

Work courses 'wasting £75m'

A SENIOR EXECUTIVE has returned to work after four weeks on a leadership-development programme that cost thousands of pounds. The executive had to fly in from overseas and be housed and looked after during the course. Covering his absence from work raised the total cost to about £100,000. But this was an investment in development and its high cost only served to underline its importance.

The executive was delighted with what he had learnt, and his director felt reassured by his enthusiasm. After a week back at the office everything settled down and work carried on as normal.

But what exactly did the company get out of the exercise? Probably very little. Kaisen, the firm of business psychologists, has just completed extensive research into the benefits of development courses and is unveiling the results to its clients.

There are not many surprises. The "investment" they have been pumping into training to create winning management teams is largely valueless. British businesses are believed to be wasting £75m a year on poor management-development courses.

Kaisen's research, aided by its database of interviews with 10,000 leaders, covered large areas of business and involved 27 companies, 20 of them in the FTSE 250.

Robert Myatt at Kaisen said: "Most of the methods used on these programmes focused on educating leaders by giving them useful concepts and theories. However, the capabilities they were trying to develop were more about skills – how to act and behave as a leader, how to be more assertive and how to motivate people, for example.

"You need to be able to practise these behavioural skills, and the only way you can do this is by using them at work

Management training and development schemes offer little value for money and need to be revamped, writes **Roger Eglin**

and getting feedback from an expert who is watching you and coaching you. The development courses are a bit like going on a two-day skiing course in a hotel, where you watch some videos and read course material and work in pairs to practise balancing. Then you are put at the top of a steep slope and the instructor says, 'off you go now – you can ski'. You wouldn't dream of doing it. It's a skill that needs regular practice with someone watching you."

Myatt said group discussions helped people understand the theory but they also needed to put that into practice. "When there was a practice element in a course, they put people into pairs – but you could argue they had been put on the course because they needed to learn something, which means you had two people who were not very good but were coaching each other. It's like the blind leading the blind."

Courses often contained an emphasis on self-awareness, said Myatt, which was useful for helping individuals to understand themselves and good for motivation, but of little use in understanding the make-up of colleagues and how to get the best out of them.

Similar research at the Saïd Business School in Oxford has come to the same

conclusion. When the director of executive education, David Feeney, involved other business schools – including Cranfield, Henley and Warwick – and got Benchmark Research to interview 500 senior personnel staff, many of whom had sent people on development projects, and 90 executives who had been on courses, there was a similar story.

"There is significant disaffection with value for money. There are mixed opinions about the value of executive education," he said.

The central issue is whether the course will deliver what it promises rather than just a generalised update on management thinking. "Getting it right means work upfront for both provider and client to reach agreement. We need a significant budget and six months of lead time before we carry out a programme," said Feeney.

Often the executive attending a programme will return full of enthusiasm, but what may satisfy the individual may be less valuable for the company as a whole. Feeney said the design of programmes had changed substantially over the past three or four years to give better value for organisations.

The law firm Bond Pearce has modernised its development programme for senior staff after deciding it was getting little value out of its courses.

"They were pretty unsuccessful," said Tony Askham, the partner in charge of development. A review concluded that the problem was that individuals had not all accepted the need for leadership development. Locking them into a classroom for the day wasn't the right way to get results.

Out of this came two clear strategies. One was that when senior staff were appointed, two people should assess them and put them through the appraisal process. And from this emerged a series



Martin Haswell

Myatt: 'People on courses coaching each other is like the blind leading the blind'

of development programmes similar to what Bond Pearce had been trying to achieve three or four years ago.

"The third thing we decided was that one-to-one coaching was better than saying can we meet for 12 days in three months' time. It's a good example of showing that locking people away and saying we're going to train you isn't the right approach.

"We're having considerably more success. People are trained to manage services – they have to be good at managing client relationships and selling services – all things they have not historically been taught to do."

Anglian Water has also reconsidered

its approach. When Phil Brown joined as human-resources director he found the utility company had something of a history of "people living on qualifications conveyor belts".

Now, he said, there was a lot of one-to-one coaching and making sure that technical managers had the range of business skills they needed.

There has also been a move away from the general business-school approach, said Brown, and there was more emphasis on developing people's strengths rather than merely mitigating their weaknesses.

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