

60 managers, 12 months of learning, 1 ILM Housing Association Programme

Submitted by: Right Track Consultancy

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Management development and accredited programmes have moved on a long way since the days when it went hand-in-hand with large corporate giants and consisted largely of lecture based learning techniques.

In a world where public sector organisations are acting and comparing themselves to the private sector more and more, it comes as no surprise that their learning and development projects reflect this.

The Community Housing Group needed a management development programme for 60 of their managers and wanted an approach that broke down barriers and removed people from their comfort zones. To reward their managers' efforts they also wanted the programme to be accredited.

Due to the size of the project, it was tendered out and eventually awarded to Righttrack Consultancy (<http://www.righttrackconsultancy.co.uk>) in September 2007. Bespoke management development (<http://www.righttrackconsultancy.co.uk/bespoke-training/management/>) is an area that Righttrack has specialised in for the last 20 years with clients including Mercedes Benz, Gucci and the North East Ambulance Service.

The design of the programme encompassed a modular development approach beginning with a highly innovative and interactive outdoor experiential event (<http://www.righttrackconsultancy.co.uk/bespoke-training/experiential-learning/>) followed by a series of training-room based modules, which focused on a variety of management and leadership areas. In addition, Righttrack are also provided one-to-one coaching services (<http://www.righttrackconsultancy.co.uk/coaching/>) to help support the managers and aid their transfer of learning.

The project has been a huge success for both The Community Housing Group and Righttrack, which is great news for Marina Banner, Group Director of The Community Housing Group, as the programme was the first of its kind for the organisation.

It is rare to get a frank look into how a client views their development project, which is why Gemma Middleton has asked Marina a few questions about The Community Housing Group's project, her learning and what is in store for the future ...

How does learning and development fit within a housing association strategy?

The Community Housing Group strives for excellence as an organisation and although we traditionally compared ourselves against similar organisations, we now compare against both public and private sector organisations. In doing so, we have a comprehensive learning and development strategy, which is central to all plans and future strategies for The Community Housing Group.

Training has always had a budget, however previously it is argued that it has not always been allocated to the right resources and in the best way. Traditionally the training was not very creative or practical

as well as having a limited emphasis on qualifications that can be transferred elsewhere.

I was new to HR and training and so I wanted to take a completely fresh approach, which I suppose was easier for me to do, as I had no baggage or previous experience with other external providers or development techniques.

What are your feelings towards learning and development as the Group Director of the Community Housing Group?

My key responsibility is for learning and development. I am very passionate about learning and continuous development; I started in admin and was given the opportunity to develop and move up the ladder. I didn't actually believe I could be a director, yet I was encouraged and supported to reach my full potential and I thoroughly believe in this approach.

The Community Housing Group has set a number of challenging targets including growth, and I believe that training and development will play a large part in achieving these as well as holding on to the right people.

Before the project started, what were employees of the Community Housing Group's attitudes towards learning and development?

Generally, people weren't very inspired, as the training didn't always relate to the business context and typically focused on too much theory. Most of our employees' thoughts on previous training could be summarised as 'ok, could do better' – they never raved about their training experiences. This is largely down to the fact that before Righttrack we didn't have very imaginative training techniques and approached most development using traditional, off-the-shelf methods.

What were the key aspects that the management programme was expected to address?

The programme had a massive agenda and I wanted it to be my landmark programme. The Community Housing Group has really grown as a business over the last few years and so we needed a programme to reflect this. Fundamentally, we needed a different culture as traditionally the mindset was that of a local authority / council, (which there is nothing wrong with) however we needed and wanted this mindset to move towards that of commercial enterprise as we now need to compete for contracts / tenders and use imaginative problem solving.

The key message was for managers to be able to cope and manage through different and difficult situations. There has never been specific management development programme even though we actively promote employees through the business. Ideally, managers would gain a toolkit, which included motivation, performance management, disciplinary actions, team building techniques as well as working together cross-functionally instead of in isolation.

When managers were informed about the forth-coming management development programme what was their initial reaction?

The reaction was mixed; there were 60 managers of all levels involved in the programme. The new managers liked it and were relieved to gain some form of help and support, however the more experienced managers felt they had been there, done that and got the t-shirt. Having said that, all directors were on board even though they were sceptical at how much it would deliver for them personally.

One general consensus was the feeling that everyone was busy and so were wondering how they would fit in the development alongside their heavy workloads. This was probably one of the main reasons behind the lack of enthusiasm.

In your opinion, what aspect of the programme did delegates view as most useful?

It is very difficult to single out one aspect as the programme was different things for different people. Having said that, personal coaching has been hugely valuable, as it allowed personal time to think about managerial styles and frustrations as well as helping many to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The programme also promoted the delegates to work together in cross-functional teams; this was a new concept as our managers typically worked in silos, which I feel will benefit our managers greatly in the future.

What are your thoughts and opinions on the style of the programme?

The programme was totally right for The Community Housing Group as all of our needs were met. It was very varied with a good balance between theory and practical with assignments to help tailor individual learning; all of which helped keep the interest of all participants.

The first module of the programme was the tribe experiential event, how did delegates respond to this?

Initially they thought it would be their worst nightmare and approached it with complete trepidation, which was magnified through feelings of already being stretched and challenged; it left me thinking have I got this hugely wrong?!

The situation was made worse because of boot camp TV programmes as they helped imaginations run wild. However, after the initial shock and after all issues were discussed 99.99% of all participants brought into the programme and turned into highly enthusiastic delegates.

Having the experiential event at the beginning of the programme was a great way to start as it really helped to lift spirits and encouraged the group to bond and drew a line in the sand. From here on in we wanted things to be different.

As part of the programme delegates completed MBTI, what value did this add to the programme?

It helped them to understand themselves and others, the different styles and gave time to understand the different roles as well as learning how best to work to peoples' strengths. We found that many managers worked on their own projects and expected / felt they should be good at everything instead of working in

conjunction with others, which as you can imagine only led to a great deal of stress and frustration.

Coaching was also included, how did you feel the sessions contributed to the overall success of the programme?

The coaching was great as it allowed participants time to talk through the new skills that were taught on the programme and test out their new management strategies and techniques prior to launching the new approach on their team. It also gave the opportunity for all participants to feedback on things which didn't work quite as well as they thought.

The coaching also allowed participants the opportunity for one-to-one support for some of their work based and personal challenges, which in turn helped to build confidence; this is vital to our success.

You were also a delegate on the programme, what was your personal opinion of the process?

I enjoyed the programme immensely as it was great fun. The programme itself acted as a refresher and allowed time for me to reflect on my own management style. The whole process added extra value for me as it allowed me to gain feedback from colleagues.

The key learning aspect that I have taken away from the project was being able to learn a lot about the processes of commissioning and managing a large development project and everything that goes with it, as my background is not based in HR or training.

During the programme, in your opinion what were the 'light bulb' moments for the delegates?

Due to the large number of participants (60 managers), each would have different 'light bulbs' as it depends where they are in their learning cycle.

I have had many people coming to me with their experiences, each having their 'light bulb' moments at different points in the programme. For example, I had one manager who had theirs after module 2; they learnt that you didn't have to be good at everything – obvious, but ground breaking for them.

How much of a buy-in did delegates have to the programme from the start?

To be honest the buy-in at the beginning was patchy to say the least. The general consensus was that the managers knew they needed the training but the senior management team felt they had already done it so although they fully bought into the principle and believed / understood it would be beneficial their expectations were slightly lower.

The key selling point of the programme was the ILM accreditation; everybody, including the senior board, was particularly pleased with this aspect.

How did this change throughout the process of the programme?

The level of buy-in increased dramatically after the tribe (experiential) event. Overall people have

brought in to the programme as they thoroughly enjoyed the experience and embraced the learning.

What were the highlights of the programme?

There were many highlights of the programme and the key ones were:

- * The tribe event was fantastic
- * Being able to find an external provider with the a complimentary culture and values that was comfortable to work with in partnership
- * The personal coaching
- * The ilm presentation; after 12 months of learning and development everyone's hard work was acknowledged, which gave everyone a real sense of achievement

The key result of the programme was that our managers actually feel like managers and have a much stronger belief in themselves, which is exactly what we wanted to achieve!

Which part of the project had the most impact on the business?

The whole programme had a substantial affect on The Community Housing Group, as it was a catalyst for change; the programme helped to show our managers how The Community Housing Group needs to operate in the future, why the change is important and more importantly who and why it will impact on their role and team.

What lasting impact has the programme had on The Community Housing Group?

To reel off just a few of the key impacts, they include:

- * It brought departmental managers into a team, which generated more cross working and support
- * Managers are clearer about what is expected of them and the plans for the future
- * Gave participants a management toolkit to help managers deal with a range of situations
- * We now have confident managers who actually see themselves as managers
- * The programme helped to change our culture and more importantly gave Managers the skills to maximise opportunities
- * Increased morale which has had a knock on effect across the Company

What are the three key changes since the programme?

The three key changes since the completion of the programme were, firstly, the definite change in culture. The programme has pulled the vision of The Community Housing Group and the managers together. It acted as a great motivator and confidence levels are at an all time high.

The Community Housing Group has a strong internal recruitment ethos, with many managers being promoted, however we have never held formal management training; the programme has enforced our understanding that managers don't just emerge and recognised that they need to be continually invested in, which will help us achieve future targets.

How do you view the return on your investment?

Fantastic! The programme was fun and varied due to the use of lots of different learning techniques and because of this we have experienced many changes.

What happens next for The Community Housing Group regarding Learning and Development?

We have a lot of ideas and plans, which include a stage 2 option for our managers offering a menu of options that can be tailored to their individual needs and aspirations.

We are also keen to utilise coaching because of its success during the programme.

What have you learnt from working with an external provider?

I have learnt a great deal from the whole experience; from writing the tender, to sitting on the interview panel and securing and directing the project. The project has also given me experience in managing large development programmes and how to get the best out of the accreditation process.

Righttrack has a huge amount of experience and so has been there to help at every step of the process, which has also aided my overall experience and knowledge.

If you could start again, is there anything you would do differently and if so what?

I can honestly say no – it has been such a success from design and delivery through to project management – I couldn't have asked for more!

On a personal note I think I would do a better job at the procurement stage because even though the tender gained praise, looking back I can see areas where I could improve it even further.

The relationship between the Community Housing Group and Righttrack Consultancy looks set to continue into the future, which is great news as both organisations seem to have the same vision and mission when it comes to learning and development.

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Notes:

About Righttrack Consultancy:

Right Track Consultancy Ltd was formed in 1988, and has its head office in Worcestershire. Righttrack is a leading learning and development consultancy that design and deliver innovative and engaging training solutions to organisations all over the world. The range of services that Righttrack provide covers a broad spectrum and includes bespoke and ready-to-run training, sales solutions, ILM programmes, organisational development, e-learning and coaching.

Righthtrack work with clients of all sizes across all industry sectors, including Mercedes Benz, Gucci, Somerfield, Littlewoods Shop Direct Group, Metropolitan Police and The North East Ambulance Service. More information can be found on www.righthtrackconsultancy.co.uk

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