

Engaging people in improving their own practice

John Stephenson, Feb 2002

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In both the public and private sectors, the concept of 'best practice' is ubiquitous, and the term is even used with something approaching abandon. But what does it really mean? In this lecture, John Stephenson sheds some light on the issue.

Stephenson opens his address with the observation that spreading information about best practice is obviously a sensible thing to do. He suggests that the real challenge, however, is to secure successful exploitation and adaptation of that information. This, he says, depends on three factors: the motivation of the intended recipients of that information; the support systems within which they work; and the rewards and recognition available to them. As Stephenson sees it, the challenge is to engage people in improving their own practice, whatever it might be.

When Stephenson himself is urged to adopt best practice from elsewhere, he finds that several questions invariably spring to mind — along with certain answers, which he suggests are fairly commonplace:

- For whom is inadequate practice a problem? The management, stakeholders and consumers quite rightly say 'this is a problem for all of us'.
- For whom is adopting best practice perceived to be a problem? Not me. I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing, thanks very much.
- Who in the organisation benefits? Again, the sensible answer is 'All of us'.
- But who do I assume will benefit? Not necessarily me — more likely my pushy head of service, who's angling for promotion.
- Crucially, who has to do the work? Well, me, of course. But why should I do it? And what's in it for me?

Getting people to cooperate enthusiastically, Stephenson admits, is not easy. In hard-pressed work situations, diverting one's energy to improvements is a major commitment. Stephenson thus sees a need to look at best practice from the point of view of those on the receiving end of exhortations to follow it. He notes that some of the following reactions to such efforts are not uncommon:

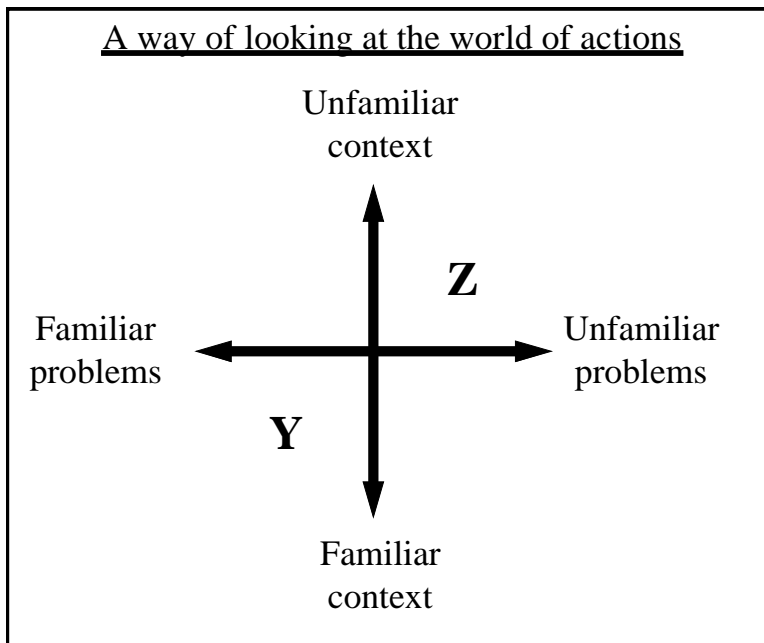
- 'There are major barriers between us, the workers, and them'.
- 'The people who developed this 'best practice' must be lions, which makes us feel like donkeys'.
- 'They obviously have lots of money and we are strapped for cash'.
- 'They have better facilities than we do'.

- 'They have more time'.
- 'They are treated better, and held up as role models'.
- 'We feel like dunces'.

Stephenson recognises that he has somewhat caricatured the situation. In reality, he suggests, things are unlikely to be quite so dire, as efforts to promote best practice are generally carried out with an awareness of the importance of breaching barriers, fostering exchange between networks and seeing-off prejudices. Nevertheless, he cautions, there remains much work to be done. Recipients are often less than wildly enthusiastic about best practice because it is seen as belonging to someone else ('It's not our way of doing things') and, perhaps more damagingly, 'best practitioners' can become complacent.

Stephenson maintains that willingness to respond to information about best practice is, therefore, still the challenge. How do we get from 'You're trying to sell me what lions can do', to people asking 'Where can I get help to become even better at what I do?' — in marketing-speak, 'How do we move from push to pull?' He argues that in order to improve one's own practice by following someone else's practice, one has to feel some ownership of the problem and the solution; that there is some relevance to one's own circumstances and future; and that there is a fit between one's own interests and those of the organisation. The challenge for the organisation, of course, is to provide the opportunity, the support and the recognition for that to happen.

Stephenson volunteers a conceptual model for the world of work that he has found useful.



In this schema, position Y is where people deal with familiar problems in contexts with which they are familiar. A complex organisation, such as a university or a government department, Stephenson suggests, can maximise its effectiveness within Y by sharing best practice, formulating benchmarks based on best practice (though Stephenson points

out that since benchmarks are based on the recent past, they may not be relevant to emerging situations) and investing in training. The Y area is currently the object of knowledge management, pooling expertise, consolidation and some borrowing from others. Position Z, conversely, renders best practice transferred from position Y unworkable or, in the worst case, a disaster. The only best practice in Z, Stephenson observes, is how to cope effectively with uncertainty. Z also involves a completely different emotional experience for people operating within it – one characterised by exposure, networks, courage, imagination, taking responsibility and initiative. Above all, he notes, Z is the realm of learning, in which knowledge management becomes more focused on knowledge development. Stephenson has used this grid in more than 30 staff development workshops, and Z has always been identified by participants as the site of their most positive learning experiences.

He admits that reality is, of course, more complex than the grid suggests. An organisation may generally be in position Y, but particular parts of it and certain individuals may be in Z, or between the two. As time goes on the organisation as a whole will move from Y to Z. And even if an organisation is mainly in Y, individuals within that organisation have their own personal Zs to consider — their own unknown, their own futures. The experiences of people introducing new methods into their work will, he says, feel a lot like Z.

It is Stephenson's firm contention is that if an organisation has a culture appropriate to Z, it will be able to cope with situations arising in both Y and Z. If its culture is wholly Y, it will always experience difficulties, since there is always a Z presence or potential. An organisation that is truly a learning organisation, he insists, helps its employees to flourish in Z. It follows from this, he continues, that the most effective strategy is, therefore, to help all individuals to take responsibility for addressing the problems they face, and to support them in taking themselves and the organisation forward.

Stephenson then turns to the issue of training. Training, he suggests, can work well as a means of disseminating best practice, but suffers from three major limitations:

- Scale — trainers simply cannot get everywhere.
- Time lag —between generating best practice and assimilating it into training manuals and programmes, potentially rendering it obsolete.
- A culture of dependence, which can result from an overreliance on training.

For knowledge development to really flourish in position Z, Stephenson argues, the prevailing culture needs to be supportive, and to involve (perhaps obvious) qualities and practices such as team-working, good communications and support for initiative. He admits that it is often difficult for people in a work environment to talk about what they don't know, and that hearing it from others can be very threatening. In some organisations telling others more senior than oneself can even be dangerous. But awareness of knowledge gaps, he maintains, is crucial to the process of adopting better practice. Organisations support this when they reward those who draw attention to their needs and those of the organisation and its people, and when they help people to develop their own knowledge and performance. To help people talk about what they need to do

better, Stephenson suggests, and to commit themselves to doing something about it, it is necessary to tap into deeper levels of personal need than those met by job security and bonuses, important though those are. People, he says, need to:

- Feel respected and taken seriously as individuals — and not just on account of their formal status.
- Have confidence in their personal identities, or in the identities they wish to develop for themselves.
- Receive recognition for their achievement — not merely their status.
- Develop a strong personal commitment to what they are doing.
- Feel in control.

The challenge, according to Stephenson, is to tap into these needs in a way that is compatible with the needs of the organisation. The approach he suggests involves focusing on helping people do what they are currently doing even better, rather than on transplanting best practices from elsewhere. It involves raising five key questions in people's minds:

- Where have I been?
- Where am I now?
- Where do I want to get to?
- How will I get there — and with whose help?
- How will I know I have arrived?

Stephenson suggests that this sequence of questions recognises and builds personal responsibility and fosters ownership of any actions people take. When the whole sequence is developed in the context of corporate needs, he says, the emergent action plan becomes relevant to people's personal futures as well as those of their organisations.

Stephenson notes that one scheme based on these principles is already up and running: the Ufi/learndirect programme¹, Learning through Work, in which nine universities are currently participating and which is available to anyone with internet access. The scheme is based on a learning contract, and leads participants eventually to university qualifications through helping them to think about their personal aspirations in the context of work with the help of advice pages, examples, diagnostic exercises and access to telephone advisors.

Another scheme still on the drawing board is also web-based, and makes use of natural language-conversion software to get to the heart of what users say about a problem and to marshal resources to assist them in solving it. A user might start by saying 'I need to get more out of my team? We are all under a lot of pressure to meet targets and my team need to be able to take more responsibility for their own work so that I can get on with other things?'. From this the software would identify priority areas to address: team management, motivation and time management. It would then respond with a list of resources: quick tips, an action plan, a database of relevant benchmarks, and so on. This interactive process, says Stephenson, is very valuable in and of itself. The machine is infinitely patient and remembers what it is told. Users can quit at any time, or reject its responses, thus putting them at the centre of things and firmly in control.

While this may sound fanciful, Stephenson notes that the concept is sufficiently viable to have in fact been placed under copyright. More fundamentally, however, Stephenson concludes that both Learning through Work and the software model incorporate the key principles of successfully fostering better working practices: they put users in control, tapping in to their personal motivations and relating directly to improves ways of doing things; they provide instant access to expert help and resources; and they provide opportunities for academic credit for people's efforts and achievements. Development, he reminds us, is not constrained by best practice through hierarchical relationships and top-down practices; it is informed by best practice.

John Stephenson

This lecture was given to the Society on 19 November 2001.
This is an edited version of the lecturer's full text.

Additional resources

Cunningham, I (1999) *The wisdom of strategic learning: the self-managed learning solution* (2nd edition), Gower Publishing: Aldershot, Hants
www.learndirect-ltw.co.uk

ⁱ Available online at www.learndirect-ltw.co.uk/