

LEARNING WITH A HELPING HAND

The potential to turn social partnerships into structured learning opportunities results in a win-win for all parties. Report by Erika Lucas

There are many great examples of how organisations are 'putting back' and supporting projects in their local communities.

For example: In a deprived area of the City, managers from a leading bank have helped to manage the construction of an adventure playground.

Executives from an Italian medical technology business have acted as mentors to a group of prisoners ready to re-start their lives.

Meanwhile, a UK charity that recycles office furniture has improved its marketing expertise with the help of a team from a leading drinks business.

But such initiatives are not just about companies establishing their ethical credentials and giving staff a nice warm feeling. All the projects have a strong focus on learning – and are helping the organisations involved build leadership capability, strengthen team-working and improve customer service.

An emerging trend

Of course the idea of linking learning and development to community projects is not entirely new. There are a small handful of companies and expert facilitators who have been doing it successfully for some time.

But it's an idea that has gained increasing credence over the last few years, and is beginning to creep into the mainstream.

"Businesses are constantly looking for new and efficient ways to develop their staff. This, coupled with the growing corporate social responsibility (CSR) expectations placed on companies, means more and more businesses are looking to partner with the social sector for volunteering and development purposes," says Moira Nangle of consultancy WangleWorks.

Nangle's consultancy works as a bridge between private and social sectors, helping ensure both sides get maximum benefit from the partnerships they set up. Done well, she says, partnerships can reap enormous benefits for everyone involved. Done badly, however, they can be quite damaging.

"Done poorly, it can raise false expectations, waste precious time and resource and invoke cynicism," she says. "Worst of all, real people can suffer as a result as social sector projects disappoint or fail to deliver, and your people fail to get what they need or want from these relationships."

So how do you lay the foundations for a successful project that links learning and development to a community project? And what's the best way to make sure there's a return on investment for everyone involved?

The perfect match

Finding a compatible partner is an important first step, according to Professor David Grayson, professor of corporate responsibility and director of the Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility at Cranfield University School of Management.

He advises employing the same due diligence you would use when choosing a potential supplier or commercial business partner.

"Partnership is a much hyped and over-used word. The good ones understand it is not a one-off, PR event," he says. "You need to spend time having a proper debate and discussion with your potential partner about what each of you is looking for."

Is the charity or community organisation really geared up, for example, to receive groups of volunteers? What health and safety procedures do they have in place? Is there enough common ground to allow you to work together comfortably and effectively?

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The culture of the organisation and the way it goes about its business on a day-to-day basis is another issue that needs to be considered. "Sometimes the decision-making processes are very different," says Grayson. "A business might be used to making decisions quickly with just a few people, whereas a community-based organisation may be highly consensual in its decision-making, where the process matters as well as the outcome."

The reality, of course, is that no potential partner is necessarily going to tick all the boxes, but if the chemistry is right and both sides go into the relationship with their eyes wide open, the chances of success are much higher.

Finding the right project

Identifying a project that will meet both the needs of the charity and deliver the desired learning outcomes for the organisation is also critical.

There are numerous examples of managers going into charities or community projects to mend fences and paint walls. But that very often isn't the kind of help not-for-profits really need – and participants often don't get much out of it beyond a change of scene and a bit of surface bonding with their colleagues.

Moira Nangle says in her experience, what social sector organisations actually want is some expert help with their core business processes. "Not-for-profit organisations are generally very good at delivering to their client group, but because they have tended to grow quite quickly, either out of a need or someone's passion, they often haven't attended to developing their own infrastructure," she says. "What they are often looking for is help with their finance, IT, HR or marketing, and people who can help them develop their strategy."

On the other hand, what companies often want is something that will engage their staff, create a feel-good factor, help them meet their CSR requirements and give them access to cost-effective team-building or leadership development.

It sounds like the recipe for a marriage made in heaven, but according to Nangle, there's often a missing ingredient. "Organisations tend to be very good at the brokering of the relationship, and they genuinely want to adopt charities and do good things for them, but the design and evaluation of these projects is often poor and very few organisations seem to be good at making sure the development really delivers," she says.

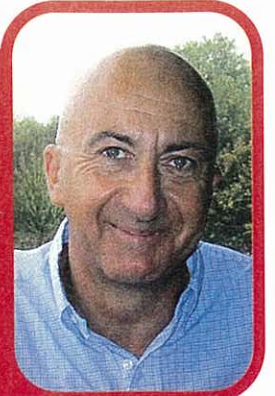
Projects in practice

Leadership and people development company Impact International has been successfully delivering projects which bring together corporate and community partners for over 20 years. Senior consultant Andy Dickson believes the key to success is in the preparation – and the follow up.

"We do a lot of work up front to understand the context of the learning an organisation wants to do," he says. "If the business tells us they want to improve the leadership of middle managers we ask why, and how they will know it's changed after the project, so that we can set specific measures and design the learning experience around this.

"It's also about facilitating dialogue after the experience

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CSR partnering checklist

- Choose your partner carefully. Find synergies, shared passions and common ground
- Invest in the relationship – take time up front to get the chemistry right
- Hook up for the long haul. Look for a charity/ community partner you can build a long-term relationship with
- Find a project that makes sense for both parties – and be absolutely clear about what you both want to achieve
- Make sure expectations are realistic on both sides – go into projects with your eyes wide open
- Identify the specific learning outcomes you want to achieve, so that you can evaluate success afterwards
- Get the basics right – make sure someone is looking after the logistics
- Follow up with managers afterwards. Help them take what they've learnt back into the workplace
- Take full advantage of the relationship – what other useful insights/knowledge can your partner provide?
- Celebrate success, both internally and externally.

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Andy Dickson, Impact International

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and relating it back to work. In most cases there is a follow-up process on a one-to-one basis, sometimes through telephone coaching with managers once they have had an experience and have gone back into the workplace."

Dickson cites a partnership set up between Sony and the charity Sight Savers International as an example of how this kind of experiential learning project can work in practice.

The charity, which restores sight and helps combat blindness in people living in developing countries, wanted to put together a hard-hitting, low-cost marketing campaign that would raise its profile and improve understanding of its life-changing work.

At the same time, Sony was looking to improve teamwork and build on the strategic marketing expertise of its European senior marketing team.

Impact International brought the two parties together in a Mission Critical Marketing programme, delivered in partnership with business school INSEAD.

During the week-long programme, Sony managers heard some of the latest thinking on marketing from experts at INSEAD and had the opportunity to develop new, leading edge skills. Facilitators from Impact International worked alongside participants on their personal development and team-working skills. The Sony team then went into Sight Savers and used their new-found expertise to help the charity put together an innovative, high-tech marketing programme.

It was a win-win project. Sight Savers ended up with a global marketing plan and some first-rate ideas on how to grow its donor base. Sony managers got a real-life insight into how they could combine their skills to find solutions to strategic problems - plus the satisfaction of knowing they had made a real contribution to a worthwhile cause.

Impact's Dickson says experiential learning like this gives participants a heightened awareness of how they can use their skills. "It's very real and it engages people on an emotional level," he says. "Working with people on live projects makes the learning so much more powerful. It definitely challenges their attitudes and behaviours, allows them to learn about others and helps them tap into their understanding of themselves."

Recipe for success

Robinne Collie, MD of Food@Work, adds that the

experience of working alongside your peers in a completely different, alien environment can help cement relationships and allow people to achieve things they didn't think they were capable of.

Food@Work uses the medium of cooking and the commercial kitchen to deliver experiential learning – often working in partnership with community organisations. It has recently linked up with a number of homeless shelters, for example, to give organisations the chance to develop their leadership or team-building skills while 'giving back' to society at the same time.

Corporate teams can work together, under the guidance of experienced chefs, to prepare meals for homeless shelters, some feeding up to 250 people a day. Skilled learning facilitators are on hand to help highlight team strengths and areas for development, and help participants understand how they can apply what they have learnt back in the workplace.

The managers-turned-chefs are able to meet staff from the shelter, and in many cases help to serve the food and share a meal with the recipients.

"Cooking works well as a medium for this kind of experiential learning because it's real, it's accessible and it's relevant to people's lives," says Robinne Collie. "The nature of cooking a meal in a team context is very tangible, and immediate, it involves many different management principles, and you will sit down and share it together at the end.

"A lot of teams say it's the first time they have really seen their team act supportively – people are saying what do you need next? Can I chop this for you? We also often see people doing things out of character. Some find themselves naturally leading when they never thought they could, whereas others find themselves out of their comfort zone and come undone a bit.

"People are often alarmed when you brief them that they have to cook for 200 people, but because we create a supportive environment where they can achieve it, it leads to a huge rise in confidence and self belief."

Collie adds that the experience of cooking together can have a lasting impact on work relationships. "There's just something really magical about people cooking together," she says. "Standing next to your colleague – or even the MD – and chopping onions and creating a meal together is quite an intimate experience and you just can't go back to the relationship you might have had before."

New leadership skills

Recent research from Ashridge suggests that projects linking learning and development with CSR may be ideally placed to deliver the very leadership skills organisations will need in the future.

In its study *Developing the Global Leader of Tomorrow* Ashridge identifies three clusters of competencies the emerging generation of leaders will need. The first is around context – the ability of managers to understand and respond to the changing external context businesses are operating in. Second is complexity. Tomorrow's leaders will need to be comfortable negotiating their way around increasingly complex challenges.

Third is connectedness – and the need for managers to be able to build stronger relationships across all levels of

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society. "The research shows there's a real need emerging for skills in empathy, dialogue and partnership and engaging with others to achieve a win-win situation and people need development opportunities that deliver that," says Matthew Gitsham, director of the Ashridge Centre for Business and Sustainability.

The Ashridge research suggests that experiential learning is in fact one of the most effective ways to build these skills. "It's very complex stuff and you can't even begin to scratch the surface in a classroom environment," says Gitsham. "So action learning and learning through projects where you are out in the real world engaging with people is very valuable."

Cranfield's Professor David Grayson points out that in addition to developing new skills, organisations are increasingly reaping other, often unexpected benefits from their partnerships with community organisations. These partnerships, he says, can help companies discover new markets, get a better insight into their customer base and can even act as a catalyst for new product development.

He cites the example of a collaboration between the charity Scope and BSkyB, which indirectly led to a redesign of the company's TV remote control consoles. "They realised that people with physical dexterity problems found the remote control quite fiddly and difficult to use, and that if they could get the design right for them, it would mean the consoles could be more easily used by all their customers," he said.

Impact International's Andy Dickson says the positive impact these joint projects can have on employee engagement also shouldn't be under-estimated.

"Employees are people who have interests outside of work and strong values, and they do things in their own time because they are passionate about them," he says. "If they are able to work with the community at work as well, it taps into their personal motivators, creates a bond between the employee and the business and makes them proud to be part of an ethical organisation." 

Resources

CMI members have access to further information on corporate social responsibility, team-building and volunteering via the online Subject Search service. To see what is available on these topics, visit www.managers.org.uk/subjectsearch

The CMI publishes guidelines on corporate responsibility management for members. Go to www.managers.org.uk/crguide

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