

Managing change: the real issue?

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I would like to start my brief session by talking about the work I am currently involved in with the UBI National Education Programmes Unit. This will I hope, bring together two themes which are relevant to the Conference, and to you as an audience, whether you are from business or from education.

The first of these themes is collaboration. The Unit has worked for many years now with various major UK and international companies in order to try to communicate the best, and most forward thinking business management practice to those tasked with managing schools. This collaboration has taken the form of management development training, for example, workshops developed and run with Rank Xerox on Total Quality Management and Team Building and Workshops run with British Gas. More recently, conferences, and research into management issues in schools have formed part of the portfolio of Unit activities.

All of this work is founded on the principle, shared by the Unit and its industrial sponsors, that the good management and organisation of the school is a vital part of the delivery of top quality education to young people. In M&S terms, not to accept this basic principle would be akin to saying that it doesn't matter what the environment is like in a store, or how well or badly it is managed, as long as the merchandise is good.

There are lots of opportunities for collaboration between schools and businesses, and many organisations involved in assisting or facilitating working together. I think, in fact, there is a degree of over-supply in the market. The key question is, however, how is the resource spent in both schools and industry being targeted to produce maximum benefit for both parties?

Having spent some time working on this issue with a number of colleagues from Marks & Spencer who are also seconded to work within education, we concluded that there were four valid areas of collaboration with schools and colleges. In curriculum development, in provision of work experience for young people, involvement in careers and guidance within schools, and finally in management development opportunities, properly targeted teacher placements being part of this. This conclusion is one of the elements of a review of education business policy we have recently completed for the Company.

Our conclusions should not come as any great surprise. However, the point I would make here is that the weighting of activity across these focus areas is perhaps not maximising the benefits to either education or business. And I refer here particularly to what seems to be the flood of curriculum materials, that businesses seem all too willing to add to. I refer also to what I see as less well utilised opportunities to look at management and organisational issues and share with industry some of the successes, and some of the problems it has encountered in this area. I think on balance, sharing the problems, slightly more than sharing the successes, is perhaps the more useful aspect of collaboration in this area, so much of which is to do with the management of change, and this brings me to the second theme of this brief presentation.

As a country, and as part of the European Union, we are facing increasing uncertainty, economically, politically and socially, and the trend looks set to continue. There will be no 'period of consolidation'.

In a business context, decision making is ever more difficult against such a background. The rise of new industrialised economies, the so-called 'Asian Tigers' for example, new industries, and the internationalisation of business all bring new demands, new threats and opportunities. In short, it brings change. It brings change very obviously to business, but no part of society is immune.

Against this background some major, and well known, companies have undergone fundamental changes affecting both numbers employed, structures, and ways of working. The impact of technology, particularly information and communication technologies is an important aspect of this.

This experience is something to be tapped into by educationalists. Understanding what is happening in industry is key to delivering the right messages about the world of work to young people. But there are also opportunities to examine how business organisations are changing, what this means for individuals within the organisation, and to consider what may be culled from such experience and applied to a school or college in order to manage more effectively. A vital part of the process is communication in 'the other direction', in getting business to understand

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what issues present-day schools and their managers are having to address.

Finally therefore, the message is that while collaboration between industry and education in the development of curriculum and curriculum materials is both right and necessary, what is equally valid is the pooling of knowledge and experience about ways of implementing change, whether this change is the introduction of new technology, or an appraisal system, or a new approach to delivering parts of the curriculum.

This deserves more focus both on the part of educationalists and on the part of businesses committed to working with schools and colleges, and I hope that you will give this some thought in your future collaborative ventures, and actions to take forward from the conference. If you wish to raise the position of design and technology teaching in schools you are seeking to manage a change, possibly even a culture change. Perhaps in terms of collaboration with industry therefore, the most useful question you can ask is 'How can we best manage that change and who can work with us to achieve this?'