

## Case study - Learning and Development Review

**Client:** A Large English Local Authority

**Service Area:** Strategy for HR

### The Opportunity

Tricordant was asked to conduct a review of the current arrangements for learning in development for the large local authority in England. Like every other local authority, the council had been obliged to reduce its expenditure across-the-board on all of its services. HR as a function and the Learning and Development in particular had endured significant reductions in budgets over a period of more than six years. The Senior leadership team within the authority were keen to understand the impacts of the cuts and indeed what kind of Learning and Development services had survived and were they providing value for money. At a more detailed level, the head of OD and her team wanted to understand what alternatives might be available that would provide a better set of learning outcomes with whatever future budget might be available. They were keen to hear what other similar organisations were doing in this area and what if any examples of “best practice” could influence future arrangements for Learning and Development. The senior leadership team asked Tricordant to produce not only a set of recommendations but also an implementation plan.

### The Tricordant Approach

Our approach was influenced by our belief in engaging a wide variety of people representing diverse views across the organisation. We designed and conducted a survey of employees to explore strength of opinion around a range of issues related to Learning and development. The questions on Learning and Development were included as part of a more general annual staff survey, which helped enormously with response rates. Following detailed analysis of the survey we arranged a number of focus groups where we invited groups of employees from across the organisation at different levels of seniority to participate in discussions that we could build up a broad picture of the underlying reasons the responses were received.

Working with the client project team we helped them to assimilate the key themes from the survey and the focus groups and to design some innovative, creative group sessions to explore some of the exciting ideas that emerged and to look at ways that Learning and Development could be developed in the future.

Using our experience from previous clients and an in-depth knowledge of Learning in development theory and practice we worked with the internal project team to build up a series of recommendations that were reviewed and ultimately signed off by the senior leadership team.

## The Outcomes

The outcomes of the project can be categorised into the following key themes:

- Engagement in the process – involving a diverse set of people in the process created momentum in the project and renewed enthusiasm for Learning and Development.
- Better understanding of the “inputs” to the learning and development process – the resources being devoted to Learning and Development.
- Better understanding of the “outputs” of Learning and Development process – what was being learned and how effectively it was being done.
- Better understanding of the needs to link business outcomes with the management of knowledge, skills and broader capabilities of employees – better managing the outcomes of learning.
- A more complete understanding of the role that the council plays in delivering employee learning within broader “Staffordshire system”.
- A clearer distinction between “Learning” (the acquisition of knowledge and the opportunity to practice new skills) and “Development” (the ways in which work and behaviours can be influenced to utilise more fully new knowledge and skills).
- An understanding that Learning and Development are different things that need to be managed differently.
- Recognition that valuable learning outcomes can emerge with little direct influence from a central OD or HR function.
- A better understanding of the organisational issues around Learning and Development; the importance of a coordinating role of a small centralised function and the value in the roles devolved to the wider organisation of managing Learning and Development to meet specific business needs.

The learnings we take from this and similar projects are:

- The process of involving people in the gathering and analysing information, and their involvement in designing options for the future had a significant impact on the energy around Learning and Development (this will come as no surprise to anyone with an Organisation Development background!).
- Despite the continuing round of budget reductions, there were many examples of where groups of employees in a particular service had developed their own learning and development solutions, sometimes using existing materials in innovative ways, to create innovative, engaging learning opportunities
- The motivation for groups of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning is often (though not exclusively) associated with continuous professional development
- The value in thinking separately about learning and development. Learning is something that individuals do, development is something that can happen for individuals, groups, teams and organisations as a whole. The field of OD offers a much broader range of thinking and options around development beyond the individual and many more opportunities to support the business than thinking about “L&D” as a single, homogenous enterprise.
- The importance of the language used to describe issues, their underlying causes and the options for dealing with them. Language needs to reflect the culture of the organisation; get it wrong and the value of the work will be lost. Take time to create materials in the language with which the client is most comfortable.
- The importance of taking care to build human relationships and how helpful that is when dealing with ambiguity and emergence in consulting work.