

## International Practice Development Journal

Online journal of FoNS in association with the IPDC (ISSN 2046-9292)



### A technician's journey through practice development to enlightenment

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Submitted for publication: 21st December 2012

Accepted for publication: 5th February 2013

#### **Abstract**

*Context/background:* Though I am not in a formal leadership position, my quest to learn and grow has taken me on a personal journey of discovery as I undertook a leadership course based on practice development principles to influence a technical environment – biomedical engineering – within a hospital.

*Aim:* To explore my journey, sharing my experiences as a biomedical technician exposed to practice development and demonstrate how I recognised changes in my behaviour and values, and how these provided the stimulus for influencing my colleagues.

*Conclusions and implications for practice:* The role of coaching has been instrumental as the catalyst for supporting me in change. The regular platform of support and guidance provided direction when the view ahead was unclear. Writing reflections provided clarity and enabled insight, leading to action. The resultant increase in confidence and a clearer vision of the future for the department allowed me to implement processes to promote change within my team.

- Practice development principles and processes can be effectively used in a technical environment like biomedical engineering
- Engaging people who have no knowledge or exposure to practice development can result in meaningful change
- An individual who is not in a formal leadership position can still influence the team in which he or she works

**Keywords:** Coaching, reflection, emotional intelligence, practice development, light bulb moments, role modelling

#### **The journey begins**

Resembling an intrepid adventurer facing the unknown I set off on my journey into practice development in March 2009, when I joined a hospital based clinical leadership programme, which offered me the opportunity to 'improve my leadership skills'. The programme (Clinical Excellence Commission, 2008) is an initiative across New South Wales that supports the development of leadership knowledge, skills and attributes in healthcare professionals in order to improve patient care and staff morale. The programme aims to develop leaders who, through critical reflection, enable practice change in healthcare teams. In role modelling effective leadership, participants foster interpersonal relationships, a culture of learning and person-centred care. Though I am not in a formal leadership position, exposure to practice development and coaching has supported me in engaging the team in meaningful change that has transformed our workplace culture.

I am going to use the metaphor of a road trip to explain my journey because for me it has felt, and still feels, like a long journey. On this journey I developed as a leader and there were landmarks along the way, which I view as towns on a map to construct the story of my road trip: *coaching, reflection, light bulb moments, fuel for the journey* and *trusting the process*. These landmarks highlight how I saw *the changing landscape*.

### **Coaching**

One of the requirements of the clinical leadership programme was participation in solution-focused coaching sessions, as defined by Greene and Grant (2003). Initially, I approached coaching with apprehension due to a lack of knowledge and understanding, and a fear of the unknown – but it has played a major role in my transformation and journey. One of the first decisions you make when going on a road trip is the route you will take, so for the purpose of my story I am going to refer to coaching as the satellite navigation (sat-nav) I used for the trip. It gave me direction as well as regular updates of my location; where I had been and where I was going.

I remember my first coaching session as if it was yesterday. I thought: ‘Great – the coach is going to tell me how to get everyone to change so they will do what I want!’ How wrong was I? The coach wanted *me* to find the answers! Unbelievable! My coach didn’t tell me anything; she just kept asking me questions.

- How?
- Why?
- What?
- Who?
- When?
- If that was working well, how would it look?

I was very disappointed. After that first session there were so many things going round in my head that I didn’t sleep for two nights.

The next session was no better. I had to talk about me and how I felt. I had not done that before: my voice quivered, my hands shook, I was a mess. I guess it was similar to how I might feel setting off on a road trip not knowing where I was going or what hazards to expect along the way.

When you first get a sat-nav there is a lack of trust; you are really checking whether it works. This was very much my experience with coaching – I needed to test it out and check that I could trust it. As the journey continued, like learning to trust a sat-nav, my relationship and faith in (reliance on) coaching grew. So I have continued with coaching much in the way you keep using your sat-nav. There are always new roads to travel and places to discover, and coaching took me down some unexpected roads by pushing me harder than I was willing to push myself. Challenges lay ahead and I wanted to overcome them. Coaching has provided me with the support and trust I need to meet those challenges.

### **Reflection**

After the first couple of sessions I realised I needed to start writing detailed notes – a significant feature of my sat-nav. The session would always start with ‘What would you like to discuss today?’ As my memory isn’t that great I thought I would forget what to discuss and, more importantly, forget to discuss what changes had occurred since the last session. To my amazement, I would start writing notes (I didn’t know they were called reflections at that time) thinking this would be done in ten minutes but found it was taking much longer. As I wrote things down I was able to make more sense of what was happening and I wrote that down as well. This helped me process things more clearly and, to my astonishment, resolve issues that in the past would have been spinning in my head for days. So instead of a few sleepless nights mulling over what was discussed, I found once I had written the reflection, I had freed up space in my brain and was able to sleep much easier. This process of reflection I was using

correlates with Mezirow's description of 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 2000). My reflections were helping me develop an understanding of myself and my leadership. In the next section I explain key aspects of this; these are like photos and a diary of my trip.

### **Light bulb moments**

This is a long journey and along the way I have found several places where I wanted to spend a little more time, chill out and enjoy the surroundings. These are my light bulb moments. On rounding a bend I have seen an oasis in the distance – not quite there but knowing I will get there soon.

### **Who will change?**

I reached one such oasis (light bulb moment) in mid-2009 when I worked out that 'it's me that needs to change!' This is a similar process to that described by Mezirow as perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978). This really hit home. You can read or be told something hundreds of times but until you are ready and willing to accept it, it does not become reality. The first stage of change!

Looking back, it seems to have taken an eternity for this to sink in. I had convinced myself of how much better my working environment would be if others made the changes that they so clearly needed to make. It was much easier for me to believe that others needed to change, but why would they? They were happy as they were. Accepting that I needed to change was very confronting. I didn't want to change – I was happy as I was. But if I didn't expect that I would have to learn, grow and change, why was I doing the leadership programme? This light bulb moment happened several times because each time I would try to convince myself I didn't need to change. In the end my sat-nav of coaching and reflecting led me to the truth. This light bulb experience is what Covey describes as the change process (Covey, 2008).

One of the realities that helped me accept this was that I had been told I was a good listener and I believed I was. However, during one coaching session the possibility was raised that maybe I was just being a sponge for others to offload their frustrations and get their feelings off their chest. I was asked what I did with this information and I realised that the answer was 'nothing really'. 'Well, is that fair?' I was asked. Those who had offloaded felt much better while I had all these negative thoughts going round in my head. On reflection I realised I had enough of my own frustrations to deal with, without storing someone else's. Nothing actually changed for either of us by me listening to them offload.

Stopping people from telling me their issues was a big change for me. I was worried about the impact on my relationship with colleagues. Did they want advice or just to get things off their chest? If they just wanted to offload or moan I explained that I was busy, and asked if there was anyone else who could help them. I was surprised when, fairly quickly, my colleagues stopped coming to me to moan and instead came to talk with me when they wanted help or advice about how to solve an issue.

I named my old way of taking on others' frustrations as 'being the sponge', akin to collecting useless souvenirs. They might feel right at the time but they are totally useless in helping me along the journey.

### **Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence**

Another oasis was being introduced to Steven Covey's Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence (Covey, 1992). In coaching we discussed that if we focus our energy directly on things we have influence over our circle of concern will decrease and our influence will grow. There was a flicker of light; I wouldn't say it was a light bulb moment but a dim glimmer that grew into headlights on full-beam over the following days. I split things into two groups: those I could have some influence over and those I couldn't. I then used my coaching sessions to help me identify how I could work on the things I could influence.

On my journey I see my circle of concern, (like wanting others to change) as the excess luggage you take with you but never use. It just takes up valuable space. It takes a lot of inner strength to throw out

this luggage. When I managed to dispose of it, I wasn't wasting energy and fuel on stuff I didn't require, resulting in lower costs and the ability to drive faster.

### **Fuel for the journey**

I required fuel not only for my vehicle but for myself, I needed to eat and drink, so there are a few items on the menu that provided me with sustenance to keep going.

### **Small steps**

Changes can be minuscule and occur over a long period; the most important fact is that change is taking place. I am impatient and wanted changes to take effect immediately and was keen to influence my colleagues with changes that I wanted. I soon learned that I was going to have to be patient. Everybody works at their own pace and accordingly accepts change at their own pace. I learned that bringing about change requires you to accept that it will be a transition, taking small steps in the right direction with a few wrong turns along the way.

### **Celebrate wins**

Each of these small steps needs to be celebrated. I must admit I struggled to accept that you need to celebrate small steps, as I was so focused on my final destination. Once I stopped being stubborn, I realised each small step was a win that needed to be recognised and the best way to do this was to celebrate. I compare this to having a beer when settled at a campsite for the night; the joy of knowing how far you have come and what you have achieved that day.

### **Positive reinforcement**

The most nutritious and sustaining food has been the regular positive reinforcement I have received. Coaching and my reflections have helped me see my progress, as has receiving feedback from my colleagues and manager. All of this has contributed to my growth and learning. There have been obstacles along the way, times when I thought, 'I don't really want to do this' but receiving feedback and reassurance of just how far I had come helped me grow in confidence. Experiencing this feedback ensured that I was then able to do this for others. I provide regular positive feedback to encourage others to learn and grow. It is highly satisfying when I see how other people have changed and grown because of a few regular positive comments I have made. We all need refuelling every now and then.

### **The changing landscape**

As my journey continued not only did I change but so did the landscape. I have grown more confident and feel more at ease in my surroundings. Other people have noticed these differences and they have changed as well, so the environment (or landscape) in which I work has also changed.

### **Approaching meetings**

The biggest change is how I approach and behave in meetings. In the past I would go in with a clear plan of what I was going to say, anticipating the response from the other person and planning my own response to that. Of course, it never went to plan. I often saw meetings, particularly one-on-one meetings, as a battle I needed to win. I noticed that when I approached a meeting feeling frustrated, the other person would get defensive and then let off steam and get all their frustrations off their chest. This resulted in me leaving feeling nothing had been achieved, while the other person often felt much better as they had shared their frustrations. Through the clinical leadership programme and coaching, I realised if you approach a meeting with the attitude of going into battle that is exactly what is going to happen. The view of the landscape through my windscreen has changed. When I now approach or conduct a meeting I first make sure that I am clear about the purpose of the meeting, then check that everyone else understands it.

### **Role-modelling**

Until I undertook the programme I had never considered myself a role model. But I realised that

whether we like it or not we are all role models, and can role-model either positive or negative behaviours. I have seen this happen in practice by changing my own behaviour, suggesting that we made decisions in a different way – what Goleman refers to as leading with emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2003). It became obvious that we all wanted to be engaged, take ownership and make decisions. Even though people were hesitant at first, when they saw things working, they adopted them. An example was the setting up of a meeting where staff could raise for discussion an existing process within our department. Attendance was entirely voluntary and the group made decisions, which were relayed to the rest of the department at the next staff meeting. Giving opportunities for biomedical staff to make decisions has seen their attitudes and behaviours change, and being part of decision making is now accepted as the norm.

I compare the skills learned on this part of the journey to having a spare tyre and toolkit ready in case of a breakdown; things might not always go my way and it might slow me down but I have the confidence that a repair can be made and I will be soon back on the road.

### Trusting the process

A successful road trip needs a reliable vehicle and, most significantly, trust has been the vehicle for my journey, see Box 1.

#### Box 1: The importance of trust

- During coaching sessions my hands would shake
- I was asked: when does this happen and why?
- I realised it generally happened when sharing my opinion or talking about myself, either in a meeting or even on the phone
- Could I perhaps control this by imagining a switch such as an on/off button on a machine?
- Next time I experienced these shakes I was asked to imagine turning off the switch!
- I was so sceptical: oh yes, sure that is going to work, I thought
- Then I remembered ‘trust the process’ – this has been my mantra for my whole journey
- What had I got to lose? Even if it reduces the shakes slightly, I win
- So the next time I felt myself with the shakes I thought of the imaginary switch and my focus became the off switch and not ‘oh no, I have got the shakes again’
- It helped!
- I still get the shakes but thinking of the off switch has given me some control over something where I believed I had no control

### Key learning

In summary, the things I have learned on my journey are:

- That I have trusted everything, primarily the sat-nav – *the coaching*
- I have taken the photos and kept a diary – *written reflections*
- I have stopped at some great places along the way – *light bulb moments*
- I have removed my unwanted luggage – *Circle of Concern and Circle of Influence, focus on my own behaviour*
- I used my spare tyre and tool kit – *role-modelling, stakeholder engagement, giving ownership*
- I relied on my fuel – *the feedback, celebrating the small wins, positive reinforcement*

### Feelings

I now feel more in control of me and confident that I can overcome the challenges that will crop up as I progress. It feels good to affirm who I am and who I am becoming, as if on this road trip I get up every day wondering what adventures lie ahead; some days will be much the same but some will throw up

a surprise. I have left behind the mundane city life and head towards the horizon knowing there is no end to this journey and the distance to the horizon will always be relative, but I am more calm now and can look back and see where I have been and recount the adventures I have had so far, with the knowledge there will be many more.

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Helen O'Grady, Senior Analyst, Paediatric Health Care Team, NSW Kids & Families; the Nursing Research and Practice Development Unit at Westmead and the Biomedical Engineering Department at the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network.

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