

“You have two hours to run a syndicate session in the chief executives’ forum, and engage the top team in the subject of knowledge management.”

Centrica’s top 60 directors meet twice a year to debate and develop the group’s strategy, and I had been granted two hours to educate, create common ground, build commitment and drive a series of actions for the following year and beyond. That was my mission, and I chose to accept it...

In our field as knowledge-management professionals, requests of this kind are few and far between. All too often we have to engineer and jostle to be heard against the rising tide of mission-critical strategic-transformation programmes and hard-edged, short-term change initiatives. How could I design a break-out session that would make the most of this opportunity and resonate with an audience of senior directors and board members? One thing was certain: it had to be designed to sustain high levels of interest and energy, because my two-hour allocation came half way through a demanding day and had to incorporate a working lunch. I made an early decision to build the two hours from a series of short inputs, some educational and personal, some experiential and collaborative, each designed to cater for a variety of differing learning styles and compete with the feta-cheese and sun-dried-tomato pastry tartlets.

Multiple intelligences

Howard Gardner’s pioneering work on multiple intelligences in the 1980s proved a good starting point. Gardner identified seven different kinds of intelligence, each one lending itself to a different learning style, and hence a potential executive hot-button:

- *Linguistic*: a sensitivity to the meaning and order of words;
- *Logical-mathematical*: ability in mathematics and other complex logical systems;

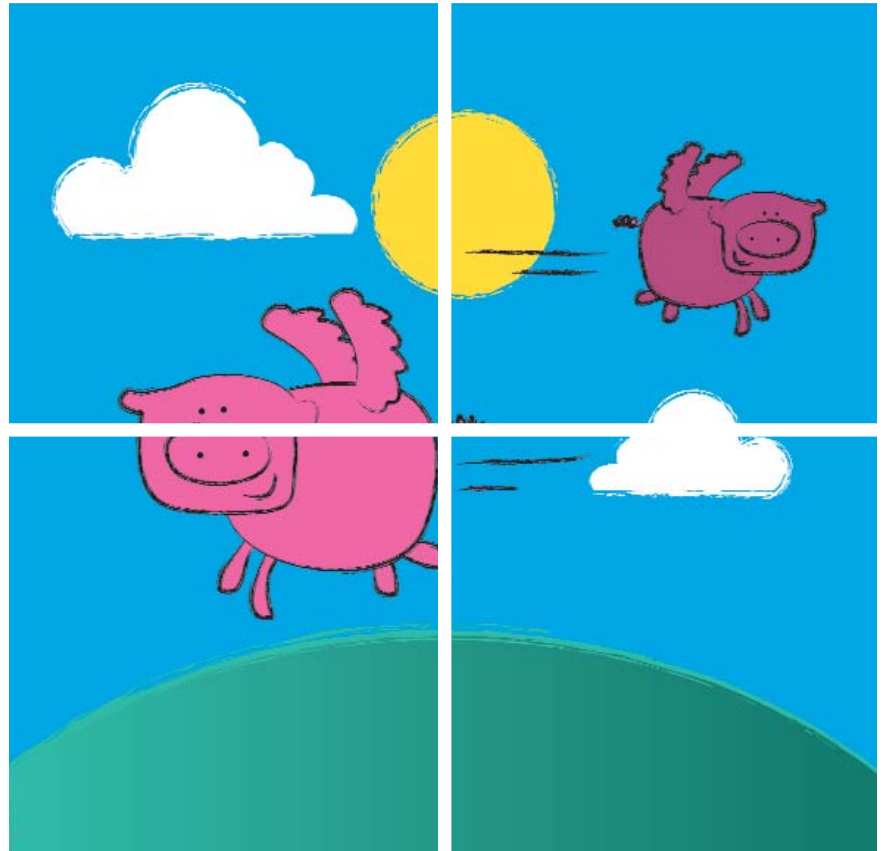


Illustration: Emma Palfreyman

Leadership buy-in

The rules of engagement

Working with multiple intelligences to engage senior executives in the knowledge-sharing process. **By Chris Collison**

- *Musical*: the ability to understand, appreciate and create music;
- *Visual-spatial*: the ability to think in pictures, both literal and abstract;
- *Bodily-kinesthetic*: the ability to use one’s body in a skilled way, for self-expression or towards a given goal;
- *Interpersonal*: an ability to perceive and understand other individuals, their moods, desires and motivations;
- *Intrapersonal*: an understanding of one’s own emotions.

We each possess all seven of the above intelligences to a greater or lesser

degree; every brain is as unique as a fingerprint. In principle, a well designed learning event will address several of these intelligences to maximise the overall levels of engagement in a group.

It seemed like a good theory. The challenge was to put it into practice.

Safety in numbers

My first challenge was to provide some data from which the group of directors could draw conclusions. As a first step, I built an online survey to use with the broader senior-management population. The survey asked members of this

About Centrica

Centrica was formed in 1997 from the demerger of British Gas, and is the UK's leading provider of energy and essential home services (it includes such brands as One.Tel and Dyno-Rod), with a growing international presence in the deregulated markets of North America and Northern Europe.

The organisation employs 35,000 employees worldwide, the majority in customer-facing roles in contact centres or providing services direct to customers' homes and businesses. Its key assets are a large established base of customer relationships, a number of upstream assets – gas fields, storage facilities and power stations – and the knowledge and experience of its employees.

Culturally, it is a melting pot of the established giant and the innovative, attracting talent from a variety of blue-chip companies over recent years, with a clearly communicated drive to deliver double-digit growth for its shareholders, year on year.

▶ group of around a thousand managers to indicate, on a scale of 1-10, their agreement with such statements as:

- We have a strong 'not invented here' culture;
- We are not good at learning from our mistakes and sharing this learning;
- We have a strong networking culture;
- A lack of role-modelling from the leadership is preventing us from becoming greater than the sum of our parts;
- Not knowing what's going on is the biggest barrier to knowledge sharing and learning.

The survey also asked the management group to estimate, in monetary terms, the potential value of more effective knowledge sharing and learning.

The team of directors was presented with the results of the survey; the directors then offered their own responses to the same questions. While the results to the survey questions were clearly qualitative, there was great power in being able to inform the directors that their own managers believed there was around £100m to be gained through better knowledge sharing. Qualified accountants in the room could debate the figure, but nobody could deny the

perceptions and beliefs of the next layer of management.

Wax crayons for the visual thinkers

The second input was a total change in style. Grouping the directors into teams of three, I distributed A2 sheets of white paper and a large selection of chubby wax crayons. The challenge for each group was to draw a picture that illustrated the current environment for sharing knowledge within Centrica. While the executives busied themselves in creative activity, I thought about a comment made to me the day before when I had slipped into town to buy the crayons and paper: "Organising a children's party are you?" the shop assistant had asked. "In a way," I replied.

The pictures carried all the hallmarks of a rich discussion: silos, organisational hierarchies, broken connections, walls, mazes and dividers, islands, hot air balloons, and even a set of flying pigs. Each team presented its picture back to the remainder of the group, explaining and, at times, defending the metaphors it had used. This exercise sparked deep discussion about the existence of silos, the absence of networks and the perceived role of the corporate centre.

Quotations from leaders, past and present

The next step was to decorate the walls of the room with a series of quotations – 20 in total, each one on an A4 sheet. The effect was something of a knowledge-management gallery. What followed was an individual task: spend ten minutes touring the gallery; identify the three quotes that are most meaningful to you; and, be prepared to explain your reasoning to the group. The directors got out of their seats and walked around the room in a self-imposed silence, identifying the quotations that spoke to them most powerfully.

Where do you find a set of provocative and stimulating quotations? My approach was to ask the Learning to Fly community, an online network of around 500 KM practitioners, with a request for the quotations that they had used to challenge and inspire their own organisations. The resulting discussion thread yielded excellent examples, including quotes from Peter Senge, Albert Einstein, Tom Davenport, Larry Prusak and even King Solomon.

For the Centrica executive team, the most powerful quotations were:

- "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." **Albert Einstein**
- "Only those who have learnt a lot are in a position to admit how little they know." **L. Carte**
- "Nothing can be effectively controlled, in the long run, from the top of a hierarchy, or from any one perspective. People are basically trustworthy. Only workplaces that give their members the chance to learn and add value through their work will succeed in the long run." **Art Kleiner**
- "In a knowledge-driven economy, talk is real work." **Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak**
- "Sharing knowledge is not about giving people something, or getting something from them. That is only

valid for information sharing. Sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action; it is about creating learning processes.” **Peter Senge**

This individual exercise ensured that more reflective members of the group had a chance to share their thoughts as we worked our way around the group. The quotations gallery generated a rich dialogue, particularly relating to the level of control that can be imposed from the centre to drive cultural change, the effectiveness of meetings, the level of networking across the company and the shallow nature of interpersonal relationships.

Family film show

I have always been struck by the parallels between the way children and organisations behave and learn. Davenport, for example, writes of the ‘kindergarten rationale’, whereby:

- You share with your friends;
- You share when you’re sure you’ll get something in return;
- Your toys are more special than anyone else’s;
- You share when the teacher tells you to, until she turns her back;
- Sharing decreases if toys are scarce;
- Once you get taken, you never share again.

To bring Davenport’s work to life and in order to appeal to the interpersonal and intrapersonal learning styles, both forms of emotional intelligence, I introduced some children into the room – via video. My two daughters were three and seven years old at the time of this event, and a finance director’s sons were eight and eleven. Prior to the event, she and I video-interviewed our children, asking such questions as:

- What makes you want to share? (“I like sharing with Reuben, because he’s my boyfriend.”)

- What makes you not want to share? (“I don’t like sharing with Lilly, because she’s bossy.”)
- What does it feel like when you share with someone you don’t know? (“I feel a little bit shy at first, but it is a good way to make friends.”)

The immediacy and directness of the video clips grabbed everyone’s attention, and the frankness of the children’s

Learning from others

Finally, I introduced some external good practice into the room, outlining BP’s learning before, during and after framework, and knowledge-capture and networking examples from the US Army.

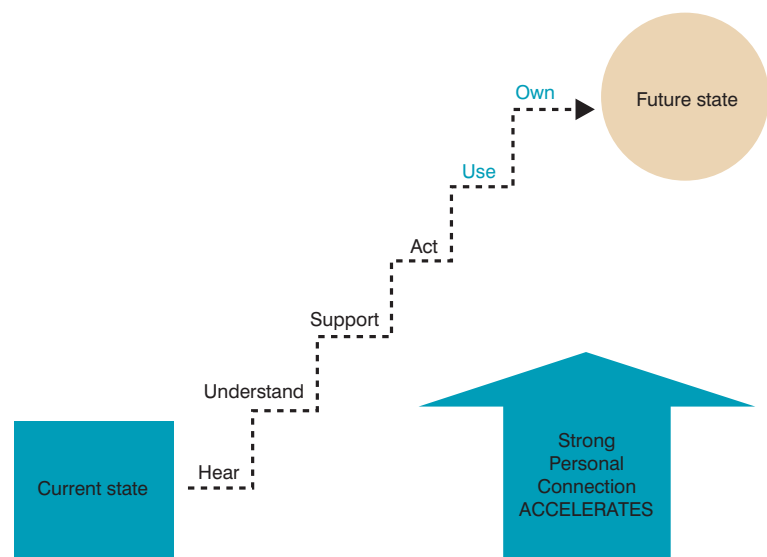
Having provided this rich series of inputs, the group worked in syndicates to address the question, ‘As leaders, what change do we need to bring about in Centrica’s culture to

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responses generated many wry smiles as the directors reflected on their own behaviour. Centrica is seven years old, and the parallels in behaviour between the children and the organisation were clear to everyone in the room, prompting discussion about how we could increase levels of trust and collaboration through developing deeper relationships, and how the directors could act as role models.

improve the sharing of knowledge and best practice?’

Their recommendations included the launch of a series of cross-business networks, the creation and communication of new leadership competencies that reflect knowledge sharing, increased movement of staff between business units, and a shift in emphasis for the company intranet, to emphasise



► connections with people as well as information.

Answers on the back of a postcard

As he was leaving the room, one of the directors turned to me and said, “You know, Chris, this is good stuff, but what I really need is something practical to challenge me and remind me tomorrow morning what I need to do differently. Something that fits on the back of a postcard.”

After drawing on Centrica’s knowledge-sharing network, I proposed that the director place a card on his desk containing the following five statements:

- When encountering a business problem, how can I reinforce the importance of learning from others, rather than simply providing an answer?
- How can I personally demonstrate that asking for help is a sign of strength rather than weakness?

- How do I react when someone fails? Is it purely a loss to the business or is it an investment in their education?
- When reviewing a project proposal, have I checked that it brings to bear knowledge from other projects?
- How much time in my diary this week is likely to include ‘real’ conversations?

Six months later, at the next executive forum, all 60 members of the top team scored themselves against these statements, and committed to refer to them on a daily basis. They have now been incorporated into the company’s leadership-competency framework and, as I write this article, are being built into the development plans of thousands of senior managers around the Centrica group.

So has Centrica arrived? What are the next steps? Walking the talk and demonstrating the benefits through success stories must follow the positive

rhetoric. A number of cross-company networks have recently been launched, each one sponsored by a member of the senior team. The success of these networks will be critical to building commitment to knowledge-sharing throughout the organisation.

Building commitment

As part of its corporate approach to managing the people aspects of change programmes, Centrica uses the commitment-escalator model developed by ChangeFirst (see illustration on previous page). This suggests a series of stages that people work through before becoming truly committed to a change – a new way of working. Starting with simple awareness, individuals must first hear then understand the change. Next, based strongly on the actions of their immediate managers and peers, they choose to support the change and can be seen to act in the desired manner – an experimental phase. The final two stages are where commitment is really won or lost, in which people can be seen to be using the new way of working as part of regular business, before finally owning the change in their environment.

At every stage, the commitment is fragile, and requires active support and sponsorship from leaders at every level of management, not just the top team. Senior sponsorship needs to cascade throughout the organisation for this change to take root.

So to repeat the question, has Centrica arrived? Not yet, but the scene is set for success. The senior team has had a rapid journey up the commitment escalator, and is actively using knowledge-sharing practices. The challenge is to sustain their commitment as champions and sponsors. And, as always, the soft stuff is the hard stuff. ■

Some lessons learnt...

Don’t be afraid to innovate when engaging senior members of staff. Look for something distinctive that will stick in their memories – By using videos of children, and ‘regressing’ the top team to use wax crayons and paper to articulate and discuss cultural issues, it was possible to generate a sense of freshness and simplicity in a team that had had its fill of Powerpoint presentations.

Tap into a broader community if you need to generate ideas – The Learning to Fly online community was a valuable resource in gathering quotations. Within two days of my request, I had received ten responses, and unexpectedly, words of encouragement and personal interest from several members of the network. Their enthusiasm encouraged me to persevere and feed back the outcome.

Ask rather than anticipate what outcomes will be most valuable for your audience – I made the assumption that a series of actions and interventions was required. When I was asked to produce a postcard with behavioural coaching tips by one of the directors, I had to move quickly to meet his needs. Had I asked before the event, I could have used the session to involve the directors in creating the postcard and increase their level of buy-in.

Think about the engagement process as just one part of an overall change programme, and **have a plan in place to build sustained commitment** – Having a change-management framework has proved invaluable in planning the next set of activities and recognising the role of executive leaders as sponsors and role models who need ongoing involvement.

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