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CASE STUDY ON CREATIVE THINKING

INSPIRING LEADERS PROGRAMME 2013/14

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Aims and Objectives

The aim of this case study was to explore ideas to generate creative thinking within the Frontline Services Team with the objective of being able to identify how improvements could be made to existing processes to make them:

- More student focussed to improve the student experience
- Streamlined to reduce administrative time
- Paper light to reduce costs of producing and processing paper mountains

Literature

I reviewed literature relating to creative thinking. I was very interested in the concept of the six thinking hats (De Bono), but to be able to use this tool effectively would require a full understanding of the concept of the six hats and how/when to use each. As time is currently the enemy, I decided that use of lateral thinking would potentially produce quicker results.

I was struck by De Bono's view that "More and more creativity is coming to be valued as the essential ingredient in change and progress", as we are in a working environment where change is a constant therefore needing to adapt quickly to new challenges. De Bono suggests that lateral thinking skills (concerned with the breaking out of the 'concept prisons' of old ideas) need to be used complementarily with vertical thinking (reaching a conclusion by following a valid series of steps).

Sloane quotes Peter Drucker who said "Every organization has to prepare for the abandonment of everything it does." A good example of this is cited by Sloane *"in the early part of the 20th century all shops were places where the assistant served the customer. The customer would come to the counter and the assistant would fetch the items that the customer required. In the 1920s a man called Michael Cullen took a different view. He asked the question 'what would happen if we turned the shop around and let the customer help themselves to the goods they wanted and then they paid at the end?' – this idea has transformed not only our shops but our town layouts too – with the old fashioned main street full of small shops replaced by large self-service superstores."* This was a strong example of lateral leadership.

Sloane provided many examples of Lateral Thinking Puzzles. He also refers leaders to the use of 'The Magic Sentence to avoid crushing creativity of thought by finding fault with new ideas and proposes instead that when someone comes to you with a half-formed idea that you can see is riddled with faults that leaders should bite their tongues and say instead **"That sounds interesting. How can we make it work?"** This will assist in maintaining motivation and by discussing the idea constructively you are more likely to find a winning solution and the person who suggested the idea will feel motivated to improve on it and

encouraged to present more ideas in the future. Having many ideas is, in the view of Linus Pauling, “the best way to get a good idea [is to get a lot of ideas]”.

Robinson said “the role of a creative leader is not to have all the ideas; it is to create a culture where everyone can have ideas and feel that they are valued”.

Methodology

I created a powerpoint presentation to run over a 2 hour session with small sub-groups of my team (I have currently run this with 2 sub-groups). The powerpoint asked the following questions to identify the challenges.

- Identify our processes
- Does the current process meet the stakeholder needs, student/colleagues (business partners)
- Do we add value to the process
- Can we make the process work better?

The participants were then asked to take some time to review current processes that they were involved with as part of their normal workload. They were then asked to consider whether the existing process met the needs of all stakeholders and the extent to which they (or their team) added value to the process (several processes are reliant on other areas of BU, so in this instance we were focused on the aspects of the processes that we had some control over)

Next, I then took the participants through a series of lateral thinking puzzles, some relatively simple and some more complex and obscure – the objective of these puzzles was for team members to practice thinking creatively to come up with answers that were different.

Following the lateral thinking puzzles, participants were asked to re-visit the processes that had been identified earlier. Due to the complexities of the various processes, I decided in-session that we did not have time to review thoroughly all the processes identified and therefore asked each participant to highlight just one process that they believed should be improved and discuss ideas to best improve that process. Each participant in the first session went away with a specific process that they could action improvements for within a target deadline appropriate to the process.

For the second session, it was not possible to achieve the same outcome as the processes selected by the participants are ‘service owned’ in another area of the organisation. However it did identify some clear questions that could be fed back to the working groups responsible for implementation of policy around the two identified processes.

Examples of puzzles used:

Simple: How do you throw a ball as hard as you can and make it stop and return to you, without hitting anything and with nothing attached to it (answer: throw it upwards).

Complex: A large city in the USA had a problem with theft of light bulbs from its subway system. Thieves would unscrew the light bulbs, leading to cost and security issues. The engineer who was given this challenge could not alter the location of the light bulbs and had very little budget to work with, but he came up with a very lateral solution – what was it? (answer: the engineer changed the light bulbs to have left-hand or anti-clockwise threads instead of the conventional right-hand or clockwise threads. This meant that as thieves assumed they were trying to unscrew the bulbs they were actually tightening them instead).

Expectations

- **Identified Benefits**
 - Identification of processes and improvements
- **Team engagement**
 - First set of participants found the approach helpful in considering different ways of finding a solution to a particular problem. Did not work in the same way for the second set of participants as focus was largely focused on processes where they were impacted but not directly in control.
- **Unintended outcomes**
 - Gave participants an opportunity to express and share frustrations around processes that did not work effectively.
 - Identified questions that needed to be raised with other stakeholder groups to resolve specific issues.
- **Reflections/Lessons Learned**
 - The process trialled with the two groups worked best when narrowing down the processes to focus on finding a creative solution for improvement.
 - Best results were achieved when the process was 'owned' by the people considering how it could be improved
 - Improvements could be made to the sessions if the 'issue' or 'process' that needs to be considered is identified in advance and each session then focuses on a creative approach to finding a solution
 - It would be helpful to have a larger group of people involved in proposing creative solutions to overcome 'thinking blocks'
- **Measures of success**
 - Processes that have/will be improved as a result of the sessions
 - Team members are able to apply creative thinking processes to other potential problems or issues to achieve creative and effective results

Outcomes

The proposals for improvement for the International Student Support Team as a result of this exercise were:

1. *Creation of a Staff Guidance Documents to cover immigration information:*

Due to the complexities of immigration rules and guidance, and frustrations around relevant staff understanding their roles in helping BU meet compliance obligations, it was suggested that bespoke guidance documents would be a useful and appropriate tool in aiding staff understand the requirements:

- Immigration guidance documents aimed at Programmes Administrators and Research Administrators to understand their responsibilities in relation to immigration issues for international students under their remit
- How/when to refer students to specialist immigration support if required
- Links to helpful sites in absence of specialist availability

Progress update

- Programme Administrator Guidance Documents have been completed and disseminated
- Research Administrator Guidance Document has been created in draft format and is currently with the Graduate School for comment and should be finalised by end December 2014

2. *Simplification of the email communications to Tier 4 students when they have been reported to the Home Office*

The current system of email communications to students once they have been reported to the Home Office means that to cover all situations the information provided is lengthy and contains copious official wording, much of which is not relevant to each individual student.

- Reduce the core wording in each email template, to give students less information to absorb and to ensure the information provided is more relevant and personalised to the individual student's circumstances
- Move the lengthy current email guidance to individual sections on the student portal
- Personalise emails by including links to the relevant student portal sections according to the student's individual situation.

Progress update

- Emails have been reviewed and sections to be moved to student portal have been identified
- Meeting has taken place with the SSS Information Officer to discuss guidelines for transferring to student portal sections, and required format
- Deadline of December 2014 set for emails to be amended and student portal sections to be online

3. *New process to address management of the BUIC student visa processing within the 2 week window at start of September*

Due to the tight window of opportunity to process the BUIC student visas (BUIC students progressing to a BU course) to comply with Home Office Tier 4 Sponsor requirements, it

is not possible to process the visa applications with 1-2-1 advice for all students so a new approach is needed:

- Presentations and website information reviewed and renewed
- Implement visa application checking stations to review documents in groups
- Staff training pack created to include hyperlinks enabling easy updates

Progress update

- Training pack for askBU advisers about How to check visa application documents created.
- Training has been delivered and a training pack issued to support the training.
- askBU Advisers have commenced assistance with checking the BUIC student visa documents in the first 2 weeks of September, using the training pack provided.
- The training and hand out pack will be reviewed and revised following feedback from askBU Advisers to inform future group visa checking sessions

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