

# 1980 Refreshing the parts other business schools cannot reach

Professor John Hunt got used to hearing a multitude of excuses from executives before they attended his management development programmes in the early 1980s. Before the course they were asked to fill in a survey about their performance and get at least five of their colleagues and direct reports to answer questions about them too. That data would then be analysed on the course and they'd be helped to form an action plan to deal with any issues. But to anyone new to the 360-degree feedback process it could be quite scary. Some people tried to cry off sick. Others said they hadn't had time to complete the survey.

Then there were the people who turned up but would dwell on any criticism. A coach had to stop such microanalysis and keep them focused on outcomes. "This had to be avoided if changes were to be implemented otherwise participants could divert attention from important organisational issues," says Hunt. "I'd just say to them: 'This is important data, are we going to sit here arguing about it or are we going to try to use it?'"

## Telling it straight

An Australian, Hunt knew that different nationalities handled personal feedback differently. He thought his own countrymen were admirably open but perhaps too confrontational: "It's not very helpful to tell a guy he's simply ineffective." The English and French found open feedback alien: "There was an idea that you wouldn't tell someone their meetings were boring even if it was written down in front of them." While the Dutch had a team culture that really let them take issues on.

And it was the Dutch brewing company, Heineken, that took up Hunt's work in the first major change management programme

run by London Business School. Heineken, which used the popular advertising slogan "Refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach", wanted to talk about the human issues in the company and Hunt proposed a system that would develop two action plans, one for the company and one for individuals' own development.

## A learning process

The programme ran for five years and hundreds of Heineken's senior and middle management went through it on one-week residential courses at various locations. They were put into groups of six to eight people to discuss issues that had come up in the feedback. The group dynamic helped to soften criticisms, and make it less about the individual and more about the company.

"The aim is to get them onto a learning curve where they can accept the data and move on to do something about it," says Hunt. Individuals were offered techniques that would help them to learn to behave in different ways and to broaden their skill portfolio. Six months later the process would be repeated to see what individuals had learned and what still needed action.

Hunt thinks the method achieved important outcomes. First, the managers were able to analyse reports of what respondents had written about them without any sense of retribution. Second, the data provided a picture of an entire organisation as opposed to an individual's view of himself or herself.

The School worked with other major companies such as Shell, Unilever and Glaxo and its Centre for Management Development filled a gap in the market for programmes tailor-made for individual companies.

## Starting at the top

Hunt was a pioneer of aspects of the 360-degree feedback system in the UK. He'd first seen it being used by IBM in Europe and America in the mid-1970s and could see the huge possibilities. "It lets you go into any organisation and extract data from which you can derive solutions," he says. But Hunt first had to persuade companies to let him in and he always demanded that board members took part in the process too: "I was inflexible on certain issues, I'd say if you won't do it at the top, I won't do it halfway down. I'm not going to work with you unless you're serious."

His approach worked. Professor Lynda Gratton, who Hunt recruited to London Business School's Organisational Behaviour department, says he was one of the few people who was able to work with boards, as these groups of very dynamic people often don't want to expose their weaknesses to outsiders. "John was seen as a trusted advisor," she says. "They trusted him and opened up about themselves and about their relationships with each other. I don't think they trusted many other people."

## Management is manipulation

Another Hunt recruit to the School, Emeritus Professor Rob Goffee, says Hunt was world-class at dealing with executives, but always focused on the data. "He always wanted his work to be informed by proper academic research," says Goffee. "Consultants write books and tell you their latest favourite theories, but John was always driven by disciplined thought about what the research shows."

Hunt also had to persuade academic colleagues that his version of behavioural



science was sustainable. Some thought it was sacrilege to reduce management practice to exercises. In one coaching exercise for example, an executive was made to put on a blindfold and go with someone to buy something from a shop. To Hunt this was a perfect example of the basic skills needed to get someone to do something and demonstrated his idea that “management is about social manipulation”. But to some colleagues from other disciplines it looked like playing games.

### **Authentic leaders**

At the time there was no doubting the need for change inside companies. As a young employee at Unilever in the 1960s, Hunt had himself been disappointed with the way decisions about things like recruitment and career development were taken. “I knew we had to do something,” he says. “We had to look at how people behave. And people had to look at their own behaviour and think how to improve their weaknesses.”

That quest for better management has carried on to the current day. Hunt knows there are still people who don't want to analyse their behaviour or anyone else's behaviour. There are also people who get feedback but don't act on it. And companies can be too impatient for results, not appreciating that it can take ten years to shift the way an organisation behaves. But overall he's happy with the progress that's been made. “People think about it now. They certainly did not in the 1970s or early 1980s.”

*John Hunt is Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School. He was appointed in 1980 and left the School in 1997.*