

## **Common Knowledge**

### **The Limitation of Management Training for Trustees**

By Phil Turner and Bernard Spiegel

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We are sceptical of what can be achieved by training people as trustees and what this means. Our scepticism centres on 'the difference between learning to do something and deciding what to do' (Rush Rhees, *Without Answers*, 1969).

Discernment, independent judgement and the acceptance of responsibility distinguish the practice of governance and management from the simple application of technical skills.

In this article we question whether training programmes alone are able to draw out and develop the qualities required of trustees and managing groups. We also seek to identify what these qualities are and how they can be developed without programmes of training.

The process of training is directed towards the achievement of technical competence as an end in itself. This process tends to isolate personal skills from their wider organisational context and restricts their application to a narrowly defined or specialised rationale.

The abilities of trustees cannot be developed by this instrumental approach because their responsibilities are incompatible with being narrowly specialised. Such abilities depend on the formation of judgements, having doubts, facing difficulties, making decisions, thinking critically about new situations, and achieving a clear sense of underlying purpose.

### **Problems and Perceptions**

Learning in these areas comes with the decisions that are actually made by those who work together with assumed responsibility for the actions of their organisations.

The knowledge of trustees is one which they make their own - through the collaborative practice of making judgements. Their decision-making is inseparable from the actual conditions and context in which difficulties are faced and choices are made. (Abstract models of 'the decision-making process' or 'how trustees work' offered by training courses are merely diversions from the reality in which such people are duty-bound to operate.)

The growth of understanding which accompanies the making of decisions is not determined by any single unifying principle. Making judgements cannot be taught, and cannot be 'trained for'.

Through their increasing experience of working together (i.e. of thinking critically, sharing doubts and uncertainties, reaching agreements, etc) a group of people can strengthen their grasp of direct responsibilities and increase their effectiveness. But

what they acquire is not a technique. They learn what it means to work through the difficulties of their organisations.

The problems confronted by trustees, in seeking to establish a necessary basis for dialogue and judgement, will not be the same from one situation to another, or from one human group to another. When such problems are met and worked through, 'there is no sort of simplification which will make them less difficult' (Rhees, *ibid*). Nevertheless, knowledge grows from a familiarity with such problems.

### **Positive Distance**

Judgement cannot be taught: 'The skills of a judge, or the skills of a critic can be used or misused; justice or the critical spirit can be neither used or misused. And this is because neither being just nor being critical is a skill.' (J. Passmore, *On Teaching to be Critical*).

Trustees are the guardians and interpreters of the values and purposes of an organisation. Their primary concern is the elucidation of principles, the development of insight, the critical maintenance of standards and the charting of a direction which will further the purpose of the organisation.

Trustees are distinguished not so much by what they do but by the way they see. They are, or should be, in a relationship of 'positive distance' from the day to day concerns of their organisation.

### **Internal Discourse**

All organisations maintain in practice an established orthodoxy. This orthodoxy will tend to insist on decided opinions and pre-established methods. In any organisation there are intrinsic conflicts and rival tendencies: inter-personal conflicts; conflicts of ideas, methods and means; conflicts of principle and value judgements. The effect of these interactions can easily undermine the confidence of trustees, making them doubtful about their role or effectiveness within their organisation.

Trustees may also collude in the perpetuation of this orthodoxy which finds expression in a series of interlocking ideas and undermines their independence and integrity. Blind adherence to these conventions inhibits the development of an independent perspective. Trustees come to 'fill' their roles rather than 'fulfilling' them. They become, and often feel, merely observers in their own enterprise.

If there is no recognition of internal discourse, the organisation will be unable to speak of itself coherently. It will be bewildered in the face of difficulty and will bewilder others.

There is no single methodology for dealing with the various forms of these difficulties. But the application of technique, without respect to the particular features of an organisation's situation, will achieve nothing. An input of extra technical knowledge may indeed only add to these difficulties.

### **The Understanding of Principles**

Being a trustee is about the understanding of principles which do not 'depend upon the accumulation of extra items of knowledge. Rather it requires reflection on what we know, so that the principle can be found to illuminate the facts' (R S Peters).

In these circumstances, individual experience and insight - as distinct from technical 'know-how' - must be released for the benefit of the organisation as a whole. Any 'solution' will depend on a reading of the problem: a form of critical understanding consistent with the organisation's needs and priorities. Once these have been understood, the main work has been done and the 'problem' disappears. This is not a matter of acquiring new knowledge or expertise, but a new arrangement of existing knowledge. Anything else is a technical diversion.

The fear of making mistakes can immobilise trustees, restricting their attention and energy to those issues which are non-controversial, i.e. where it is always possible to play safe. (In reality, errors are unavoidable and are part of the process of confronting and working through difficulties.)

### **The Support of Learning**

The ability to address the issues of a changing situation is a vital feature of the trustees' role. Such an understanding is built on the common ground of responsive, exploratory discourse. This demands of an organisation the capacity to discuss intelligibly, and so elucidate, the problems which perplex it. Being intelligible implies a capacity for purposive action: practices which belong to an organisation and have their meaning within that organisation.

We have previously argued that a process of internal discourse can release the creative potential within an organisation (See 'Organisational Orthodoxy and the Individual Talent'). Such learning is not simply a matter of practical requirements: it is an understanding of actual priorities and can make a difference to the people concerned.

The emphasis needs to fall on creative practice, personal interaction and a capacity to relinquish former assumptions. This capacity for change has to be recognised by the trustees themselves. The ownership of a problem is always distinctive and precedes the other stages of learning.

This can be supported by someone with experience in this way of working. Such a role involves enabling, mediating and liaising: it approximates to the role of an educational facilitator, rather than a trainer.

The development of collaborative practice is what learning means here. The facilitator's role is not to offer easy answers, but rather to provoke an understanding of problems. Creative attention involves analysis, clarification and possible solutions. This describes a process where trustees are actively engaged and one which belongs to the people involved. This practice informs the qualities which trustees need to develop within their organisation.

### **Participation in Responsibility**

Our point is that training programmes cannot foster qualities of governance and management, precisely because they are 'qualities' and not quantifiable or tangible skills. We are here looking at a more complex and subtle problem than can be addressed by the proliferation of training courses alone.

Common ground is created through the active participation of those who share responsibility. Although no one sets out to teach anything, learning can take place here. Each distinctive contribution adds to the reservoir of understanding that will form part of the living tradition of the organisation.

The crucial task is to support and explicate those processes which contain the seeds of growth and collaborative endeavour. Here the conflicts and opportunities inherent in trustee and management groups can be illuminated by the role of the independent consultant.

All 'solutions' are partial and temporary. The management of organisations is not susceptible to the language of finality.

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