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Exploring the challenges of fostering workplace education in a manufacturing environment
The manufacturing managers role as an educator

"Grow and develop employees skills"
- to generate improved business results

How is this best done in a manufacturing context?
The sandcastle
Australian Manufacturing – in crisis?
Responding to the crisis

What should we do at the sandcastle?

- Move it to higher ground ............or
- Attempt to improve it so that it continues to stand tall against the tide
Responding to the crisis

What should we do at the sandcastle?

• Move it to higher ground ............or

• Attempt to improve it so that it continues to stand tall against the tide

Limited time, money and resources = organisational stress
The lure of ‘activity’

- To order the chaos and provide direction, organisations and the managers who work in them are expected to develop and implement improvement plans & strategies.
- This creates a perception of control.
- Short-term results are demanded
Personal issues and dilemmas

- Given that I’m responsible for keeping the sandcastle sound against a threatening tide, should my improvement plan be to ..... or
- instruct employees to work harder ..... or
- instruct employees on how to spade and bail faster................. or
- replace employees with those of higher spade and bailing skills............ or
- push employees aside and shovel and bail myself............... or
Personal issues and dilemmas

- do nothing, knowing that the tide cannot be controlled.............or
- tell employees that the tide is coming in, then create teaching opportunities as our remedial plan is implemented so that they are more capable of leading the defence of the sandcastle against the tide.
Educational impact of each action option

- instruct employees to work harder

No education requirement
Educational impact of each action option

- instruct employees on how to spade and bail faster

Those doing the instruction will need knowledge
Educational impact of each action option

- replace employees with others of higher spade and bailing skills

Pool of higher technical skilled candidates required
Educational impact of each action option

- push employees aside and shovel and bail myself

No education requirement
Educational impact of each action option

- do nothing, knowing that the tide cannot be controlled

No education requirement
- tell employees that the tide is coming in, then create teaching opportunities as our remedial plan is implemented so that they are more capable of leading the defence of the sandcastle against the tide

Combination of educational interventions likely to be needed
My research is a case study exploring the feasibility, difficulties and compromises of this option
Plasticproducts

- Supply food packaging products
- Located at Melbourne
- 30+ years of operation
- 230 permanent employees on the site
- Plasticproducts has a global manufacturing strategy, but at Melbourne its implementation was limited

Rationale for the sandcastle location
Research framework

Three proactive action learning activities;

1. Teaching consultation-based change skills through adoption of this approach to a restructure of the organization along team-based manufacturing principles

2. Creation of a learning forum to teach change leadership skills

3. Review of the manufacturing strategy to educate participants in its purpose and their role in its implementation
Using a consultative approach to restructure the work teams

The discussion seemed forced and did not flow freely [note from my research journal]

“Some of your direct reports will only be here because they know you expect it. They’re shit scared of losing their jobs.”
Using a consultative approach to restructure the work teams

- Participants did not initially reveal their inner thoughts or feelings about the changes being proposed. They sat silently in ‘mere attendance’
- ‘Mere attendance’ slowed the learning, decision-making and implementation process
Leadership training


“use less psycho babble will you”
“Use words I can understand”

Participants complained of being fatigued
[note from my research journal]
Leadership training

• In responding to how they would implement change, participants repeatedly used ‘management babble’
• Some admitted that they didn’t understand what the words meant
• Participants appeared to have difficulty linking what we were doing with the words
• Participants actions either did not change, or changed only marginally
The lure of ‘activity’ and the manufacturing strategy
The lure fallacy of ‘activity’ and the manufacturing strategy

“I’m sceptical of our ability to make changes to our cost base and labour flexibility. We only get minor incremental improvements. This isn’t enough to assure survival. We need innovation. People don’t feel the need for change”

“This place has never influenced its own future. It’s hard to say that we control our own destiny. The marketplace is stagnant. There are more threats than opportunities”
The lure fallacy of ‘activity’ and the manufacturing strategy

Participants gave mixed input as to the expected affect that implementing the company’s strategy would have on its future. Some saw it as having little affect as they believed that the dominant force was external global issues.
Conclusion

• Fostering workplace education in a manufacturing environment is extremely challenging and time consuming

• This compromises the feasibility and effectiveness of this process as a short-term response to the rising tide
Impact of the conclusion

• To find purpose in an education agenda in manufacturing, a broader view than merely defending the sandcastle is required

• This purpose can be one way of finding meaning when there is a sense of inevitable decline
Impact for communication with industry

For effective communication;

• Know the industry context and its impact on education

• Know what role, if any, education plays in the industry strategy

• Recognise that education may not have a short term impact

• Seek out industry contacts with an education agenda that is broader than the ‘bottom line’