The Four Pillars of Successful Management Development

Pillar 2: Robust Content

Few CEO's Cite Paint-Balling as their Chief Leadership Influence

Rare quotations:

"I paint-balled my way to the top"
"Karaoke made a leader of me"
"I now run all meetings on an assault course"
"All new employees have to fall backwards off a desk"
"The Captain and flight crew improved safety 14.6% by singing light opera"

One morning, walking back to your cubicle from the kitchen, you detect a subtle change in the atmosphere of the office. You look around and realise none of your colleagues are at their desks. A fan buzzes. On a notice board, sales targets flutter in the breeze. The first pellet catches you on the leg. The second and third thud into your chest, splattering blue and yellow dye. A fourth pellet smacks into the mug you are holding, and you feel a scalding sensation as you throw coffee all over your shirt and tie. "That leadership through paint-balling course," you think to yourself, "has caused more trouble than it was worth."

For comedians training is one of the most fertile areas of business life. The tenuous links made between a host of activities – from actors' trust games to orienteering – and our working practices are hilarious because we can all recognise the scenario. Whether it is making the accounts team go through an army assault course or asking the production division to do a karaoke for leadership programme, everyone knows someone who has done something ridiculous in the name of development, or – worse still – has had to take part in something ridiculous themselves.

And, if you have spent your development budget on paint-balling, cooking and actors' games, you should have gone to the pub instead.

If you want a development activity which is useful, rather than simply entertaining, what should you look for? After more than 25 years in development, Mitchell Phoenix' Kevin Yates concludes that there are four pillars of successful development programmes. "Look for expert facilitation, an unwavering focus on the creation of results, a structure which will allow the creation of results, and tried and proven content," he says.

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What should this content consist of? First of all it should be usable in the workplace. Under pressure in a real life work situation, anything overly complicated, such as a theoretical 'model', will not come to mind or be used. Second, content should be useful, so that when it is applied it will solve a problem and/or generate concrete results. This means the content should focus on how to conduct the key activities managers and leaders undertake. Whether the focus is delegation, persuasion, motivation or anything else, concrete detail on how to do each of these things is vital. It is not enough to define the problem, the content must take us towards the solution and then prompt us to take action back in the workplace.

"Perhaps most important," says Yates, "is that the content is based on strong, ethical business principles which senior managers can relate to, and on which they can build. They must see clearly how what is being suggested to them fits with the business principles they already hold, or with principles they aspire to and are likely to adopt."

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