

The benefits of self-reflection

It is an important part of L&D, say **Gillian Smith** and **Pat Yates**

This article acknowledges how the current economic climate is influencing organisations in the design of their L&D programmes. In light of that climate, we discuss how a well designed 'toolkit' can support L&D programmes and share some findings of our ongoing research into the development of 'soft skills' (*communication, working with others, problem solving, improving one's own learning and performance*).

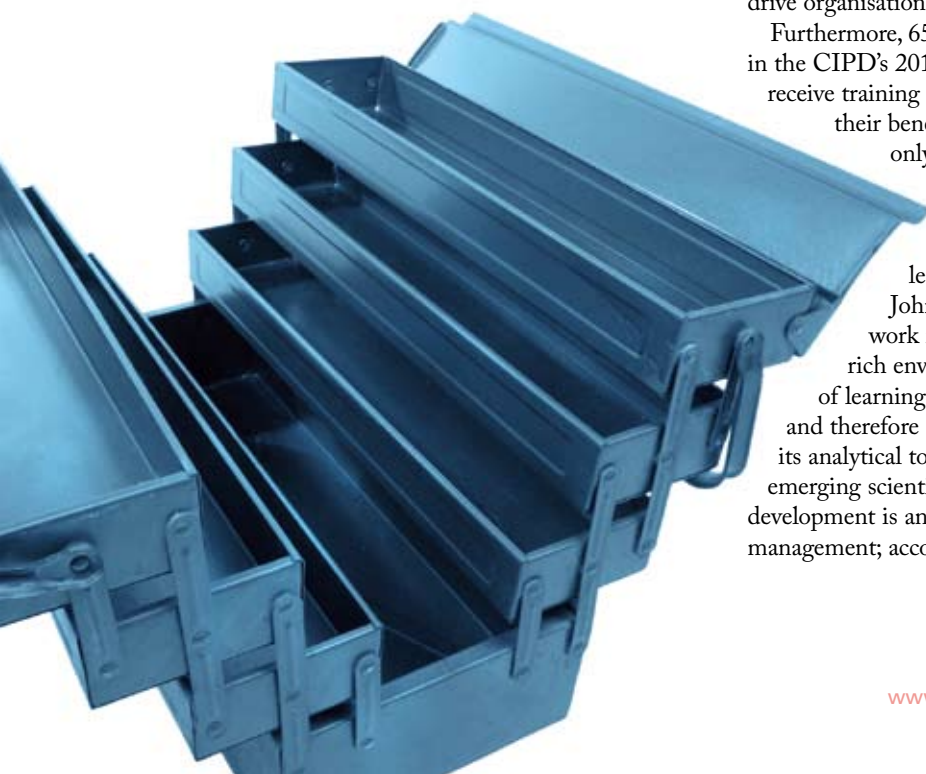
We believe that group work is the vehicle for the development of 'soft skills', and suggest that this will not take place unless facilitation and guidance are given, systems are in place to support the process, and an opportunity exists to strengthen the experience through reflection¹. This viewpoint is even more poignant in the current climate given the reduced uptake of external providers for L&D.

According to the findings from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's 2012 *Learning and Talent Development Survey*², organisations are reducing their use of external providers for L&D and increasing less costly development practices. The training methods most frequently used by the organisations surveyed are e-learning (54 per cent); coaching by line managers (47 per cent); in-house development programmes (45 per cent), and internal knowledge-sharing events (37 per cent).

Coaching is most commonly rated as one of the most effective TM activities (49 per cent). In-house development programmes, high-potential development schemes, 360-degree feedback and internal secondments are identified as the most effective methods by a quarter of the organisations surveyed. Conversely, the future will see greater integration between coaching, organisational development and performance management to drive organisational change.

Furthermore, 65 per cent of employees surveyed in the CIPD's 2012 *Reward Management Survey*³ receive training and career development as part of their benefits package. This infers that not only do employers offer development as part of the rewards package, employees expect to receive it.

The CIPD's advisor for learning and talent development, John McGurk, states: "The need to work in a resource-light/challenge-rich environment is becoming a feature of learning and development practice and therefore needs to refresh and revitalise its analytical toolkit by drawing more on emerging scientific insights."⁴ Clearly, continuous development is an important facet of performance management; accordingly we have created a 'toolkit' →



that could be used by a range of stakeholders:

- for the individual undertaking research into self-reflection or to improve knowledge of self when working with others
- for facilitators involved in self- and team-development activities.

The approach we have adopted, in terms of the design of the 'toolkit', is such that it could be delivered via a variety of training methods, eg e-learning, coaching by line managers or in-house development programmes. We hope that the philosophy of this 'toolkit' may be useful to stakeholders when considering the application and design of their L&D programmes.

As we have already noted, currently organisations are focusing more on in-house L&D. This emphasises the need for effective soft skills both in terms of the employees involved in providing L&D and also from the perspective of individuals who are engaged in group work activities. According to Taylor⁵, the most commonly-sought competencies in UK organisations are:

- communication
- achievement/results orientation
- customer focus
- team-working
- leadership
- planning and organising
- commercial/business awareness
- flexibility/adaptability
- developing others
- problem-solving
- analytical thinking
- building relationships.

Currently many articles refer to the lack of employability skills of graduates. Disturbingly, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills'

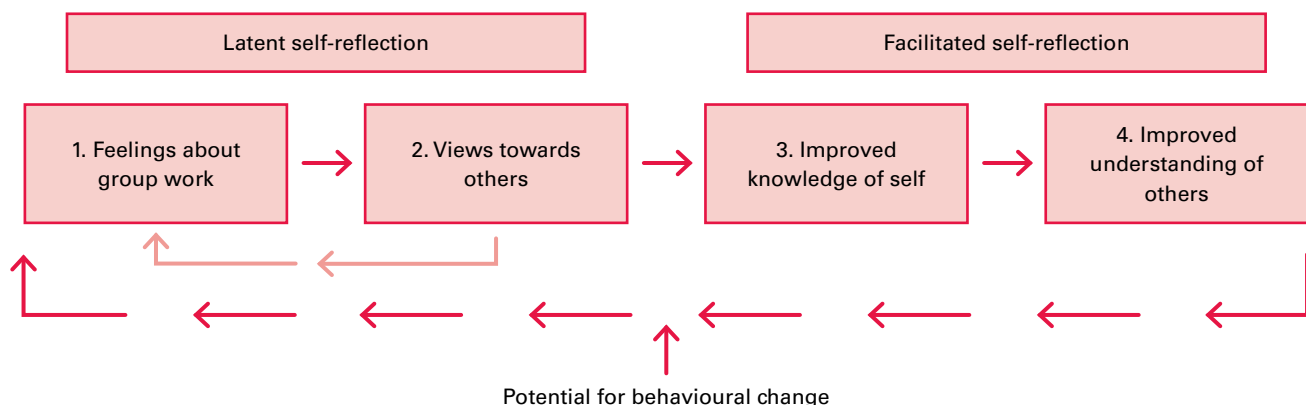
Towards Ambition 2020: skills, jobs, growth report in 2009 found that "too many young people in the UK fail to gain the basic employability and lower level skills needed to progress in work".⁶ Skill development is required at all levels of the hierarchy and, with this in mind, we developed the 'toolkit' to incorporate team cohesion and self-reflection opportunities that can be of benefit to all employees within the organisation.

We therefore argue that undeveloped soft skills reinforce "latent self-reflection". The Group Work Development Indicator Model (Figure 1 below) seeks to move individuals from stages one and two to stages three and four. It identifies that **latent** (undeveloped) **self-reflection** reinforces the feelings that we have about group work and our views towards others. This could be compared to the Forming stage of team development as identified by Tuckman. For example, if an individual has had previously bad experiences of working with others, little understanding of group dynamics or negative feelings towards others, this will in turn affect his performance and that of the team. Research we have undertaken indicates that by recognising the preferences of ourselves and others, **facilitated self-reflection** improves the potential for behavioural change.

We also believe that there is a lost opportunity to improve performance at both an individual and team level, in terms of training courses offered within many organisations. Individuals often attend courses to learn about group and team work; it is facilitated on the day and usually works well. Then what happens? They go back into the workplace and people they are required to work with might not have been exposed to the same experiences; therefore, performance may be compromised.

So there exists a gap that needs to be filled. What we are trying to do is bridge the

Figure 1: Group Work Development Indicator (Smith & Yates 2012)





gap between employees who need to work collaboratively, thus enhancing an opportunity for soft skill development. Our research has found that, when designing L&D programmes, it is important to build in a range of inclusive learning opportunities that are relevant to the environment in which employees are working and that the activities should provide individuals with an opportunity to integrate the outcomes into their personal development plans.

This is the principle of the design of our toolkit, which requires individuals to consider the internal and external influences affecting specific teams. The content also contains activities that give them an opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of the theory behind group work and also knowledge of themselves. We believe that this knowledge is an essential part of the 'toolkit' as it helps individuals to move into the stages of facilitated self-reflection.

To date, 103 questionnaires have been completed by participants, who were asked to comment on the usefulness of each activity. All activities received between 90 per cent and 97 per cent positive responses. Participants were also asked to give reasons for their responses. Typical feedback includes:

- helpful to identify personal attributes when working with others
- good to think about which team activities they prefer to do
- got to know others very well
- helped to understand how they work with others
- identified individual and team strengths and weaknesses
- enabled them to think about future development requirements
- improved knowledge of self
- improved confidence because they had greater understanding of how to work with others.

The questionnaire also revealed that 97 per cent of participants thought the activities would be useful

to other individuals undertaking group work, and 95 per cent thought the activities would be useful for other individuals within their organisation. Typical reasons that they gave for their responses to these questions are:

- very useful to learn about the theory behind teamwork
- helps understand individual preferences and also the preferences of others
- usefulness to employers regarding the benefit they would get from knowing more about the individual. For example, "gives the employer an insight into the type of person the employee is and so can delegate tasks accordingly".

Conclusions

The key findings of our research are that individuals benefit from learning opportunities that provide them with the chance to gain knowledge about the theoretical aspects of working with others. Additionally, well designed activities that give individuals an opportunity to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses support the development of soft skills that are required when working with others.

This knowledge can be used to develop team dynamics and provide personal development programmes. It is also important that all employees have the chance to engage in this developmental opportunity to maximise the performance of the team.

As we stated earlier, the training methods most frequently used by the organisations that took part in the CIPD's 2012 *Learning and Talent Development Survey* are e-learning (54 per cent); coaching by line managers (47 per cent); in-house development programmes (45 per cent), and internal knowledge-sharing events (37 per cent). The approach we are purporting would be conducive to the preferred training methods of many organisations. Finally, we reiterate that facilitated self-reflection improves the potential for behavioural change. **TJ**

References

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- 4 CIPD *Learning and Talent Development Survey* (2012) www.cipd.co.uk
- 5 Taylor S *Employee Resourcing* CIPD (2008) www.cipd.co.uk
- 6 www.ukces.org.uk

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