developing capability

John Varney of *Centre for Management Creativity* explains the nature of capability and why its development needs courage and leadership in project management.

If an organisation seeks growth, it is not just a matter of getting bigger by adding more of the same. It also needs to grow its capability*. But what is capability? Just as we might look in the store cupboard to see whether we have enough plates for the feast, we might look into the psychological store to see how well we are able to handle the group dynamics, the emotional crises that may befall us, and the success we envision.

Capability is not just capacity, even though capacity has a bearing on it. Capability emerges from a combination of Skill and Knowledge (technical or functional ability), Capacity (emotional ability to cope), and Intent (ability to commit - the will to do). This is another take on being 'ready, willing and able'. If any of these three is weak or absent, there will be a lack of capability and the battle may be lost.

Projects provide a microcosm for us to understand this and to learn to develop. The overt purpose of projects is to develop structures, systems and processes. However, we also need to develop the people, the relationships and the dynamism, not only so we can achieve our ends but also to add to the capability of the organisation.

Hence, in any project, the delivery of tangible results is not more important than the emotional and developmental aspects, because those aspects are developing the capability the organisation needs elsewhere. The purpose of projects should be to achieve both ends.

It is a common fallacy that we learn from experience. Learning only takes place if learning is our intention and we have learned *how* to learn from experience. Individuals connected emotionally as well as intellectually with vision and strategy, can do it for themselves. It is their intent that can produce magical results. In a control and command organisation intent is in the hands of top managers who then have the problem of driving or motivating people to do what is needed. In a flatter, empowered or self-organising entity, people are fully engaged and energy is not dissipated in managing or supervising.

SKILL (able)

Capability Cube

INTENT (willing)

CAPACITY (ready)
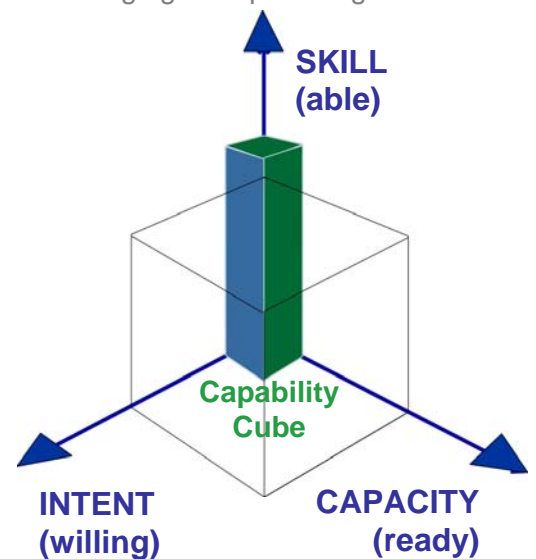
To bring about such a change of dynamic we need not tell people what to do and how to do it. Instead we can tell the story of our vision – live the story – bring the story to life for everyone – get them to tell the story their way. Engage people – ask them their views, educate them, tap their potential, involve them in projects and decision-making.

* Wikipedia:
Capacity is the ability to hold, receive, absorb. **Capability** is the sum of expertise and capacity

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

We are used to being efficient at delivering projects. We have the skills as well as the systems and processes to do so. Of course, we have our hands full with a day job, so projects put us under pressure. How then can we also attend to learning and development? Isn't that the job of HR or someone?

Well, that is a common, though fragmented, way of seeing things. In fact all work should be developmental but, too often in our modern world, this is overlooked. As managers we need to manage the practical progress of the project. At the same time, as leaders we need to coach and develop the project team. Not only that but also, as managers and leaders, we can aspire to model ideal attitudes and behaviour (that is our own personal challenge) and to measure ourselves against the very best. If we are not doing so we are holding back the organisation.

One thing is to design your interactions as learning processes. Include serious play and experiential learning; use different group dynamics, harness creative thinking by using methods such as LogoVisual Technology, stretch capacity and build relationships internally and across boundaries, engage all the people all of the time and devolve responsibility (it is a plentiful resource).while holding people accountable.

A key to development is always to review at the close of every interaction. Ask people how things are going. Elicit feedback. Respond constructively. Never react or judge yourself or others. Stay focused on the goal (both practical and developmental). Nurture aspiration.

Allocate time to ask the questions: Where are we compared with where we expected to be? What has actually happened? How is it for you? How are we getting along? What needs to change? Make sure you record the comments. Help people learn from the facts in a developmental context. Ask people what they will continue to do and what they intend to change about how they are working. Encourage, coach, support – and most of all be a role model of learning and positive response.

"If you want to build a ship don't drum up people to collect wood and assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea"
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Counter-productive is to not do this or to pretend you are in control, to make excuses, to lay blame, to 'explain' why things are not what they might be without agreeing to take responsibility.

If all this is difficult, remember it is meant to be so. You have all the rest of the team, and all the rest of the company, as resources to help you. Ask for help. If necessary find external counsel and support. Share your burdens. Share your learning too. Be not afraid to share your vulnerability with chosen colleagues. If we have a hard shell we will shut out learning. It is OK to fumble. Without admitting ignorance, new knowledge cannot come to you. Learn to learn – and help others to do so. This is the very stuff that increases capability.

John Varney helps organisations with strategy innovation and cultural change. As facilitator and coach, his challenge, empathy and support lift the aspirations of individuals and teams.

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