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Articles on Leadership

13 June 2011

Developing Talent in Shared Service Teams: Managerial Judgment by Alistair Lloyd.

Alistair Lloyd is Shared Services Director within Lion. Lion is one of Australasia's largest foods and beverage groups, employing close to 8,000 people and boasting a portfolio of market-leading, household name brands in beer, spirits, and wine, dairy and non-alcoholic drinks.

In any Services group, developing team member's behaviours and knowledge is a vital enabler. This is because the 'output' being produced by the group is not tangible – it is not a bottle of milk or a case of beer. The services being provided are a combination of information, created from knowledge, and transactions, created from repeatable processes. This results in three key challenges:

Where to 'focus' training, i.e. building technical skills, behaviours and leadership;
Budget constraints, i.e. being pragmatic about the investment made given that the result will be cost reduction not revenue enhancing; and, How to make it work, i.e. how to measure that the training has increased the effectiveness and efficiency of a process, resulted in the team members being more engaged and improving customer satisfaction levels.

Within technology-based services, a major issue is that there is a correlation between formal (classroom- or institution-based) training for growing technical knowledge and the team member's motivation. Team members have the perception that formal training makes them more valuable and literally 'invested in' by the company. Another issue is getting an understanding of the existing capabilities mix of team members. These include technical capabilities, as well as communication, experience and business knowledge. There is a need to determine the mix of capabilities required, now and into the future.

When it comes to closing the gap between the current and required capabilities, a key issue is to make an organisational development decision – what skills or knowledge should you "buy in" (using a consultancy, hiring new team members or through cross-functional secondments) and what should you develop from within your existing pool of talent.

There are some simple and effective steps that can be taken to address these challenges. Cataloguing the skills, behaviours, education and knowledge of team members provides an understanding of the capabilities you have "right now". It can be done in a way that both reveals previously untapped capabilities, such as different languages or experiences gained in other companies, as well as revealing the aspirations and interests of team members. Closing these gaps then becomes a more targeted exercise. Formal training may provide the 'book learning' required to build basic understanding of a skill. However, experiential learning – through a project placement, involvement in developing and delivering a new service, or secondment to another team – is by far the most effective in cementing this capability. Tying these together is effective coaching – actively providing guidance, having quality conversations and constructively challenging team members to take ownership of their goals, whilst fostering a culture of achievement.

Focusing on behaviours and leadership, rather than discrete 'technical' capabilities, provides a foundation upon which any capability can then be built. Capabilities should only be "bought in" where the gap is larger than can be reasonably developed internally. The results can then be measured in two ways – the observed improvement in transaction costs and customer satisfaction, and the improvement in team member engagement.

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