

# Know Learning, Know Change

## Earning learning to sustain organisational change



The story of a journey in organisational learning, a major change intervention in FE colleges during 2003-05

*"If we get our organisational culture right, then we can meet any challenge".*

Principal, leading participant college

And... not just for organisations in the Learning & Skills sector:

*"Why can't teaching organisations become learning organisations too? The news from the following narrative is that they can... Hard work, yes, scary, sometimes — but surely worth it for a process that puts your destiny back in your own hands. That could teach the private sector a thing or two, too."*

Simon Caulkin (The Observer)

# Foreword

By Simon Caulkin

We all know the syndrome. Too much work for too little return. Too much energy spent on accounting for what you've done and not enough on actually doing it. A vitality-sapping gap between what we say and what we do. A deep sense of powerlessness when confronted with the need to change — we know we need to change, but we're too busy, too tired, too cynical, we did it before and it didn't work, to try.

Of course, this paralysis is not unique to the public sector — despite what New Labour ministers seem to think, it is distressingly familiar in private companies too. It was Peter Drucker who lamented that 'So much of management seems to be about preventing people from doing their job.' But the effect is particularly debilitating in public-sector areas such as FE, whose entire product is, or ought to be, 'making a difference' — that, after all, is what learners are desperate for, and on the supply side, the thing teachers signed up to do (well, it wasn't for the money, was it?).

Yet we also know that some individual practitioners do make a difference. Through a mixture of values and method, they don't teach people, they provide them with the desire and the equipment to learn. And, learning from changing demand and environments, they keep on doing it. So if individuals can do it, why can't organisations? Why can't teaching organisations become learning organizations too?

The news from the following narrative is that they can. The account of a consultancy intervention that took place in 2003-4, it shows that FE organizations that tackle the values gap with determination and craft can generate the energy they need to unblock the machinery and get the wheels turning again. Hard work, yes, scary, sometimes — but surely worth it for a process that puts your destiny back in your own hands.

That could teach the private sector a thing or two, too.

Simon Caulkin, *The Observer*

# Executive Summary

**Know Learning, Know Change**, developing an organisational learning culture: values into action, is about developing sustainable organisational change based on consultancy work in a number of Further Education colleges from around 2003 to 2005. It tracks the background, approach, beginnings and development of this intervention, which still continues.

The intervention was prompted by the failure of many quick-fix attempts at change and develops a new approach to enable fundamental cultural transformation. Along with outlining the basis of this approach, the publication narrates the approach in practice, what actually happened, what was learned from this, and what progress has been made so far. The approach was based on a radical vision (see 'Introduction: Key influence 3') and a radical change 'lever', a Change Team in each of the colleges involved, composed of staff from all organisational levels. These Teams led three linked tasks to:

- \* identify and agree core organisational values
- \* build a values framework to make explicit the behaviours required to enact these values in everyday practice, to improve performance
- \* embed the values framework in their processes and procedures as a new means of managing performance for all staff

The publication is in four parts:

**Introduction** outlines briefly the aim, sector context and evidence of why this initiative is needed.

**Part 1** outlines our approach: the importance of organizational culture in meeting future challenges, why previous change initiatives failed and the role of values in sustaining performance. There is also a key aspect, the role of learning and how to remain open to learning as necessary fuel, for the long change journey.

**Part 2** outlines each stage of the intervention from initial engagement; gearing purpose; responding and tackling defensiveness; sustaining momentum; creating and presenting a values framework; embedding the values framework; effectively measuring; and what next. Each stage follows the same structure: an outline of the main activities which occurred at that stage; the issues which emerged; and key learning points. There are also examples drawing on effective change from other organisations. Each of these is short, snappy and structured to have maximum relevance to the learning sector.

**Part 3** outlines what next: the benefits of the intervention, an invitation to other organizations to engage with it, some outstanding issues and how this work is continuing.

# Executive Summary

## Reading it

Much writing on organizational change seems as if sifted through an academic homogenizer, everything seems reasonable, there is little rethinking and the idea of 'learning' hardly surfaces. This work, however, should resist passive consumption. It is an amalgamation of action research, think-tank, and cutting edge new ideas, which can help to lead sector thinking. It contains illustrations, diagrams and quotes from participants which animated their journey. We hope it provokes, inspires and contributes towards creating a new change agenda.

## A word on behalf of our sponsor: learning

To emphasise how crucial learning was, here are two things we learned:

- 1 that to be effective, in change circumstances, there is a need to increase our rate of learning, as previous responses will be inadequate for the new journey, indeed they may well be part of the problem.
- 2 'Culture change' OR 'changing the work we do now': is this the perfect dialectic? Which comes first? Culture change may seem like pie in the sky, always coming soon, sprung into the ungraspable future. However, staff work in the here and now, and cannot wait for that promised future, however much they want it. Effective change needs to start with the frustrations and urgencies of what we do every day, where work isn't working, where those who have to do it are robustly empowered to improve it. If we can get that right then watch out for floods of improvement – and culture change.

## Finally, a tale of two 'efficiencies':

At the 2006 AOC conference there was an 'FE' pub quiz. One question was: how much did it cost the LSC to make £40 million savings with its 'Agenda for change'? Answer: £38 million (Ok- howls of protest from LSC staff) However what other inefficiencies don't we tackle? How much has been wasted on failed change, reworking and learning poorly? This work is an argument for an underused collective resource: the riches of real, messy, hard to be heard, organisational learning.

# Introduction

## What is this publication about?

### The Aims of this Publication

The aim of this publication is to provoke, stimulate, inspire and contribute towards creating a new change agenda. The publication is in part a provocation, and a call to action for leaders in organisations; those who may feel they are working in uncertain conditions which result in fragile or fragmented attempts at change, while at the same time being aware that they cannot meet their key challenges without substantial change. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide, nor safely academic. Rather, it maps out a tricky, risky journey where the most important resources are the values and commitment of those who want to change things, along with one other key element: that great unused resource, organisational learning. Like the Loch Ness monster, though frequently sighted, this has rarely been trapped. We are suggesting here that fundamental change is not possible without organisational learning. Part of this learning involves saying things which those involved (and possibly readers) might not want to hear.

Crucially, it embraces the hesitations, deadends and frustrations we experienced and how we learned from them. Our experience before the start was that most thinking about sustaining the benefits of change is superficial and unambitious; deep down, it's shallow. Effective change is less about trying harder and more about *thinking harder*, thinking differently. Now we are saying to all in the sector: If you think fundamental change is necessary, *it can be done* and here is how.

Though this started out as a more or less conventional project, we soon became aware that it was more a new approach to consultancy intervention; and as the importance of values was so central to the whole rationale, the title changed to '*Developing an Organisational Learning Culture: Values into action*'. Utilising consultancy support, in any organisation involved, it is a strategy for change intervention intended to transform organisational culture, to enable sustainable improvement. It is also amongst the first major change programmes in the sector to use learning as a model for change, and to place crucial emphasis on building and applying collective learning.

For many organisations, their challenges are immense; and doing what they normally did won't be enough. Probably the *greater* risk is in doing more of the same.

### Key Influences

'Change and continuity...how long can that relationship last?' (College Principal)

The issues the intervention were designed to tackle were longstanding, deepseated, and cultural. As consultants, we felt a new, radical approach was needed which was suitably 'bespoke', stimulated those involved, and avoided the pitfalls and false promises of previous approaches. It began with key influences, and involved crafting our thinking over a long period of time, to ensure it would be appropriate and effective.

# Introduction

## Key Influence 1: The Sector Context And Why This Initiative Is Needed

*'We're suffering from burbur..'*

(college manager)

'burbur' = bureaucratic burden imposed by external bodies

*'What does L+M stand for?'*  
*'Licensed Mistrust'*

Exchange between two teachers

*College Logo: teaching for learning*

*Notice how the front line becomes the bottom line*

All learning sector organisations attempt to do a good job. Most perceive their working circumstances as highly fraught; having to adjust continually to changing policy drives, having their value undermined by an accusatory audit regime which hinders their development and experiencing a significant paygap compared with schools funding. As one Principal said 'we are being continually intervened with...'. These concerns lead to uncertainty and frustration –not just with senior sector managers- overall there is a great difficulty in attracting and retaining staff at any level. Teachers perceive they are undervalued, managers that they are not allowed to manage. There is also a damaging post-Incorporation, long term legacy of mistrust and disaffection which college managers have found hard to tackle, making some sector staff understandably cynical and wary of change.

This publication understands all these perceptions and their implications for performance. The sector has many satisfied customers on an incredibly diverse range of courses, with some providers performing excellently. However, there is also some evidence suggesting that , as a whole, the sector is only showing limited sustained improvements:

*'..one in ten colleges is 'inadequate' according to the Annual OFSTED Inspectorate Report. Further education (quite apart from wbl) is afflicted by some persistent weaknesses, half of all colleges having some unsatisfactory provision... There are, as yet, no convincing signs of significant overall improvement in sector...the most common failing of college management is the performance of its core function of ensuring and sustaining the quality of teaching and learning.'* (TES 6/2/04)

Alan Johnson, then minister for life long learning (TES 9/7/04) further emphasised the need for continuous improvement as a key change driver: 'Improving outcomes for learners and qualifications... will continue to be a top priority for us and we look to providers to develop a strong culture of continuous improvement to make this a reality...'

David Sherlock , ALI Chief Inspector (TES 18/6/04): 'in the first round of Inspections just over 60 general further education colleges were graded consistently good. Only 12 have sustained that level of performance until now'.

And, in his Chief Inspector's Annual Report (CIAR) suggested that the achievement of *Success for All* will be 'a lengthy business because it demands changes of culture as much as practice...' He implicitly criticises a familiar management response: 'There is a tradition in England of managerialism: that is, of rewarding the capacity to generate policy and to organise *from a distance* (our italics) rather than seeking to empower those who have to do the frontline job.' (p15 CIAR ALI)

# Introduction

## Key Influence 2: Reaching for 'high hanging fruit'

The ALI CIAR then poses what we think are key questions for the sector:

- \* 'There is a difficult question for all who have some authority in the new sector: what kind of culture do we hope to create'? (page 15 *ibid*) And
- \* 'A vital question is... whether or not the organisations in the sector create the circumstances in which teachers can teach and learners learn most effectively'? (p15 *ibid*)

In other words, can they create the conditions/culture to deliver core business? How can organisations develop commitment? How sector organisations seek to address (or not) these 'vital, difficult' questions may well be key to their long term effectiveness. Many commentators have taken a long time to pose these questions as the most important ones.

However, the one certainty that any organisation faces, let alone sector ones is that '*only change endures*'. In order to meet their current and future challenges, they will need to consider change differently. How they build strategy, capability and effectiveness will depend on how they harness change. Hence the importance of the intervention here.

### Key Influence 2: Reaching for 'high hanging fruit'

Over a period of time, the LSDA Quality Improvement Consultancy Team had been considering these issues(1). In their experience, most organisations seeking their help looked for 'low hanging fruit. This is, in Peter Senge's analogy (2), a means of providing quickfix solutions, while more fundamental problems remained. This led us to look for a different approach that could be applied to organisations ready to embark on a holistic change programme that would tackle the fundamental, strategic issue of culture.

We were aware that sustainable change had to be based on enacted values, from evidence of high performing organisations built on values *and* on practices which enact them, i.e. organisations doing what they say they do. Bypassing these, ignoring them, or pretending they were present when they were not, would mean that change would be short-lived and that the symptoms prompting the need for change would probably reappear later. Our concern was what values would apply to sector organisations; how this would relate to ones they currently claimed; where *learning* should fit amongst them; and how appropriate values could be expressed so they would have the most significant impact on organisational culture and performance.

*'Runshaw College transformed, partly thanks to management consultancy...'*

Bernard O'Connell  
Guardian 20/1/04

# Introduction

## Key Influence 3: Our initial inspiration

Including: *listening; eliciting/negotiating; sharing power/raising status; securing engagement; developing commitment; developing independence and interdependence.*

*The logic is straightforward. Companies... that take less time to improve must be learning faster than their peers...'*

'Building a learning organisation', David Garvin, Harvard Business Review July/August 1993

### References

1 Messages from the front (2001) LSDA QIT consultancy see [www.s4s.org.uk](http://www.s4s.org.uk)  
2 Senge P (1999) *The dance of change: the challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organisations* Nicholas Brealey, London

One particular idea inspired our initial thinking. Though many teachers -and other staff in the sector- feel undervalued, some highly inspiring learning, led by some teachers, is occurring. Their practice *is informed by particular values*, see left.

Note that here we are not necessarily talking about competence or skills, as such. It is more the animating force, the discretionary will that motivates, turning teacher time into effort, at times almost regardless of circumstance. This basis of commitment if you like, produces an ambitious learning culture with highly transformative effects, which is successful even with the most challenging of learners. However, the radical idea is: if this practice works for customers, why not for all staff? How these teachers work could be used as a model for profound organisational change. Why not have this as the basis of an organisational culture, for how colleges should *manage their interdependence*, those broken relationships between teachers, managers and organisational intentions, which is part of a post-Incorporation legacy of mistrust, leaving many sector organisations fragmented, separated from their purpose, over-managed yet under-led.

### A working definition

Over time, we adopted the following working definition for the intervention. This was as much to clarify our own thinking, distinguish it from current notions of 'a learning organisation' (usually greeted with defensiveness) and to find an effective shorthand to explain it to others. Though we are convinced about the role of learning and its relationship to performance, this intervention was also an opportunity to test out and see what the effects of organisational learning as a value, and a system could be.

An organisational learning culture consists of its practices at all levels, which are based on agreed, enacted values, including how it increases and uses collective learning, to enable high performance. The enactment of its values should be part of the overall purpose and aspiration of an organisation.



# Acknowledgements

## More than an acknowledgement

Amongst the begrudgers, the less imaginative fully armed, the hollow yawners, those who do only what is expected and wonder at their dull effect, there is always someone somewhere... Someone with a little more steadfast audacity, who imagines and crafts, who knows things will be better only if we do something – that's not what we always did. These people come in many forms, a concept-lush here, a soul-bandit there, always enrichers, always traveling in hope.

To have any life at all, every idea needs an ear; listening is nourishment but having the power to help an idea stumble into practice, and use intelligent accountability to get it on its feet...

This is more than an acknowledgement. For anyone who never had the good fortune to work for Linda Bye or a manager like her: your loss.

## To the main players

To all those people and organisations that took part in this intervention, led it and went much further, many thanks. 'Positive deviants' all, they confronted the 'brutal facts' of their organizations in building the learning culture they need to meet their current and future challenges.