

Laying foundations for better management

A pilot project to assess and develop managerial skills in the Welsh construction industry ended earlier this year. **Elizabeth Eyre** spoke to some of the people involved

Developing management and leadership skills is vital to keeping the UK competitive – it's something that Lord Leitch has highlighted in his report on the state of the nation's skills.

One sector that is taking action to improve the quality and effectiveness of its managers' and leaders' skills is the construction industry. Traditionally, it has tended to concentrate more on the 'technical' training needed to do the job onsite and hasn't paid much attention to acquiring the softer skills needed to manage successfully.

A combination of that and a tendency for practitioners to rise up through the ranks to become managers, particularly in smaller building companies, gives you a blueprint for management and leadership skills that are not as effective as they could be.

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) began laying the foundations for better management last year, funding a 12-month pilot project to diagnose skills gaps within the Welsh construction industry using the Managerial Assessment of Proficiency (MAP) tool from

training company Development Processes Group (DPG).

The pilot, which ended in April, was so successful that the WAG is now hoping to raise more funding to roll it out to other sectors.

“How do you get a brickie that's been made a supervisor appreciate that management's important?”

The idea for the project was initially devised by the Wales Management Council. The Council promotes the importance of leadership across Wales and has found that one of the fundamental issues is that managers “don't know what they don't know”, said chief executive Christopher Ward.

“We'd been involved in some research previously to look at diagnostic tools that were available to help managers assess their skills. We found there were, surprisingly, not that many and many of the ones there were didn't quite hit the spot in terms of what small businesses wanted, so I said to the Welsh Assembly that it would be a great idea to explore further what's

available and try some tools that are in the marketplace.”

DPG's MAP tool “seemed as good a point to start as any” so the Council began deciding which sector to target. “We thought we should find a marketplace where the response was likely to be the most hard to crack. The construction sector particularly, through ConstructionSkills, was very interested in this whole agenda – it had been very proactive in thinking about developing the skills of its sector – and said it would be delighted to be the guinea pig,” said Ward.

The bid for funding was put together by ConstructionSkills Wales, DPG and marketing, PR and events company Cazbah @ workingword, which also then project-managed the programme.

Wyn Prichard, director of ConstructionSkills Wales, said the main reason for wanting to implement the project was that internal research had identified management and leadership as a key issue for construction companies trying to develop and within the supply chains between companies and contractors.

He said: “We went in partnership to the Welsh Assembly and they asked us



whether we were prepared to be the pilot. We said yes, but not without trepidation – the sector is very sceptical about management and leadership training. They don't accept it as something they need.

"There's a strong culture of training with things like apprentices and Health and Safety but there's a lot of groundwork that needs to be done to get people to accept the importance of management and leadership development too."

Cazbah's Caroline Challoner added: "There's a major need in the construction sector to upgrade management skills. It's very manual work but it needs really good, strong leadership and effective management too, particularly at the moment."

"Construction is one of the priority sectors in Wales and we felt it would be a really good opportunity to pilot this diagnostic tool – we need to find out what the issues are and where the areas for development are."

So the pilot project was launched in April last year, running simultaneously in North and South Wales. ConstructionSkills Wales's seven development managers "did a selling exercise" with employers, said Prichard, using a leaflet specially designed by Cazbah to highlight the benefits of management training, and then "we lined up companies that weren't the easy ones but weren't the difficult ones – they'd give DPG a proper test but they wouldn't be awkward".

Prichard described construction companies' response to being asked to take part in the project: "A lot of them said they couldn't see the benefit. I think they understand that management is an issue but it's low down on their list of priorities. They couldn't quantify a cost or a bottom-line return to it at that stage."

In South Wales the project was run as an open course, attracting participants, mostly site managers,

from a number of different construction companies ranging in size from six employees to 180. In North Wales, however, there was just one participating employer – Read Construction of Wrexham – which had 12 people on the course, including construction director Wynne Davies.

"We wanted to see whether there were any geographical differences in the development needs identified," said Challoner.

"The South Wales pilot was a good experiment in bringing organisations together, bouncing ideas off each other, networking and talking about the different ways they manage in their own companies. The North Wales pilot was a company that really wanted to make a difference with training."

As well as a mix of company sizes, there was a mix of commitment to training: some were already doing schemes such as Investors in People while, said Challoner, others had done no training at all. "Some managers on

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the project were very nervous and sceptical – they’d never done any training of that kind. To see the change in them by the end of the course was really great.”

DPG director and business development manager for the project, Cameron Robertson said: “The whole idea [of the project] was to use the diagnostic tool and then do a development programme to see what came out of it. The big thing was how do you get a brickie that’s been made a supervisor appreciate that management’s important?”

The programme was delivered in two stages, aiming to help the participants develop six out of 12 generic management competencies (listening and organising; giving clear information; getting unbiased information; identifying and solving problems; time management and prioritising; planning and scheduling work), put into four composite groups, and in three out of 27 functional management areas (problem-solving and decision-making; effective communication; managing oneself).

They were assessed against all of the competencies and functional areas to allow measurement of their progress against both the competencies and areas that were developed and those that were only assessed.

At the end of the programme they had the chance to develop in all the competencies and areas.

Stage one comprised an on-line functional test, followed by a two-day assessment using the MAP tool. Day one was spent undergoing an objective skills assessment, using videos showing management behaviour in a day-to-day work environment, and day two was devoted to interpreting the results and producing individual development plans for the participants.

The development programme included flexible video- and text-based learning materials, workshops and telephone and email support. When it was over, participants were reassessed to see what they had learned.

As well as measuring managers against competencies and functional areas, the MAP tool also assesses their management and communication styles.

“MAP is six hours of non-stop assessment,” Robertson said. “It’s hard work. We had a lot of people who hadn’t done any development for a long time and to come into a tool like MAP was a little bit difficult for them.”

The way to tackle that difficulty as far as development programme tutor Janice Marshall, an associate trainer with DPG, was concerned was to keep the programme as relevant to the participants as possible. She talked about the skills and competencies needed by managers in other sectors and asked them which ones they thought weren’t relevant to their own jobs.

Once they realised that they also needed all those managerial skills and behaviours, they became very engaged.

“They get a lot of on-the-job, occupational training but there seems to have been a perception that that’s all they need. I think that’s changing – awareness has been raised a lot with projects like this,” she said.

“The guys on the course were mainly at site manager level. I had to approach them

in a very different way to how I would approach managers who see themselves as managers. I don’t think these guys perceived themselves as managers – they thought they were still guys on site who had extra tasks to do.

“Very early on I realised I couldn’t go about talking to them about managerial skills. I had to keep relating everything back to them, to make it relevant and useful and practical.”

Although both the groups successfully completed the project, Marshall feels that the North Wales group benefitted from all being from the same company – they had peer pressure to do well and all had support back at the office from an employer that was totally committed to training. On the other hand, the members of the South Wales group didn’t necessarily have that extra support – they didn’t all have employers as keen on L&D as Read Construction.

According to Robertson, Read Construction – a small company of around 90 employees – is “really into training”. Davies said its staff had already done a lot of L&D with the support of ConstructionSkills Wales before being asked to join the programme.

“We’ve learned over the past five to ten years that, to be a construction manager these days, you have to have the same skills as a car plant manager or a supermarket manager,” said Davies. “It’s not just about being a practitioner – you have to manage so many other things. There was a time, for example, when Health and Safety wasn’t important so people simply weren’t trained in any aspect of that. That’s now been followed by all kinds of statutory regulations that you need training for.

“It’s a moving target – you have to try to keep up with it.”

Davies said the first day of the project was “challenging” – there was a lot crammed into the day

and participants had to concentrate and pay attention throughout.

“I did learn from it but nothing dramatic – there were no Eureka! moments,” he admitted. “One thing it probably taught me was to engage people in decision-making, rather than being directive, because then they can take ownership of that decision. From the group’s perspective, listening and organising, delegation and thinking clearly were the things that came out as needing development.”

He added: “It’s been a success. There’s nothing that we can measure but people talk about it. There were site managers and team leaders and quantity surveyors on the course and they talk about things in a particular way and refer to it.

“There are things that we will develop – we’ll pick out some weaknesses and choose some courses to work on them – but we’re giving people the chance to put their learning into practice before doing it. The majority of people have identified things that they feel they’d like to do; time management is one that people do feel they need help with.”

Challoner agreed that the project had been a success, particular among the sceptics taking part: “There was a significant improvement and an excellent response from the big sceptics. They were very keen to take it back into the workplace.”

Participants and their line managers were interviewed about changes that had been seen in the workplace as a result of the project and the responses were better than Challoner had expected. “They were really, really good,” she said.

In the South Wales group, 33 per cent strongly agreed and 67 per cent agreed that the 12 competency roles tested were relevant to their roles. The same percentages strongly agreed and agreed that the MAP assessment accurately identified their

strengths and development needs, while 67 per cent strongly agreed and 33 per cent agreed that they had identified personal objectives to help their development.

In the North Wales group, 92 per cent agreed and 8 per cent disagreed that the 12 competency areas were relevant while 100 per cent agreed that the MAP assessment accurately pinpointed strengths and weaknesses. Twenty five per cent strongly agreed and 75 per cent agreed that they had identified personal objectives to help their development.

The re-evaluation exercise found that overall managerial proficiency for the South Wales group had risen to 54 per cent – above the national average of 52 per cent – from 45 per cent. The rise was even greater for the North Wales group – up from 37 per cent to 50 per cent.

Both the groups showed a broad increase in overall managerial proficiency, with performance increases in all the four composite competency groups. The communication composite group showed the greatest increase, rising from 50 per cent to 72 per cent for the South Wales group and from 37 per cent to 50 per cent for the North Wales group.

All the members of both groups said the assessment had made them more aware of their skills and competencies as managers. All of the South Wales group considered themselves better prepared as managers as a result of the assessment, with all but one of the North Wales group agreeing.

Examples of how learning had been applied in the workplace included setting time estimates for jobs or tasks using the PERT model, learning to think wider and deeper in order to treat the causes of problems rather than just the symptoms, using brainstorming techniques to generate ideas and solutions, dealing with interruptions better and being able to say no.



While pointing out that it was still a little too early to see the real benefits of the training, 70 per cent of the line managers who were interviewed said they’d seen an improvement in time management and prioritising – the module that all of the participants said had been particularly useful.

Four line managers also highlighted improved levels of confidence.

Robertson concluded: “We were very pleased with the results. What was most pleasing was that people were saying ‘I’ve truly learned something. Because of this I’m doing something different, I’m communicating better or managing my time better’.

“Although the scores showed improvement, which is great, the bit I’m more pleased with is listening to people who were sceptical at the beginning saying ‘it’s helped. I’m doing something differently’.” ■