

Some thoughts on the approach to change being used by the Core Skills Development Partnership

As part of the ongoing evaluation, the Partnership was challenged to make more explicit its change-model. If it was bringing about system-wide change, how was it doing it.

1. Factors influencing for change

The Partnership does not work in isolation. By its very nature it is driven by, and in turn adds momentum to, the events and planning processes within partner organisations. The Partnership was established to forge a way forward through what was predicted to be sets of national changes that would have impacts across the area. The Partnership responds rapidly to (and feeds back into) national developments.

- Developments
 - in national strategy
 - in local partner's Development Plans and Strategies
- Build up of external events that precipitate sudden change within partners
- Contractual commitments still to be met in order to reach any agreed outcomes
- Insights gained from internal/external reviews

Tools used:

- turning any national and local reviews, reports and evaluations into a checklist of action points re changes to be made within own activities
- regularly scanning horizons for changes and updating (e.g. checking internet 'latest'; ensuring local receipt of key documents; securing appropriate involvement in national and local key groups)
- reading the 'waves'; knowing what is coming e.g. re changes in local and national arrangements and strategies
- keeping capacity for rapid reaction and repositionings of resources
- covering changed emphases through short term flexible team attachments; new centrally directed 'project development' activity; close financial monitoring and continuous redeployment of resources to best effect
- setting times for outcome/vision focusing: identifying 'distance still to be travelled'
- target setting; action planning

2. Nature of Partnership and how it is set up for change

From the beginning the Partnership has focused only on development. It does not have a delivery role (that is the function of each of the partner organisations) and is therefore freed up to focus on adding value to the work of partner organisations. The Partnership has persistently and relentlessly pursued agreed sets of necessary changes. It emphasises:

- Consistent, transparent purpose; keeping same aim re change
- Consistent leadership: pushing for change
- Repeated messages: establishing a culture of change
- Strategic objectives: identifying key levers of change
- Steerage: engaging senior managers from partners, with power to change
- Flexible development team, within partners: ability to directly operationalise change
- Retaining sufficient/adequate resources to be able to respond when opportunities arise to push changes through; but keeping central 'team' as small as possible so resources aren't spent on internal processes
- Ensuring reputation built up through practice rather than promotions
- Recognising respective roles both of partners and of Partnership
 - avoids 'boundary wars' between partners

Tools used:

- early agreement of key principles and systems
- use of key intermediaries from partners, loosely attached to focus on Partnership's work from within their own organisation
- annual business planning, in shifting context – identifies the agreed progress to be made each year
- appraisal of proposals by someone other than deliverers
- Partnership represented within key steering groups; planning groups – able to influence at early stages of developments
- newsletters which promote partners as well as partnership and which keep focus on broad developments
- Partnership level reviews undertaken – various aspects of Partnership mechanisms reviewed annually
- early 'system compliance' work done to ensure we aren't distracted by having to constantly do later remedial work

3. Leverage on Partners

The Partnership is set up to operate through its partners. This requires some mechanisms of influencing partner organisations at a number of levels. Through a 3 level matrix of influence with partners ('strategy' level; 'Management' level and 'doing' level), the Partnership is able to impact on:

- Staffing capacity for change within partners
- Leadership for change within partners
- Culture/language of change within partners
- Inter-relationships between partners
- Quality of basic skills planning within partners
- Effectiveness of operational mechanisms within partners
- Use of partners' own resources for development
- Quality standards in partners' own provider networks
- Establishing and maintaining the reputation of partners

i.e. partners' capacity to implement change

Tools used:

- Activity Agreements/Appraisal questions – annual agreements with partners re their next developments (and how feasible and cost-effective these are)
- Quarterly Monitoring of progress/keeping momentum going
- Tracking back to identify the remaining ‘gap to outcome’ – stress ‘getting there’ re strategic objectives
- Working back from target numbers – focus on numbers still to be worked with in order to get ‘whole system’ progress
- Reviews at level of broad development activities
- ‘Whole system’ querying rather than worrying about small activity detail
- Central structures kept small, and things done right, so that energies can go on ‘futures thinking’

4. Key phrases that are used to establish working culture

Most of the agencies are established to ensure delivery of programmes (at certain quality standards) for target client groups. ‘Change needed a different way of thinking, and work needs to be done via the Partnership re ‘thinking for change’. This requires a ‘language for change’ – in the sense of a set of frequently repeated phrases to establish a culture:

- being well positioned in shifting landscapes
- keeping stable relationships with each partner, even where relationships between partners are not strong
- the basic operating rules are well known, and complied with
- promoting change as ‘opportunity’ as well as ‘necessity’
- communicating a compelling purpose for change – keeping an eye on ‘what’s it all for’
- inspiring trust, through behaviours ... ‘this is the way we do things...’
- adequate resources, deployed in agreed framework – ‘money’ doesn’t become the main discussion. Money (once adequate) is not as important as having properly planned ways forward
- rehearsing the track record of changes brought about
- repeated emphasis on work through partners – it’s not just about the Partnership
- know when we’re getting there – descriptions of ‘how will we know when we’ve got there?’; ‘distance still to go’
- strategies clear yet flexible to use in context – kept to consistently repeated strategic objectives/purposes – not bogged down in fine detail of activity
- ‘bigger picture’ regularly rehearsed – ‘what was it we were supposed to be doing? How does it all fit together?’
- support collaboration across agencies; language is that of ‘joint collaborative ...’ etc – dampening down ‘fragmented, competitive ...’ etc
- right mix of leadership and management; linkage between bigger ‘directional’ statements and day to day ‘operational’ statements
- critical friend – challenge and support; stressing partnership not as an organisation, or as a funding mechanisms – but as a function

that supports organisations re change, but also pushes them to do
that bit more

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February 2003