our conventional thinking about learning and opens our minds.

Do you know what we are developing? A stakeholder group to which every team member belongs because GULL provides a self-development framework that enables each and every stakeholder to attain their fullest potential and achieve professional career goals too. It is a recipe for continuing success because team members are motivated, happy and they have access to development pathways, then guests too are happy and by extension, the company will secure the levels of guest retention and revenue generation that it needs. It is normal in business to expect strong revenue generation and guest retention levels, but these are difficult to sustain without securing the foundation on which they are based: How will we take care of the people who serve our guests and ensure that they are so engaged that they fully appreciate that in everything they do and say they have the ability to persuade the guest to return?

In my role, I look for cheer leaders who understand that when they develop personally with professional backing and support, they will be able to fully articulate the Sandals brand. We are fortunate in that we have very dynamic team members who come to us in the first place because Sandals is a dynamic company and this blend creates synergy and a level of energy that propels us forward. I would like us to take this to another level so that everybody is wearing the same badge of pride and shares the sense of accomplishment that arises from being the very best at what we do. There is a significant difference between telling people that they can feel proud and engaging people in the creative process so that they are fully aware of the nature of the contribution that they are making. Our business is to create “memories of a lifetime” and if every team member understands how he or she can impact on a guest and every manager is actively supporting and developing his or her team, it scatters proverbial pixie dust all over the place – it is just infectious – a happy cycle – that takes us forward – no doubt about it.

In essence, we are changing the mentality of our people as action learning gives them ownership of situations and with multiple projects to work on, they will share ideas with each other and the outcome will be contagious. Further, this will generate increased employee satisfaction and it will make a big difference.

The importance of self-actualization

Wayne cummings

Self-actualization is a powerful reason to engage in workplace learning. A lot of people end up working rather than studying because they have to – their circumstances determine their actions. In many cases those who work in the hotel industry have not had the opportunity to continue with secondary/tertiary education and hotels typically reflect a wide spectrum of people ranging from those who have had limited education to degree holders. Workplace opportunities like GULL enable people to advance to the next level and, aside from securing an income and being able to satisfy their family’s needs, there is always a desire to achieve personal goals. In some cases those goals may have been deferred because of circumstances – I could not finish my education or I intended to go back to school, but I could not afford to and I had to keep working – all these things play on the mind of team members every day and it also plays into their productivity. By being able to drive systems like GULL into the operations, the incidental responses and results will I am sure, have a positive impact on productivity. For these reasons we must always seek opportunities to facilitate learning and the opportunity to grow for the large numbers of people who work for us and in the wider Caribbean tourism and hotel sectors. I think GULL presents that opportunity.

At present, there are a lot of people who are undecided about whether to take an academic or a professional route. Personally, I am sold on the concept of a continuing professional pathway because it is work related and enables me to combine both working and learning in a way that enables me to take care of daily realities. How we package that message and how we provide a facility to deliver it while taking care of what matters on the ground, is really going to make a difference. It is my hope then that we can enable all our staff – at every level to self-actualize so that wherever they happen to work, brand integrity is looked after because they are happy, and successful. Furthermore, they will also know that the organization is facilitating this because they would not have been able to advance without a structure and framework for learning that the most senior persons in the company had helped to create.

In terms of my own development, I do ask myself from time to time whether I am achieving all that I can. The answer is “no” and as I reflect on my own career, I would have wanted to study for an academic doctorate but I know that I would not have been able to afford it. I also know that it would not be practical for me to do it at this stage in my life and so the opportunity to take a parallel professional track via GULL does present a manageable option. My professional life is so important to me and it consumes most of my time and energy. In view of this, if I can integrate personal and professional development with what I truly enjoy doing – working, helping others, seeing them and the company that I work for grow – then the combination will satisfy me wholly and completely. It will also address my own inner conflicts about the choice made – for instance – If I would had the educational opportunities that other people in my own age group had had – perhaps I could have achieved more or different things? However, I am sensible enough to know that income and my career are important and should never be under-stated, especially in terms of family and other commitments and responsibilities. These and other considerations affirm my own belief and wider corporate recognition that the opportunities provided by GULL in partnership with Sandals Corporate University are key to aligning work, learning and the possibilities for self actualization.

Further reading

Global University for Lifelong Learning (n.d.), available at: www.gullonline.org
Sandals Resorts International (n.d.), available at: www.sandals.com

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