Issue Three

Spring Edition 2009

a sideways look

News from Elevation Learning

In this issue

Joke Corner

You might be a consultant if...

- You ask the waiter what the restaurant's core competencies are.
- You decide to reorganise your family into a "team-based organisation."
- You can spell "paradigm" and you actually know what a paradigm is

If you would like to contribute a joke please email: jokes@elevationlearning.co.uk

The 2009 fitness regime

There are still sectors of the economy – and indeed consulting – that are thriving. But for most of us, 2009 is going to be tough, so the question is how to make the best of the current circumstances.

I recommend you see this year as your corporate fitness regime. Now, you may need to diet and, to continue the analogy, this means cutting costs. But fitness is not just about diet; it is about a successful exercise programme. I see the 2009 corporate fitness regime having three main elements:

1. Discipline. Use this time to make sure that your internal management systems are fully effective and in particular, that expenditure delivers value for money. And then ensure that this discipline is kept up when the upturn happens. (By the way, we expect the first glimmers of this in the autumn and for the upturn to happen early next year).

2. Innovation. Current economic conditions present challenges that many businesses have never previously experienced, and continuing to keep doing the same things could be a recipe for disaster. This is a great time to develop new products and services that help your clients address their own challenges.

3. Investing in your people. Well, we would say that – but so are lots of others. Business Schools typically flourish in a downturn as managers use a period of redundancy to invest in executive education and increase their marketability. And many of our own clients continue to invest equally assiduously in developing their people.

As usual, there's news of what we've been doing to support our clients in this edition of A Sideways Look; I wish you an enjoyable read and look forward to seeing you at our forthcoming events.

By the way, can you believe we're going to be 20 years old in November? You can celebrate with us later in the year… read more about how and when the party will take place in our forthcoming e-newsletters.

Calvert Markham

Continuous professional development for independent practitioners

Every year, thousands of management consultants make the exciting decision to 'go it alone' and set up their own practice. But where do you access continual professional development (CPD) and the support of peers when you become an independent? In this article, we ask Hedley Basford, Chairman-Elect of network group The Richmond Group of Management Consultants, what this particular network offers independents in terms of development, and how the meaning of CPD has changed since the 90s.

Hedley explains: "Our definition of CPD has changed significantly in the last few years. In the 90s it was all about accessing latest industry information, best practice and white papers, so consultants could improve their professional skills. However in the 00s, the Internet has placed much of that information at our fingertips, meaning CPD has become much broader. It is now less about industry tools and methodologies, and more about how we can develop and grow as people – how we communicate and negotiate, how we influence others, and how we might hone our entrepreneurial ambitions, support others and exchange our knowledge."

Hedley continues: "When starting or running your own consulting practice, your need for support and learning is probably greater than ever before. There are undoubtedly many benefits to working on your own - being in control of your destiny, ability to focus on one project/area of interest, flexibility - but its tough going too. As an independent, it is important to recognise that you can't do everything yourself or be all things to all people. It is vital to connect with a group of trusted colleagues so you access that sense of community, peer group support and the opportunity to learn new skills from trusted advisors.

The Richmond Group offers all this and more. Since its conception back in 1982, the group's goal has been to be a source of knowledge, practical support and networking to its members, by meeting together every two months. At these meetings, as well as the chance to chat about 'consulting life' and swap tips, members enjoy a lively mix of outside speakers on new topics, tools and current affairs. This is important for extending both learning and networking, and it's amazing the new lessons learned from external experts that I have been able to put in place in my own practice: for example, tips on how to write a better website or improve my selling skills.

The group also encourages consultants to bid for new business together, so people can partner up to win larger contracts or 'fill a skills gap' another member may have. We also encourage members to read each others bids, review and make suggestions to give a 'second opinion' – many find it invaluable as when you are working alone one of the downsides is never having someone around to validate the direction you are going in, and say "Yes, you are on the right path", or "Have you thought of pitching it this way?"

An innate sense of trust underpins the group, which is vitally important if you are vouching for each other as professionals and individuals and want to build meaningful relationships. This didn't happen overnight but is testimony to the ongoing commitment of the membership and the board. We're careful about who we allow to join and the fact that we have been operating for a long time and constantly refine what we are doing to ensure it meets members' needs really helps.

Being a member - and now Chairman-Elect - of The Richmond Group makes me feel although I am an independent, I have sixty colleagues supporting and helping me to succeed. That is a special feeling and one well worth investing your time in."

You can contact Hedley at www.basford.com

Helping the Synexus team to improve their influencing skills

Clinical trials company Synexus wanted to improve the influencing skills of its important medical team, who were responsible for signing up members of the public to take part in critical clinical trials in areas such as prostate cancer and osteoporosis.

Dr Ravi Pawa, Medical Advisor, Synexus, said they had identified that even a relatively small improvement in its recruitment conversion rate would make a huge difference to their efficiency and success, but that the skilled doctors and nurses involved in the process were not necessarily confident in the fine art of customer service. They asked Elevation Learning to help…

Elevation Learning trainer Cynthia Pexton-Shaw was intrigued by the proposition. "I don't have extensive previous experience of working in Pharma, but when I researched the company and what it did more closely, I saw that this was a classic case of teaching client facing teams how to better influence and tune in to the needs of their clients," explained Cynthia.

Ravi takes up the story: "Newly qualified doctors and nurses are now much more communications savvy but that hasn't always been the case. We felt it would be timely for our diverse team to take part in the same training so there was a clear idea of what is expected of them going forward, and a standard set of tools and techniques that ensures consistency of approach. Our call centre initially qualifies whether a prospective client is potentially suitable or not. We then invite them to come in for a discussion with one of our medical team. This is the crucial part of the recruitment process – it's where we either win customers or lose them – so improving our skills here was really important."

Cynthia added: "The clients are often quite diverse. For some trials it is older, retired people, and for others, its young professionals. Older people tend to prefer a 'friendly helper' style and respond well to a doctor's professional distance, and appreciate someone who will sit back and listen. However, young professionals tend to be more 'logical thinkers' who require a clear list of risks and rewards to convince them to join up to a clinical trial. Both require very different approaches to get a successful result and this was something we were able to work on in the role play."

Ravi concluded: "Cynthia spent a lot of time getting to know our community prior to the training course, both our teams and our customers, and it showed. She handled our delegates brilliantly and managed to pitch the content in a way that appealed to a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, and people who possess very different 'bedside manners' when it comes to dealing with the patients.

We hope to roll out more workshops to the wider team and see a growth in our recruitment rate as a result. We'll be measuring our 08/09 recruitment figures against last year to see if the numbers speak for themselves."

Why your ability to sell to existing clients has never been more important

The recent pilot of our new course 'Selling on to Existing Clients' was a huge success with delegates reporting that the lessons learnt were both practical and timely.

The seminar, which sales specialist Deane Hitchens co-hosted with Elevation Learning's Calvert Markham, provided a solid introduction in to how to spot and develop new business opportunities with current customers, and turn these into valuable consulting assignments.

Deane has extensive experience as a business consultant experienced in the psychology of behavioural change. He shared with the group a model that helps consultants understand the psychology of how clients interpret and evaluate a new business opportunity and where they are in the decision making process. He also coached delegates on how to 'think client, plan client' – and tune their thinking and language to their customer's to get best results.

Once they have tuned into their clients' needs, and spotted a legitimate opportunity to sell a new service or project, its then time to focus on clarifying the value they can bring to the client, and why it's pertinent to do this now (rather than any other time). Deane continued: "The key questions in the customer's mind will be: What is the value of change to me? Why should I do this now? And why should I use this particular consultant to do it?"

Calvert said: "This approach is all about recognising an opportunity, accessing the right person to pursue it with, facilitating the right conversation at the most appropriate place, time and level, and then closing the sale. Good consultants are always talking to their clients, and thinking 'what is next? How can I progress this to the next stage?" which requires awareness, confidence, clarity and momentum. We shared new tips and techniques with the delegates around this, and talked through the real life client situations they find themselves in, where they might use them to best effect."

However, one missing and vital ingredient to a successful sell on is this: "It is crucial that consultants go on a joint journey of discovery with their clients, not arrive there before them and then whip out a solution that the client doesn't see value in. This is what forces most objections" tells Deane. "Of course, it's important to help the customer recognise what they might need to do, and show authority and credibility, but it is equally critical that you move at the same pace, at the same time, so they feel ownership and commitment when you do 'discover' the solution together. Nobody likes to be sold to!"

Deane explained: "Consultants can be guilty of burying themselves in an existing project and not looking up and spotting where they can develop what their client is thinking, and where they might be more impactful. Smart consultants are learning how to get into this mindset, and then once in it, how to spot the sell on opportunities and turn them into assignments that mean business. Now, more than ever, the ability to do this is the difference between personal and professional success and failure."

For more information about Selling On to Existing Clients please e-mail: diane.davies@elevationlearning.co.uk or telephone +44 (0) 20 8642 9568

RAF consultants benefit from High Intensity Training Seminars

Today's armed forces face a unique set of demanding and often shifting challenges. Flexibility to deploy rapidly at short notice anywhere in the world is commonplace, but more delivery of the capability required to do that must also more and more represent real value for money and efficiency from inception to disposal.

Finlay McLean leads a team of twenty internal management consultants who work with RAF project teams and personnel to ensure good decisions and processes are being made and followed, both strategically and on the ground. With the RAF engaged in expeditionary warfare, which has brought many challenges regarding capability, process and personnel, Finlay and his team have found themselves in high demand.

"Our client needs us now more than ever and as a team it's important that we rise to the occasion," explains Finlay. "Our continuing personal and professional development is vital. All of the consultants on the team are military or civil servants and have deep sector expertise, but few have traditional consultancy training before joining the team.

We were aware that when it came to selling the benefits of our services, and convincing clients to engage with us, there were improvements to be made. With that in mind, Elevation Learning's High Intensity Training Seminars (HITS) were an inviting prospect. For a set price, we were able to train our entire consulting team in two key subjects – Winning Business and Negotiation and Influencing Skills – in just one day away from the client."

Elevation Learning's managing director Calvert Markham ran the Winning Business seminar in the morning. Finlay continues: "This session helped us understand the importance of promoting our key services, how we might brand ourselves as a team, and the benefits of selling success stories that detail what working with us can achieve. As a result, we have already launched our own micro site on the internal website that acts as a shop window for our services, along with flyers that explain what we do.

The Influencing and Negotiation workshop that followed taught us about the 'push' and 'pull' styles of influencing clients (push – assertive approach, pull – more discursive), and the importance of 'ethos, logos and pathos' – which is about establishing your credibility (ethos), clearly promoting the 'hard' benefits of working with us (logos), and conveying a deep understanding of the client and their environment (pathos). These last three areas are particularly crucial to us. The importance of word of mouth and reputation cannot be underestimated in the RAF; if people are convinced we not only really understand where they are coming from but are experienced, innovative and driven enough to lead change – they'll buy us. We regularly network with key heads of department and have to impress quickly, so learning how to quickly establish our credibility and empathise with client needs is critical. We are also often asked to share our best practice and success stories with consultancy heads from other public sector organisations too - who sometimes push new business opportunities our way - so its vital we can also quickly get on their wavelength, and sell them a great story about how we can partner with them to help solve a client's problem.

The lessons we learned from trainer Monica Hernanz in this session were really helpful, and we were keen to implement some of the 'push and pull' styles of influencing, using ethos, logos and pathos, with clients and contacts straight away."

Finlay concluded: "The HITS sessions lasted half a day each and were very intensive, but learning in detail about two vital topics made great use of our time – and our lean training budget. The whole team learnt new tools and techniques which they could begin using straight away, and our new starters found the training particularly useful, both as an introduction to the RAF and general consultancy, and also in increasing their understanding of our sales strategy and goals for the coming year."

For more information on HITS courses running near you or to hold a seminar in-house, call +44 (0) 20 8642 9568.