

Encouraging Innovation in the Civil Service: Innovation Workshops as part of a high potential development programme

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Objectives

'Innovation' is typically associated with the private sector and the creation of new products and services to ensure profitability in a competitive context. However innovation should also be a priority for the public sector (Mulgan & Albury, 2003). Whilst creativity is exclusively concerned with generating entirely new ideas, innovation is a broader concept; encompassing the *application* of new ideas to produce something new and useful to benefit groups, organisations or societies (West & Farr, 1990). In this sense, the relevance of innovation to the public sector becomes clearer. Government and public services can and do innovate to develop new solutions to old problems, more effectively use resources, and refine strategies (IDeA, 2005).

We describe a workshop designed to encourage innovative activities within the civil service. Since 2004, the Home Office has held a set of organisational values which include 'we are professional and innovative'. However, responses from their 2008 staff survey showed that many staff were unsure as to how to demonstrate these values at work. This, coupled with a backdrop of cuts in public sector spending, prompted fresh reflection on the 'professional and innovative' value- specifically how employees' understanding of innovation could be increased, and how they could apply their learning for individual and organisational benefit.

Design

Using an evidence-based approach, two key concepts were identified from the research literature to inform the workshop design. First, was that innovation is a cyclical process with three main phases broadly idea generation, exploration and implementation (e.g. Van de Ven et al, 1999). Second, was the recognition that a large part of organisation's innovative potential resides in its employees (e.g. Gupta & Singhal, 1993; Vrakking, 1990). Therefore individual level resources such as intelligence, personality, knowledge and motivation were discussed, drawing on research findings summarised in reviews such as Patterson, Kerrin & Gatto-Rossiard (2009) whilst activities were mapped against the three process phases.

During the workshop, delegates completed the Innovation Potential Indicator (Patterson, 1999) to encourage them to think about their own approach to innovation. Building on research suggesting that self-efficacy is related to propensity to innovate (e.g. Tierney & Farmer, 2002), the workshop aimed to dispel stereotypes about innovation, support delegates to identify previous times when they had contributed to an innovation at work, and provide them with an opportunity to try out tools to increase confidence and mastery in this area.

Methods

To date, 27 delegates have attended the workshops. Attendees are members of an internal high potential development scheme- effectively the Civil Service talent pipeline- and are drawn from the Home Office, the UK Border Agency and other government departments. To take account of individual learning styles, the day-long workshops consist of facilitator-led

discussions, pair and group work, and individual reflection time. The stages of innovation were used to structure the workshop. After an introduction into the concept of innovation, delegates completed a series of exercises to raise their self-awareness of their individual innovation style- as well as to practise methods to facilitate their idea generation and to structure their idea implementation. Facilitators spent time with delegates on a 1:1 basis to encourage self-reflection on strengths and development areas, as well as to provide feedback on observed behaviours. To encourage transfer of learning, delegates were encouraged to complete 'learning logs' throughout the day, which included structured questions around each exercise.

Results

Delegates completed post-event questionnaires. Quantitative analysis shows benefit in a number of areas. First, adherence to an evidence based approach ensured that 'facilitator knowledge' was rated as excellent. In addition, a number of the exercises used Home Office specific scenarios meaning that delegates could easily apply their learning to their roles. Consequently, 'relevance to work' was also rated as excellent. Free text responses indicated that the practical exercises were valued for their applicability and relevance to delegates' job roles and that delegates now felt more confident that they could contribute to innovation in their role.

Qualitative evidence, in the form of interviews with past delegates, is currently being gathered to explore how delegates have implemented their learning in practice. Full details will be presented at the conference.

Conclusions

Delegate feedback suggests the workshops have been a success in increasing understanding of innovation and in encouraging innovative activities in the workplace. This success was due, in part, to grounding the workshop in established theory- a practice which made the workshop relevant and credible to delegates. Indeed, positive feedback from the workshop is leading to embedding innovation theory more deeply in the Home Office. A developmental masterclass and practical workshop for senior managers is being designed and elements of the innovation cycle are being incorporated to the Project and Programme Management (PPM) framework to broaden the focus and emphasis of PPM training.

References

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