

## **Kessels & Smit, *The Learning Company***

### **Mix Fix M-Prize summary – update, February 2011**

This update summarises our story and focuses on two key principles that shape our work. We also give an illustrations of how other organisations we have worked with have adopted our principles – something we hope others can learn from too.

#### **Overview**

Our entry is not about processes or procedures. Rather, it is about the human aspects that emerge when openness and individual responsibility are made central to an organisation. This leads to powerful results, but it is not a utopia without difficulties. We know this from our story and we know it from sources such as Gary Hamel's insight in to W.L Gore in *The Future of Management*.

So - It is difficult to manage without management! But it reaps rewards and it's something we have worked hard at Kessels & Smit to develop. We are proud to work this way ourselves, and to take this approach to the wider world to help others build great organisations too.

#### **Where things started – a quick recap**

The purpose and idea behind our company was to create a laboratory in which to develop practices, concepts and approaches for new ways of learning and organising that help individuals, groups and organisations become the best they can be.

Central to our idea was that learning is at the heart of work: we live in a knowledge economy in which value is created through the development and application of knowledge - through the talent of people. This kind of value creation is essentially a learning process in itself: you cannot be productive today without learning. So: work becomes a primary source of learning and work and learning become inseparable.

#### **Our drive and purpose**

What drove us at the beginning was the question: *how to organise for this?* How do we create an attractive, successful and sustainable organisation: a good place to work, a fun place to work, a productive place to work, a *real* learning place? Our own organisation, in which we continuously experiment with answers to these questions, needed to become a platform and source from which we contribute to others and to the world. Kessels & Smit's purpose is to create the best possible learning environment for us to develop our the talents, knowledge and *experiences so that we can help others do the same*.

#### **Two Key principles**

When we started, we asked ourselves what are the key principles for developing an organization in which people are good learning companions for each other – and this stood equally for fellow professionals outside our own organization and for clients.

This has developed into two core principles at the heart of our work:

### 1) Personal entrepreneurship

- People own the most important means of production: their talents, learning capability and knowledge. No one else can own these, no organization can be owner of it. People are free, entrepreneurs of their talents by definition. They can be more or less active, more or less aware, more or less good with these talents and awareness of these talents. It's in everyone's interest to start from this personal ownership and entrepreneurship as a given and organize to develop and maximize it.
- Obedience leads to mediocrity, for excellence/innovation/inspiration you need to build on personal passion and strengths. People can not be smart against their will.
- Matching freedom and responsibility: treating people as autonomous professionals also means that they need to take responsibility: freedom to choose with matching responsibility for consequences of this choice.
- This means people can choose their own work, are 'boss' of their own time, and choose their own fees.
- Work that doesn't provide learning is a waste of time, no matter how much it pays.
- This has helped to develop a practical rule linked to entrepreneurship: to continuously develop yourself you spend 1/3 of your work on issues that you are good at (a base for self confidence and for trust with clients), a 1/3 on things you are becoming better at (continuous improvement) and 1/3r on new things that you want to explore for the future (innovation)

### 2 Reciprocal appeal

- A strong whole is built on strong connections between individuals, who work together based on reciprocity. Reciprocity is more than exchange, it is more than mutual dependency, it is co-creating something exciting and special that no one is able to do on his own- this becomes more fully enriching.
- Working together is based on individual choices ("I want to work with you"). An enlightened self interest is fertile ground to really create a common good and a strong whole. Starting from a common good leaves us with general good things, agreed to by everyone, owned by no one. Once the individual drive is out, the whole become empty and powerless.

These are the two principles behind our work. They shape everything that is illustrated in detail in our entry. It is how initiatives are started, how new companies within the company are developed – even how this article was written. It means when we do things, we do it with a lot of heart behind it... and we do it with people we really want to work with.

Over the years, these principles have proven their value, and we have come to understand what these mean deeper and deeper, by experimenting: asking us in every situation 'what do this principles mean for this situation? how can these guide our action?'

The question for others of course is – can others do the same?

#### **One example of how we use some of our learnings for other organisations: supermarket project**

As per our introduction, we set out initially to understand more of this way of working not only for ourselves, but so that others could benefit too. Here we show one example of how other organisations have adopted what we do, with our help – starting with learning that we developed through our way of working.

Some people say: to be a good consultant your hair should become grey. In K&S some years ago the average age of the consultants was growing. But, in contrary to the saying, our feeling was that in our company it would be better to have more young people. So we decided to 'hire' five young consultants – all at the same time - to make a better balanced group. Unfortunately it didn't work out very well at first. The young people grouped together and didn't 'gel' with the older consultants. Something like a generation conflict! Reflecting on this we realised this wasn't the way to work with young people. Our reflection showed that the young people thought they should first learn the knowledge and skills the 'seniors' already had before they could become masters themselves. The older people had the same mindset: "I know how to do this profession, so if you are new, just watch me so you learn how to do it". After this conclusion we changed our way of working drastically. Our younger consultants evaluated their skills and passions and went looking for projects in which they could build with these talents. The senior consultants helped them in finding clients, but left the development of the assignments in the hands of the young consultant. Both groups felt better respected, we worked better together and even developed new kinds of consultancy work – the company started to build!

And then...

A supermarket chain experienced the same problem: older and younger workers didn't go well together. The senior people thought you should be dedicated to your work, while the younger ones liked to talk to each other and when possible make jokes. So the question came to K&S: can you help us to develop us a dedicated work culture for the young workers in the supermarket. A K&S senior consultant went there with two youngsters. It seemed immediately clear what to do with this problem. Not a training or 'coaching by the experienced workers' program for the new people, but an interactive project in which the reciprocity between the two generations was strengthened. A programme was set up in which the pairs were made with a junior, a senior and a consultant to explore a research question: where and how can we make our supermarket better for the client?. Every idea was welcome. The result: a significant shift in innovation, greater awareness of customer need and a new found respect between the workers no matter their age!