

“Edgy” Learning & Development

By Dr Gavin Didsbury

A key development issue for managers making the transition from a functional speciality such as marketing, logistics, finance, HR, operations, etc to general or executive management is the need to make business decisions quickly and with limited information.

To prepare potential managers for a world where a day is fractured into a myriad of interactions, meetings – both planned and unplanned, with a range of stakeholders requiring decisions, both small and large, “management development” or “leadership development” is provided by “L&D” in mid to large organisations.

Because of the limited usefulness of didactic teaching, or the learning of theories or facts in facing this challenge, much of this training or leadership development is based on experiential learning and ‘day in the life’ simulations, based on a “virtual company” developed for this purpose.

Having spent a significant part of my life coaching and developing senior management in companies such as Shell, Cadbury Schweppes, Saudi Aramco, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, GM, etc we at Psych Press are offering HR departments the next step in what we have termed “Edgy L&D”. **Basically, we are doing away with the simulation.**

Instead, the concept is about giving executives the opportunity to hone business skills by going to Cambodia to confront **real** “business problems” being experienced by rural communities. They listen to the community leaders, and then develop ideas and business models to enhance the commercial business development which the

Foundation for Developing Cambodian Communities (FDCC) is sponsoring within the rural town and province of Prey Veng.

This is not a simulation – it's an opportunity to confront some classic management issues on a manageable scale, within a set time period. It's not a simulation because participants will learn more about front-line management this way than role-playing in a meeting room – and the outcome will not be measured by a 'score' and a formal report, but in the impact they will have upon peoples' day-to-day lives.

The trip would be 'sandwiched' within pre and post management development centre activities prior to and after departure, which would be lead by experienced business psychologists on a pro bono basis. In blunt terms, your organisation would benefit by grooming aspiring leaders to confront practical commercial issues, in an ambiguous, culturally different environment, where there is both a crying need for such input and a high chance of the organisation acquiring valuable management skills and experience. We would want your organisation to invest exactly the same as they would for a 'normal' simulation based management skills training program, the only difference being this is not a simulation - this is responding to a real need, with real benefits. Of the fees paid by your organisation, 100% (less unavoidable bank charges) would go to support the orphanage and community resource centre being run by FDCC, as well as provide seed funding for potential projects devised by participants. This might even form part of an ongoing executive talent development program for the organisation. In addition to the management development / succession planning benefits, there would clearly be some marketing benefits for organisations around sustainability and the social commitment of the organisation.

You can learn more about what FDCC is doing and how they are going about it from the link on the Psych Press website www.psychpress.com.au or directly at www.fdcc.org.au.

This work is being done on the basis of the “social economy” model, which eschews the more typical "charity" approach, for the idea is that business can productively become involved in improving the lives of others through developing commercial initiatives, rather than simply giving money. Recently FDCC has been greatly assisted by the Planet Wheeler Foundation (Maureen and Tony Wheeler have sold part of Lonely Planet to the BBC and have committed to give the proceeds away in their lifetime) and the Department of Foreign Affairs who have provided a three-year grant to help establish a community resource centre to teach computer skills and some business skills within the Prey Veng community. Telstra has provided computer hardware and on-site expertise, and other organisations such as the Costa Group have provided technical project advice.

The first trip in February 2009 took a group of senior professionals to Cambodia to interact with and listen to the needs of the people in this community. The trip had an amazing impact on those who took part, and was clearly highly valued. As a result, it's happening again. To date several embryonic commercial ventures (silk textile production and import of finished goods and horticultural enterprises as well as other ventures at feasibility stage) have been commenced.

If you are interested in what participants from your organisation can learn, what they might contribute or what benefits this may have for your organisation, please ring on + 61 3 9670 0225, 0412 535 913 or email on gavin.didsbury@psychpress.com.