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CASE STUDY: P&G Improves Coaching – By Listening

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The managers in Research & Development (R&D) at Procter & Gamble (P&G) are highly trained professionals. They are selected from the nation's best engineering and science programs. Like physicians (see box, Doctors and Problem Solving), they too are excellent problem solvers. And like doctors, they work under heavy time pressures and deadlines which often leads to not listening enough to their direct reports, customers and colleagues. This article will describe one technique – the small discussion group – as an intervention to address this issue. The intervention was delivered through one of the R&D University programs.

In the R&D University College program for middle managers and technical leaders (scientists and engineers) several blocks of time were set aside for participants to practice the skill of listening. This strategy should yield improvements in managerial coaching skills, with a secondary benefit of strengthening informal networks among small group members. The authors chose to use the small discussion group as the instructional strategy for this performance improvement work. We named it L.E.A.D. Groups, an acronym for Leaders Effect (cause) A Difference.

Background on R&D University

In keeping with the experience of 1600 corporate universities (Meister, 1998), a P&G planning team designed an overall R&D University. A total of five Colleges make up the R&D University, one college for each level (band) in the company, starting with incoming scientists and managers at Band 1 up to directors and top technologists at Band 5. A goal for these colleges was to increase levels of marketable innovation, in large part, by increasing networking across business silos to encourage cross-fertilization of thinking. Each one-week College focused on innovation and the R&D core competencies. The six R&D core competencies are:

- application of technology to business,
- comprehensive consumer understanding,
- holistic innovation,
- business understanding,
- proficient project management and
- valuing diversity for innovation.

We started in the middle with Band 3, a group of R&D leaders who coach and/or manage 85 percent of all R&D employees. The R&D senior leaders were frustrated with the level of coaching, mentoring and technical skills that the Band 3 people were providing to their people. Internal survey data suggested the need for greater skill in the area of coaching for Band 3 people – both on the managerial track and the technology track. R&D University was an ideal setting for such an intervention because the College placed Technologists (Principle Scientists

Doctors and Problem Solving

Doctors are considered excellent problem solvers, yet it is estimated that misdiagnosis occurs in 15 to 20 percent of all cases. Mistakes are rarely due to technical factors, like the laboratory mixing up the blood specimen of one patient and reporting another patient's result. Rather most errors arise because of mistakes in thinking. Physicians under time pressure use pattern recognition (putting together things they have seen before) to make a diagnosis. Doctors often are correct in these rapid judgments. But at times they are wrong. When time is an issue, a variety of errors creep in. Doctors will stereotype a new patient (neurotic young woman) and make an attribution error (assigning her to the wrong category). The physician may then make an anchoring error (fixing tightly on one diagnosis, or premature closure) because of an inability to consider a different diagnosis. In addition doctors, on average, interpret the patient within the first minute of the usual brief, six-minute, interaction (Groopman, 2007). Interpreting the patient so soon in the interview sends a message about not listening enough and quickly drawing conclusions. It appears that there are two critical factors leading to misdiagnosis: time pressure and not listening enough to the patient.

and Engineers) and Managers (Section Heads) together in their week-long residential College on "Leading Innovation Programs". Participants were selected for this College by about 25 VPs (with or without HR assistance) from a pool of 800 Band 3s resulting in four classes a year of about 50 participants per class. Although all Band 3s would eventually be tapped to attend, VPs were told to nominate one Principal Scientist and two Section Heads with an eye on providing a demographically diverse selection consistent with the makeup of their organization.

LEAD Groups

The focus of the Band 3 College was to increase innovation. One component, LEAD Groups, was designed to build lasting relationships. These relationships are expected to increase long-term networking, which in turn has historically led to R&D innovation at P&G. The focus of the LEAD Group instruction and activity was on coaching and listening skills. The final design of LEAD groups had additional benefits in that these groups helped participants:

- Realize the complexities of current work issues,
- Accept the senior management expectation that they are responsible for developing others,
- Realize that they can best develop others by helping them solve their own complex work issues, and
- Accept the need to recognize and address emotions and intense feeling associated with workplace concerns.

These skills are so important that six hours were freed up in a tight College schedule for LEAD Groups. The program starts with a 45 minute introduction to the LEAD process, followed by an icebreaker dinner with the LEAD group facilitator, after which the groups retreat to a hotel suite for in-depth listening sessions.

MacKenzie (1996) noted that, in the later stages of his Hallmark career, when others consulted with him and he tried to fix their predicament or fix them, it never worked. He started to read Eastern authors and developed "compassionate emptiness" or a state of nonjudgmental receiving. He then began to listen in silence. Interestingly, when he stopped interfering with their process, many of his colleagues would come up with solutions of their own, and "each of us would be the better for the experience."

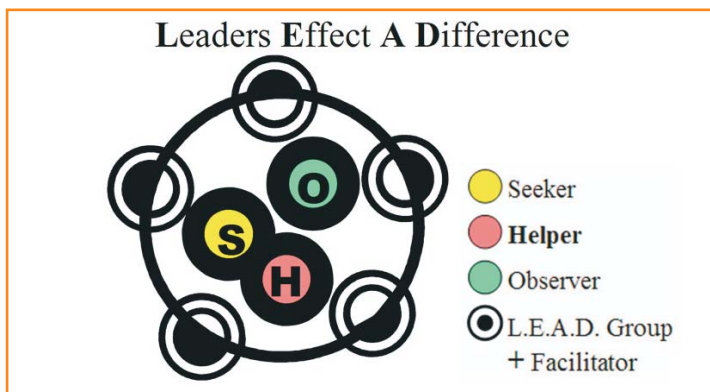
Listening is the high point of coaching like it is for diagnosis in health care and in business organizations. Therefore listening is central in developing coaching.

LEAD Group Instructions

About four weeks before attending the R&D University Band 3 College, each participant, hereafter called the seeker, wrote a 200-250-word description of a current unresolved issue. They were told that writing up a case serves a number of purposes: explaining a issue in more personal terms; seeing the difficulty of getting a balanced view of the work situation; and experiencing a new way of thinking about issues. When analyzing the case they were asked to consider the following: what does it mean for the writer, what feelings are involved, is it a new issue or one that has been around for a long time, is the writer free to change, and is it solvable? This exercise is designed to help people learn to be more aware of feelings when helping someone else. The exercise should aid in identifying strengths and weaknesses as a participant and an observer.

LEAD Group Structure

People were divided into 6-person groups. Participants were asked to volunteer for two roles, Helper and Observer. Each member of the group was assigned to the Seeker role for one of the six LEAD Group sessions that would be conducted during the week. For about 20 minutes the Helper interviews the Seeker about his or her issue, based on what was written prior to the College. There will be a 20-25 minute discussion of what was observed and learned from the interview. This procedure will be followed until all LEAD Group members have a chance to address their issue. This event is not intended to solve the concern presented in the case. The emphasis will be on asking and listening and an awareness of powerful emotions in the exchange between Helper and Seeker.



Seeker and Helper Roles

In the Seeker role, select an issue that is significant, current and unresolved. It should have to do with relating to others. The situation is difficult, it needs to be changed and you care about the outcome. The person in this role is practicing the skills of reaching out for perspective and help.

In the Helper role, the person is practicing listening and coaching skills with the intent to help the Seeker see, think, feel and plan. Issues are rarely as simple as they might first appear. The current concern is often only a symptom of a bigger issue that needs to be addressed. Often it is important to listen and then ask questions which probe deep enough to dig beneath the surface to understand what the issue means to the Seeker. As the Helper, find out who is involved, try to clarify things, be supportive, ask open-ended questions, (yes/no questions add little) tolerate ambiguity, keep cool, maintain a sense of humor and do not problem solve.

Observer and Facilitator Roles

The Observer role calls for careful listening so this person can coach both the Seeker and the Helper. How well do the Seeker and Helper listen to each other? How sensitive is the Helper to the level of tension in the Seeker? Does the Helper stay in role or become a parent, judge, social worker or prosecutor? Does the Helper blame people or take sides instead of trying to understand the complexity of the issue in a complicated work situation?

The Facilitator was expected to observe and listen carefully to the group interaction and their use of LEAD group process, as well as assist when needed. Facilitators were from HR at P&G, the university, and the professional community.

LEAD Group Composition

The LEAD Groups were constructed by taking into account gender, race, age, years in current role and workplace discipline (process engineering, consumer research, analytical, packing technology, etc), career track (Principal Scientist or Section Head) in order to have as diverse a group as possible since diversity is seen as a positive factor in innovation. Further, to assure diversity as well as improve the chance of building unlikely personal networks, researchers¹ separated people who were in the same business units such that no one in a person's group would have been part of their normal work group. Therefore these were diverse teams that represented, as much as possible, the total membership of the College in each LEAD Group

¹ Researchers: Klein led a group of colleagues and graduate students located in the Organizational Training and Evaluation Lab in the Psychology Department of the University of Cincinnati. Lab members included Ruth Joffe, Charmaine Harrison, Mary Lou Kohne, Jenny Lang, Linda Little, Gerald Matthews, Ian Pritchard, James Short and Kristy Smith.

In addition, the order of participant presentation – that is, the order of the Seekers – was determined by a case classification which we established to help order the cases from least to most complex. One of four classifications were assigned to each case as judged by the university research group: 1) personal, 2) interpersonal, 3) technical or 4) systems. That is progressing from relatively “simple” to more complex organizational issues.

Usually there were six participants in a group and eight to nine LEAD Groups per college. The LEAD Groups met for a three-hour block on Tuesday and another three-hour block on Thursday. During each three-hour block, three cases were discussed. Approximately forty-five minutes were spent on each case with short breaks between the cases.

LEAD Group Experience

The first evening there was typically resistance in that participants tended to problem solve and listen less. By the fourth session, on the second evening, all of the groups were more into listening and trying to understand rather than providing answers (problem solving). The need to take time to learn and listen and then understand the often-pressing issues that managers bring to with them to corporate universities is very important, in part, due to increased pressures in a global economy reflected back at work.

In terms of the process in the LEAD Groups, generally participants liked it, found it useful and got a lot out of the experience. Groups met with their facilitator for dinner the first evening and that connected them. The groups had lunch without the facilitator the second day leading to more independence.

Facilitators met at the end of each day to review the LEAD Group process. This helped in four ways: 1) Assess the overall mood of participants; 2) Give input to the College deans; 3) Provide guidance to increase effectiveness for the rest of the week; and 4) Enhance learning between facilitators as well as prevent isolation of individual facilitators.

Facilitators reported that men tended to have a more difficult time than women who seemed to communicate more easily. Often Principal Scientists got bogged down in the technical details, not paying enough attention to the feelings involved in the case under discussion and even their own case. Participants usually helped each other first in the LEAD Group and later in the bar or over lunch the next day. So even though facilitators encouraged “no problem solving” in the LEAD Groups, because participants are problem solvers by nature, they met during informal times and experienced their collaboration as a great success.





The following notes from facilitators' reports at a recent College should provide a more personal view of the various reactions to the experience. There were roughly four main reported issues: emotional aspects and feelings during work, communication difficulties, change and the LEAD Group.

1) Emotions

- These people are great problem solvers who understate the emotions involved in talking about an issue.
- Employees have been let go. Folks are mourning. Is there a way to process these losses with the "survivors"? (Note: Organizational interventions were in place for this, but the LEAD Groups provided additional space for dealing with the changes.)
- They told us that it is hard when you have to be building competence in a team when you have to hit the ground running. This leads to middle managers telling people the answer instead of coaching them to find an answer. Further, this time pressure leads to frequently ignoring underlying emotions.
- Participants are generally conscientious and diligent about doing the task once they understand what is expected of them.
- The individual's personal stake in the written case was not fully recognized or addressed by the helper/coach. This seemed to involve concerns about how will I be regarded by my boss and in what ways will my handling this issue affect my career?
- Spending what little time I have as a manager managing difficult employees may foster dependency and shortchange other direct reports/employees.

2) Communication

- It's hard to get things done with divisions merging and when leadership is ill-defined such that it seems that people are working at cross-purposes.
- Need clear communication about a proactive strategy anticipating the influence of data on product utilization.
- There is obviously a lack of trust with some managers, which leads to not knowing who to turn to for advice.
- Remote assignments are often difficult because there is no team, boss or others to offer ideas and support.

3) Change

- Although dates for product launch are established, demands change, then there is no time to pilot initiative, and the manager is forced to compromise or delay the launch.
- With outsourcing, there is a sense that the P&G staff loses control of the project.
- It's critical, but difficult, to develop partnerships on a peer-to-peer basis when you have to influence without formal authority.

- There is a general concern that technical people will be defined narrowly and lose their autonomy, which negatively impacts their career and/or job satisfaction.
- 4) LEAD Group
- The Seeker-Helper-Observer methodology is something you can actually apply.
 - I really like the openness within the group. It is rare to be this close.
 - Even though our issues look different, you realize that problems are similar and that you are not on your own.
 - It was hardest to just listen with restraint from leading the Seeker or attempting to diagnose their issue.
 - Practicing multiple times allows us to improve our skills and learn through observation what did and did not work.

Over time managers learned that they could work on problem solving at the bar, over breaks or at dinner, rather than do their normal problem solving during the LEAD Group. Engagement in the LEAD Group increased from the first to the second day. This seemed to happen for a variety of reasons. Participants got used to the structure and format of the LEAD Group. Trust based on confidentiality developed in the group. There was latent learning such that learned skills carried over from day one to day two. Participants checked with members of other groups to see if they were on course. They seemed to be reassured and then could proceed with the task, which was listening, understanding and appreciating the emotions involved in a complex situation.

Harrison (2007) studied the level of engagement of participants (70 percent men) in LEAD Groups in Band 3 Colleges. She found that male participants reported a greater increase in engagement than did women. A possible explanation is that since the number of men greatly outnumbered women, men might have felt more comfortable at the College. Another possibility is because women tend to be more relational, this College experience was not unusual for them, but it was for men. Because men were pushed to more openness and exposure, the men might have felt they were more engaged in the LEAD Group.

Outcome and Summary

Overall the LEAD Groups were a very important part of the R&D University. The single most positive aspect of the weeklong College, according to over 500 Band 3 participants, was the chance to meet other people at their level. These connections were vital since participants' felt less different, less isolated and more like others dealing with similar issues in their work settings. If others acknowledge similar work concerns, one is not alone,



and may feel less different, strange, or odd. The R&D University College for middle managers, and particularly the LEAD Groups helped people connect and feel more part of a group.

In short, the LEAD Groups cemented relationships, so much so that several groups planned to continue the LEAD Group interaction through teleconferences every few months for a year, despite the fact that these groups often involve participants on three continents.

The effectiveness of the LEAD Group is supported by the participants' ratings of the event: about 4 (Very Good) on a 5 point scale. Also, participants reported feeling more engaged from the first group session to the last LEAD group session. Finally, when participants were asked, at the end of the College week, what would you start doing in the workplace Monday morning, as a result of your LEAD group experience, responses were as follows:

- Start Listening More 28%
- Connect/Network with others 18%
- Start Coaching others 20%

This LEAD Group methodology met the business need for improved coaching by the middle managers and for a broader network of people across silos in this very large global corporation. We hope that the above will help you with your planning for an innovative and successful corporate learning experience.

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