Integral Leadership Review

Volume X, No. 5
October 2010

Notes from the Field

'How AQAL Might Save Britain's Failing Managers'

A presentation given by Helen Davis to the London Integral Salon, Wednesday 6th October.

Nick Shannon

Britain's middle managers rarely seem to get a break. In 2003, the US Management Guru, Michael Porter, was invited by the UK government to report on the UK economic competitive position. Commenting on management, he wrote " Problems with managerial skills in the UK seem likely to be concentrated at the lower and middle management level, reflecting the overall skill deficit in the UK labor force". UK companies, it seemed, were slow to take up "modern management techniques". The Leitch Review (2006) reported that the UK's spending on leadership and management training was "less than any other country in Europe". While in 2007, a survey by management consultancy Hay Group concluded that underperforming middle managers were costing British business £220 billion a year in lost productivity. More recently, and somewhat disturbingly, British middle managers have also been reported as increasingly "turning to fraud" by the accountants PWC (2009). Social commentators (Gunn and Bell, 2002) highlight the rise and potential fall of the British middle class. They point to the increasingly competitive nature of middle-class life and the decrease in job security since Margaret Thatcher's opening up of the classic middle-class professions, such as university teaching, to market forces.

Clearly, British middle managers are under the cosh. So it was with keen interest that I attended Helen's talk last week on how AQAL might save them. Helen admits to having been a middle manager herself once upon a time, and not - she claims remarkably frankly - a particularly good one at that. Now, as principal lecturer and the course leader for the London Metropolitan University's Masters Degree in HR, she teaches working HR practitioners, many of them middle managers.

Her research focuses on the means by which middle managers are *selected.* Selection is, of course, only part of the story since the factors that contribute to middle management performance are numerous and might also include organizational culture and norms, learning and development processes, senior management capability, compensation practices, organizational structure and strategy, etc. However, it can be argued that selection is of principal importance, since if it is poor, organizational efforts to achieve good performance will be made all the harder. Helen notes that a robust selection process should consider not just the characteristics of the person (person-centered approach), but also the characteristics of the role (job-centered approach). She argues that the realization that job-centered approaches are problematic because gathering

information about the requirements of particular roles is time-consuming and difficult, has caused organizations to embrace competency models and frameworks as a selection tool. However, implicitly she questions the coverage of such models and the organizations ability to apply them effectively. She therefore chose firstly to analyze such competency frameworks by reference to the AQAL model to see which, if any, quadrants were missed or under-represented; and secondly, to survey organizations to find out what categories of criteria they actually used when selecting middle managers.

Methodology

The first part of Helen's research involved a review of the literature surrounding management competency models and frameworks in order to map specific competencies against the quadrants in the AQAL model. Such literature is complicated by the use of different forms of the word "competent" and Helen has a preference for the term "capability" which I will adopt henceforth. In the first instance, Helen found a clear distinction between three classes that she terms "input" "behaviour" and "outcome" capabilities. "Input" capabilities relate to characteristics that a manager holds, e.g. knowledge, skills, attitudes, and traits. "Behavior" capabilities relate to what a manager does with his/her knowledge, skills and other "input" capabilities, for example problem solving, or developing others. "Outcome" capabilities relate to the performance expected from a manager, e.g., specific standards and targets. Helen found that in relation to the AQAL model the upper left quadrant (UL) was strongly represented by input capabilities and the upper right (UR) by behavior and outcome capabilities. By comparison the lower left quadrant (LL) appeared to be significantly underrepresented. She takes this omission as failure for organizations to appreciate the significance of "context" in their selection process. Here, "context" for Helen refers principally to organizational culture and shared values. By implication, the selection of middle managers using typical models of capability is flawed in at least two ways. Firstly, selected managers may not share the organizations culture and values, and therefore be a poor fit. Secondly, those selected may know little about the management of organizational culture and values, and therefore make poor management decisions, for example concerning change.

The second part of Helen's research involved the design of a questionnaire seeking to assess the presence of capabilities from all 4 quadrants of the AQAL model as *criteria* when making middle management selection decisions, and its distribution to HR managers in a wide variety of organizations. In addition, Helen was keen to find out whether the criteria, and the process, for selecting managers were considered effective. In the relatively short questionnaire, Helen asked questions such as "When considering candidates for management positions do you:

a) consider their personality attributes or type?
b) consider their level of intellectual development?

Answer; Yes/No/Sometimes.

Helen noted that choosing the precise language for questions was difficult and, in one instance, led to some confusion about the quadrant intended. In this respect it is perhaps worth recognizing that at least some aspects of organizational life seem to fall into more than one AQAL quadrant. "Context" for instance can be considered from 1st, 2nd and 3rd person perspectives. Hence the value of the AQAL model is perhaps not so much in its ability to categorize, but in its ability to stimulate a comprehensive view of relevant job criteria.

Results

52 people from different organizations completed the questionnaire, a sample unfortunately too small to permit valid statistical analysis of differences. However, a glance at the data shows that UL and UR criteria in the form of job related technical ability and past performance and behaviors (respectively) were strongly endorsed as criteria in use. So too, albeit to a lesser extent, was "fit with the culture"—a criterion from the lower left quadrant, that had been under represented in the literature search. Amongst the least commonly found criteria were "Complementary team capabilities" (LR), "Understanding of organizational dynamics and systems" (LR) and "Understanding of cultural management" (LL) each of which about 50% of all respondents said they never used. Interestingly Helen cited two examples of very different organizations that claimed to use an all quadrant set of criteria, one from the gambling industry, the other, UNICEF. Somewhat disturbingly, less than half of the respondents thought that their organization's criteria for selecting middle managers was always effective. There also appeared to be relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with selection processes, highly reliant as it is on interviews.

Discussion

As with many instances of this type of research, one tends to learn more from the process of doing the research than from the results themselves, which are not, in themselves, that startling. I believe that Helen's principal finding has been to discover that competency models are not organised equally along AQAL principles. That is to say that they are skewed towards a specific perspective, usually UL or UR in my view. In trying to write questions that tap into the specific quadrants, Helen has also rightly noted that the characteristics commonly attributed to managers at work in organisations are not always clearly identifiable with a single quadrant. But the use of any model, AQAL included, is never infallible. Here, the remark that "the map is not the territory" (attributed to Alfred Korzybski) is relevant. Nevertheless people are forever in the business of trying to create better maps, and competency frameworks are one instance of this, while AQAL is another. Helen's suggestion that selection criteria would benefit by cross checking against the AQAL model makes good sense, but there are also practical considerations to be borne in mind, since a map is only as good as the ability of its reader to make sense of it. If, as Helen's research suggests, the management selection process itself is faulty, relying too heavily on interviewing, then altering the content of the interview to embrace broader selection criteria may have relatively little impact. It is also possible that, despite the claims of those responding to the questionnaire, in practice selection decisions ignore many of the criteria supposedly brought to play. Argyris' distinction between "espoused theories" and "theories in use" is relevant here. How can we be sure that Helen's questionnaire respondents are not simply espousing the selection criteria that they think should be in use?

More broadly, Helen's literature research suggested that there has been relatively little academic research into the use and efficacy of the AQAL model in organisations in the UK so far. Those present at the talk seemed to feel that AQAL is being used more widely than is academically recognised, and indeed, its use may well be spreading as business schools such as Helen's start to teach it. This article has focused on the use of AQAL quadrants, but there is plenty of mileage to be had in considering other aspects of the AQAL model, such as lines and levels, and how these apply to organisations. Another aspect that bears some consideration is the nature of the interactions between the quadrants, for example, how does personality (UL) impact on culture (LL) and vice-versa? And how do structure and systems (LR) shape behaviour (UR)? In thinking about selection procedures themselves, the application of AQAL might well produce some insights regarding why more rigorous analysis of the match between individuals and the demands of their roles does not take place. Helen suggests that the pace of change makes job context hard to pin down, as with organisational culture, but this feels like an excuse rather than a reason since many aspects of context and culture remain

relatively stable over quite long periods of time. Perhaps an alternative explanation might be that the HR industry, being notoriously obsessed with fads and having picked up the bug for "competencies" is currently reluctant to consider other options. Helen intends to follow up her findings with a qualitative study of practice in 10 organizations to find out more about which quadrants are favoured and which neglected, and why.

The question remains, however, what ails British middle management? Paradoxically perhaps, the UK's business schools are thriving and considered to be amongst the best in the world (London Business School currently heads international MBA rankings[1]). If the UK is able to attract the best business school teachers and students, why should it lag behind other countries at middle management level? Perhaps it is all just a matter of perception.

About the London Integral Circle:

The circle meets regularly usually on the first Wednesday of every month. For details see: http://www.integralstrategies.org/london.html

E-Group discussion and news can be found at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Londonintegralcircle/

References

Argyris, C and Schon, D (1974) "*Theory in Practice. Increasing professional effectiveness*" San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Gunn, S and Bell, R (2002), *"Middle Classes, their rise and sprawl*" London: Cassell

Leitch, S. (2006), *"Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills",* Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Porter, M. E. and Ketels, C. (2003), *"UK competitiveness: moving to the next stage"*, DTI Economics Paper 3 (May).

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2009), "Global Economic Crime Survey", http://pwc.com/crimesurvey

Walker, G (2007), "*Corporate soufflé – is the middle giving way?"* HayGroup report.

Note

1 Financial Times Survey: http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/global-mba-rankings

About the Author

Nick Shannon is the founder and principal of Management Psychology Limited, a UK based practice specializing in organizational and management development. Nick is a Chartered Psychologist, a member of the British Psychological Society and a founding member of the Association of Business Psychologists. After studying Psychology and Philosophy at Oxford University, Nick's career has involved working variously as a commodity and derivatives trader, a director of a foreign exchange business, and a restaurateur. Latterly a business consultant, Nick's goal in working with clients is to help them improve the quality of their management teams, which he believes leads to better organizational performance and more satisfied and engaged employees. Typical assignments involve the design and delivery of assessment, selection and development processes at three points of focus: individual leaders; senior management teams; and organization-wide.