

# Developing Transformational Leadership through Outdoor and Experiential Learning

by William Stephen

The often intangible “power” of experiential learning is often referred to within the outdoor learning arena literature. As an Outdoor Learning practitioner currently working in Human Resources and Organisational Development, I have always been keen to promote the use and ‘power’ of the outdoor management development approach.

A new approach to leadership was needed within my own organisation, East Lothian Council. There was evidence of silo\*working, a lack of management cohesion and the old favourite - teamwork, and at a time when the public sector needs to maintain the highest levels of performance, the need for provision of ongoing support and development for leadership. The organisation in the past had a good record of management but as the new Chief Executive put it “Leadership for us is a new concept”.

Much of this need for a change in direction had come from self supported Challenge for Change Conferences which brought together business unit managers in East Lothian Council. These identified areas of organisational focus and improvement, one of these areas identified was to develop leadership.

## The approach

We considered using a variety of approaches to the ongoing development of leadership. Part of this was an element of training and development. After an initial pilot with our Directors and Heads of Service, we decided to opt for a more experiential approach for the development element and the design focused on a blend of experiential learning techniques. This transformational leadership approach became known as “A Space to Grow & the Innerwick Experience”. The approach was designed using a mix of internal, private, public and voluntary facilitation.

After an initial launch meet to set the scene that explored Leadership behaviour and the “The East Lothian Way” a residential took place set in bunk house hostel style accommodation (the Innerwick Experience), This included;

- Beach Journey – exploring trust, communication, values and leadership

## Management Development



- Drama – exploring change vision and leadership through metaphor
- Cooking task facilitated by a Professional Chef – team-working and planning to deliver results
- Coaststeering and Scrambling – exploring team and leadership support, using a meta-journey in the tidal impact zone and a scrambling “no ropes” journey.

Follow up Action Learning Sets reviewed learning and gave delegates an opportunity to focus on personal leadership actions through peer support and challenge, this included;

- Personal Leadership Projects – focusing on a challenging behavioural change
- Peer group project – Supporting organisational and culture change

These were all set against a background of a behavioural framework designed within the organisation called the East Lothian Way – focusing qualities and behaviours it’s become a blueprint for how we want to do things around here, i.e.

- Focus – On service
- Explore – The bigger picture
- Share – Knowledge
- Relate – Experiences
- Initiate – Solutions
- Deliver – Outstanding service

Overall a high proportion of the programme was delivered outdoors or in an outdoor setting, within the beautiful diverse landscape of East Lothian.

Transformational Leadership - differs from transactional task leadership in that it focuses on behaviours and values and an acceptance of culture change that aims to raise everyone (i.e. leaders and follower) to higher levels of motivation, engagement and trust. It can result in collaborative, effective working through shared values & vision.

\*Silo working - The opposite of teamwork and collaboration which can result in departments and teams within organisations working in isolation as opposed to sharing knowledge. This can stifle effective working, creativity and innovation.

## The Outcomes

In the beginning we did have usual concerns of using adventurous activity elements during a design – would our managers from across different services within the organisation be happy using bunkhouse style accommodation and all the chores associated with that? Would anxiety of the outdoors cloud the learning? Was it too abstract? Would there be any transfer of learning?

Yes of course, using the outdoors in leadership courses is not by any means new – however crucially it was new for this organisation so there were clear tensions i.e. making a shift from traditional talk and chalk delivery of leadership models, transactional leadership qualifications and workshops to this more behavioural approach and how it would reflect as a return on investment. While we appreciated that use of such techniques are not a “silver bullet”, evidence from the first cohort had indicated it was highly impactful.

Once the programme was underway, to support the evaluation an independent external evaluation using a variety of sampling, interviews & questionnaires was undertaken. It found that:

- 96% of responses said the programme had a medium or high impact on their leadership capability
- 4% responded that it had had a low impact

The evaluation also highlighted 3 key areas of benefit;

- Collaborative working - improvements across council departments through shared understanding.
- Networking – more robust network creation
- Approaches to leadership – shifts in personal styles that enhance team performance

Personal stories and formal feedback also revealed that not only great enjoyment, stretch, challenge and awareness of others resulted from using the outdoor environment as part of the learning process, but that there were clear links between what individuals experienced and what they then went on to do.

In using the outdoor environment for a major part of this programme we wanted to create something that was fun, safe, memorable, relevant, impactful, transferable and real. Combined with the other elements in the

journey the experiential learning opportunities have greatly supported these initial successes. Using a mix of external and internal partners has also ensured a variety of facilitation styles and value.

So yes, we and delegates did experience initial tensions and anxiety on relevance and transfer and potential physicality barriers, but as the evaluation indicated, it was worth it.

## Moving on

We will continue to seek feedback well after the delivery (delegates, as part of the process, have sixmonthly feedback and continued work through Annual Conferences) but it's clear that the use of the outdoors and experiential learning has proved to be a valuable part of the 'mix' when working on leadership themes.

Yes, as with all training we have learned that there are improvements to the approach but as an organisation we want to hold on to the successes of the experiential element and the use of our rich local environment.

The plan is to start to move this 'home grown' powerful and effective approach to new and emerging leaders which will assist in areas of succession planning and energising and enabling leadership talent within the organisation. Further development in these areas, we are sure, will generate more opportunities to tap in to the power of outdoor and experiential learning. ■

### Author's Notes

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### Some suggested references

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