

EMPOWERED TEAM LEARNING: The Drivers' Story

Introduction

We have found that the real power of empowered team learning comes through most strongly when we talk about actual examples.

The company was one of the largest oil companies in the UK with a quarter of the market for petroleum products, and it maintained its own directly employed HGV drivers to distribute its products. Five years previously, the tanker drivers had numbered over 1100 and were the second highest paid group of manual workers in the country. Since then, the company had de-recognised the union, and the number of drivers had fallen to just over 400. New terms and conditions had been introduced, including flexibility agreements and new operating standards.

The 400 drivers were now delivering more product than the 1100 drivers had five years previously but they were unhappy and were seen as uncooperative in the face of continuing change. The company wanted to introduce a new round of negotiations on further changes in terms and conditions. There was also concern about low morale, an increase in driver accidents and operational mistakes. Some of the drivers believed that the new operating standards were too tight, although it was widely recognised that they had in the past been negotiated to levels that were far too generous and unsustainable in today's ever more competitive operating environment. They were nervous that the company was going to lay them off and use contract drivers in their place, as had been done by several of the company's competitors. Neither the management team nor the company's 400 HGV drivers appeared to understand each other.

The management team decided to carry out a consultation with the drivers to find out exactly what they thought about such issues as the operating standards; current terms and conditions; communication between drivers and management; and the possibility of expanding the drivers' role.

A number of attitude surveys had been carried out with the HGV drivers in previous years by external agencies, but somehow the findings had not lead to any significant change. The drivers were highly cynical about the surveys that they saw as attempts at manipulation by management.

The management team decided to consider empowered team learning. A specially formed team of drivers would be progressively equipped with the skills

and understanding to design and carry out the consultation for themselves and to present their conclusions to the management team. As a first step, the entire senior management team attended a one-day workshop to examine the idea of empowered team learning and to decide whether to commit to the process with the 400 HGV drivers. The management team needed to be convinced that it was not taking the risk of making an unsatisfactory situation even worse.

The formal objectives of this workshop were:

1. To explore and deepen the senior management team's understanding of the pros and cons directly employing HGV drivers.
2. To identify how the management team could ensure that it really understood the drivers' viewpoint.
3. To examine the pros and cons of different ways of obtaining more information.
4. To evaluate the pros and cons of allowing the drivers to design and run the consultation process themselves with minimal management involvement.

The design of the workshop did not centre on explaining empowered team learning and presenting it to the management team as the solution to their needs.

The first phase of the workshop was designed to clarify the management team's thinking on the key issues. This was done by brainstorming several questions:

What are the possible benefits to the company of having directly-employed drivers?

What, if any, are the disadvantages of having directly-employed drivers?

In what ways would a directly employed-driver be the same as a contract driver? In what ways different?

The exercise revealed to the management team the range of thinking that existed within the group itself and emphasised the need to really understand the drivers' own perspective. This was done by brainstorming all the possible benefits of a consultation exercise with the drivers:

Think of all the possible reasons for a consultation exercise.

The actual output of the discussion is shown below.

- Two-way confidence can be built up
- Improve morale
- Gain a lot of knowledge
- Jointly clarify values and perceptions
- Save money
- Help us shape strategy and direction
- Shared instead of imposed outcome
- Challenge preconceptions
- Convey (and share) a vision
- Reinforce our commitments to the drivers
- Release tension
- Improved performance
- New ideas/innovative thinking
- Identify real training/development needs
- Reinforce driver identity

The team then listed all the things that could go wrong and highlighted the dangers of making a bad situation even worse, the risk of the process being manipulated and distorted, and the possibility that expectations might be set in a way that could lead only to disappointment. The management team also recognised that it might not like what the drivers had to say. It was also recognised that a failure to get the consultation right would make future attempts even more difficult.

The management team decided in favour of an in-depth consultation that in some way would break the mould from the past. Having listed all the ways in which information could be gathered, the main methods were looked at and the pros and cons of each method were brainstormed. The management team used its own analysis to conclude that face-to-face

interviews and focus group discussions with all 400 drivers was the best way forward. The management team's analysis of the pros and cons of using focus groups was as follows:

For	Against
+ Dialogue possible + Involvement of all the drivers + Research their responses + Probe in depth + Flexibility + Comfortable for the drivers	- Need good process - Take too long? - Summarising process needed - Consistency could be a problem - Skilful group leaders needed - Risk of peer pressure

The next issue to be addressed was who should conduct the exercise. The management team brainstormed the pros and cons of different categories of people being given responsibility (with appropriate levels of support) for conducting the consultation. The options considered were:

1. The management team itself
2. The drivers
3. Supervisors
4. An external contractor
5. A combination of the above

The management team's decided in favour of allowing the drivers to design and carry out their own consultation, and the analysis of the pros and cons is given below:

For	Against
+ High credibility with drivers + Acceptability to other drivers + Confidence in the process + Break with convention + Time less critical + Open, frank discussions possible + Drivers' own language	- Loss of control - Inconsistency - Who do we select? - Data one-sided - More peer group pressure - Not really collaborative

By contrast, the arguments for and against the task being assigned to an external contractor, as had been the case in the past, were seen as:

For	Against
<ul style="list-style-type: none">+ Done quicker+ Technical competence in survey management+ Likely to be impartial+ Comparison data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Top management credibility low- Low credibility with drivers- Preparation time- Understanding of the company, the activity, history- Costs- Lower company control- Would learn less- Contractors' analysis insufficient on its own- Unlikely in itself to improve relations with drivers

The management team decided that they would ask a specially selected project team of HGV drivers to design and run the consultation process. It was decided that a Supervisor and a Training Officer, who were trusted and respected by the drivers should also form part of the team. A further decision was made that the consultation exercise would involve all 400 drivers, and be completed within three months, and that the project team was to work on behalf of **all** the drivers.

Communicating with the drivers

The management team communicated its decision to the 400 HGV drivers as follows:

<p>WHY WE NEED TO CONSULT</p> <p>There have been many changes in the last few years and our distribution business is now recognised as a professional and efficient operation.</p>

However, we are all aware of areas of safety and operational performance that we must put right to maintain this reputation. It is also important for us to look ahead and see how we can build on our achievements.

We need to work together to understand the problems that are affecting safety and operational performance and drivers' job satisfaction, and to explore ways in which these can be overcome.

We want to work with you to explore how the role of the driver can be developed and to identify what changes we each need to make to increase the quality and security of the in-house operation.

The next phase was to recruit drivers to the project team and take them through the same series of exercises that the management team had been through in the workshop described above. In this way the project team could draw its own conclusions about the value of carrying out the consultation in the manner proposed.

Building the confidence and competence of the project team

When they first arrived at the initial workshop, the eight team members were visibly nervous. This was a new experience for them. They were unused to attending extended workshops in hotels. They did not really know what was expected of them and were fearful of being shown to be ignorant.

The workshop objectives were to:

1. Develop a shared understanding of what the workshop was trying to achieve.
2. Agree how best to carry out the project.
3. Jointly plan the whole project.
4. Get skilled up for the task ahead so that it could be approached with confidence.
5. Think through and plan for what happens next.

The first day of the workshop was entitled *Sharing our thinking* and followed a series of brainstorming sessions identical to those conducted at

the management team workshop. This enabled the project team members to clarify and share their own thinking and to commit to the process they had undertaken. They also participated in some practical team learning exercises which provided light relief but also insight into how they could function effectively as a project team. At the end of the first day they had come to realise that they were equal members of the project team, and began to feel excited about the prospect. They had started to overcome their fears that they might not be able to cope. They realised they had a crucial role to play, that the rest of the workshop was designed to equip them with the skills and understanding that was needed to carry out the task and that they would receive whatever support they required.

The second day of the workshop was entitled *Planning and Skilling up*. It focused on:

- Brainstorming the options available for gathering information
- Brainstorming and agreeing on the criteria for choosing between options
- Choosing the preferred approach and understanding how it works
- Identifying what they could hope to get from discussions with their fellow drivers and what should be done to prevent things going wrong
- Creating a framework for the group discussions and the one-to-one interviews to be conducted
- Practice sessions with a draft framework
- Feedback and reviews to revise the framework and create guidelines and standards
- Reflection on what had been achieved.

The third day was entitled *Consolidation and planning ahead* and focused on:

- Brainstorming and deciding how to ensure the project team obtained reliable and accurate information
- Syndicate work to agree quality standards for the output from each focus group
- Applying the quality standards in practice sessions with feedback
- Reviewing practical sessions and agreeing on guidelines and support material for focus group leaders
- Reviewing arrangements and logistics

- Planning ahead and preparing for the next workshop at which the collated data from the focus groups would be summarised (before checking back with the drivers)
- Reflecting on what the workshop had achieved.

Preparing for the consultation

A key output from the workshop was a mission statement that is shown below. Part of the importance of this mission statement was that it was created by the team itself, and not imposed upon it. The mission statement was sent to the 400 drivers as part of a briefing to encourage them all to cooperate with the team. The project team saw this as a real opportunity to communicate to management what drivers felt about a number of key issues that affected them and also their relations with the company. Initially the project team felt nervous about its ability to carry out the task in a professional manner, but nevertheless felt excited at the opportunity. They knew they needed to get it right or the chance might not come again.

THE PROJECT TEAM'S MISSION STATEMENT

- To honestly encourage people to talk to us in an open and relaxed manner about the everyday problems we face in delivering our products.
- To get the drivers to talk to us about such issues as:
 - i) Job satisfaction
 - ii) Safety
 - iii) Customer serviceand any other issues of concern to them.
- To gather ideas about how the drivers' jobs can be developed.

The project team planned to run 75 focus groups, each facilitated by two members of the team (always with at least one and often two of the driver members of the project acting as facilitators). The structure of the discussions, the actual wording of the questions, all the support material

(including hints and tips for running successful focus groups) and the quality checks were created by the project team itself.

The drivers in the project team decided (for themselves) the help and support they needed. They progressively built up a guidance manual of support material, including tools and checklists that ensured that the whole project ran smoothly and generated truthful findings that they could confidently present to management. The confidence of the project team grew.

The questions that the project team decided to put to their 400 colleagues are shown below. The guidance manual created by the project team included checklists on opening and closing the focus group discussions; the procedure for conducting the discussions, practical tips from their own experience; the procedure for checking and sending the information to a central point; quality assurance measures; hot-line support, contacts and materials needed.

THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THE PROJECT TEAM TO ALL OTHER 400 DRIVERS IN THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

1. As far as things are now what are your personal concerns about your job as a driver (or about your job in relation to drivers)?
What would you like to see changed or done differently?
2. What are your main concerns for the future?
What ideas do you have for doing things differently? Think about how the role can be developed.
3. What are the main issues with regard to customers?
What would you like to change?
4. What are your main concerns about safety?
What ideas do you have for improving safety?
5. What are your views about management and communications?
What changes would you like to see?

6. Do you have any other concerns or issues?

The consultation phase

The focus groups were run intensively over a six-week period. The data were summarised on to standard forms, lightly edited, subjected to the agreed quality checks, and collated into a dossier for each member of the project team. Once the data had been collated, the project team attended a three-day workshop during which they jointly analysed and interpreted it under the guidance of a facilitator. The team learned how to collate and summarise information and put it through the agreed quality checks. At all times it was emphasised that the members of the team were working as equals and that the output would be presented jointly.

Making sense of the findings

In this phase, the team members' role was to summarise the main findings, and then, and only then, to agree a joint view for the recommendations to be made to the management team.

The objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Examine and become familiar with all the findings
2. Identify trends and themes
3. Conduct preliminary analysis on the findings
4. Discuss the implications
5. Consider options
6. Make provisional recommendations for discussion.

The structure of the three-day workshop was as follows:

Day one

- Brainstorming the likely issues to emerge
- Group work to examine the data (working in pairs and small groups)
- Reviewing the issues emerging from the data
- Systematically examining the findings
- Brainstorming likely implications
- Reflecting on what had been achieved.

Days two and three

- Analysing the findings
- Agreeing conclusions (i.e. The main trends in the data under each of the main headings)
- Brainstorming the recommendations
- Agreeing the evaluation criteria and choosing the recommendations
- Preparing for the interim presentation of the findings to the management team.

Presenting the findings

The main findings were presented to senior management by the project team under five main headings, each which was backed up by actual quotes from the drivers:

1. Job/salary security
2. Time pressures and delays
3. Trust, honesty and openness
4. Retail markets
5. Safety.

The main conclusions were expressed in a concise and dignified way, quite unlike the cynical and sometimes hostile language of preceding years. For example, the conclusion on trust and openness was expressed in these words:

'Drivers want to be listened to and told the truth by managers who are skilled at dealing with people and have the time to do so.'

On retail markets the overall conclusion was:

'Problems associated with the customer service centre, delivery site performance by retailers and site developments are leading to distribution inefficiencies, safety and legal problems.'

Each conclusion was supported by a detailed list of actual problems and some vivid quotes. The management team was impressed with the quality and reasoned nature of the findings. An immediate positive

response was made and over the next 24 months many of the drivers' recommendations were implemented. Some were not, but reasons for this were clearly communicated to the drivers.

The consultation exercise, which the drivers designed and ran by themselves, showed that they could respond with maturity and a professionalism in which they took pride, to complex issues in which they had a vested interest. They demonstrated loyalty to the company, creative capacity, and an ability to grasp complex issues in a way for which they had not always been credited in the past. In many situations this had been obscured by adversarial mind-sets, and a tangle of "them-and-us" thinking and position-taking. The vast majority of the drivers felt that they had never been asked their opinions seriously before, other than through attitude questionnaires that they felt were being imposed upon them.

It was also a breakthrough for the management team. Empowered team learning powerfully demonstrated that by trusting and working with, rather than against, groups of employees' better results could be achieved than had been possible in the past. The outcome gave the team the confidence and the desire to work in a collaborative manner on other sensitive issues. The company had taken what it saw as a risk and it had paid off. Two years later the same team of drivers was given the task of running another survey on the driver population to assess the effects of the changes that had been made and to assess the current level of morale.