

Change through Learning and Learning through Change at Kinark

A VISION Management Services Perspective by Ruth Armstrong and Sandi Trillo

In 2006, in response to a changing and challenging external environment Kinark Child and Family Services (Kinark), a \$65 million children's mental health organization¹, embarked on a massive clinical transformation² process. Peter Moore, Kinark's visionary executive director (ED), recognized that evidence-based management practices and a consistent management philosophy would help ensure the success of this initiative. This article tells the story of how Kinark implemented a year-long customized Management Development Program in parallel with their clinical transformation process engaging the management team in learning from the change process. VISION Management Services (VMS), the authors of this article, worked with Kinark to design and deliver the program.

The article outlines **key design elements** from the Management Development Program which might be of interest to others implementing in-house management development. It also describes some of the **results** Kinark achieved by implementing the program. It concludes by illustrating some of the **learning strategies** any

organization can use to foster a culture of learning.

For today's organizations, change is constant, and learning is critical. While many organizations recognize these realities, few have focused on this nexus. Kinark's Management Development Program was designed to amplify the mutually reinforcing aspects of change and learning. The program was intentionally designed to help Kinark's management team 'learn through change and change through learning'.

The ten-session program provided a learning environment in which groups of managers could reflect on and make sense of change; and learn and apply new theories and tools to management challenges. By investing in the development of a customized program for its ~100 managers, Kinark learned from the changes happening in the organization while evolving change processes and expanding the management team's capacity to respond to challenges.

We, and Kinark, were interested in understanding what results this investment in learning delivered. A post-program survey and individual interviews suggest the organization's management team has become more cohesive and developed a more consistent approach to management. Results of a 'Task Cycle Competency'³ assessment indicate that Kinark's managers have increased their competency

¹ Kinark Child and Family Services (Kinark) is a children's mental health organization that provides help to children and youth, families and communities. In 2010 the organization's 1000 employees and volunteers served 11,000 clients across 14 locations in Ontario. Kinark views transformational leadership as a critical enabler of its work for the mental well-being of children and youth. www.kinark.on.ca

² Clinical transformation was based on Dean Fixsen's model of implementing evidence-based practices.

³ A research-based instrument that rates managers on a number of competencies.

in a number of areas including: risk-taking and innovation; managing conflict; coaching; and providing feedback. In addition, while in the midst of a significant transformation process, managers reported that the level of overall tension in the organization has lessened. Most managers agree Kinark's management culture has shifted and the organization reflects many characteristics of a learning organization.

Management Development as a Journey

Kinark recognized from the start that developing management skills requires a significant commitment to organizational learning. There are many dimensions to management, and developing the corresponding range of skills is an evolving process that takes time and effort. We began thinking of the program as a journey.

The destination was identified at the outset. Objectives included: developing a cohesive cross-agency management team aligned with Kinark's strategic directions; enhancing capacity to manage in and adapt to complex situations; developing a culture of inquiry; embedding continuous learning and high performance; and creating the conditions to support the agency's Clinical Transformation Project.

The program was co-managed by Kinark and VMS. Kinark's 'Clinical Transformation Team' acted as a Steering Committee. The group's role included providing input on program design; maintaining connectedness and alignment between the two initiatives; and addressing issues related to evaluation and sustainability.

A comprehensive learning needs assessment was conducted in late 2006 (information was gathered via surveys, focus groups and interviews); this information was combined with the results of a recently completed Task Cycle Competency survey which rates managers on key management competencies. The needs assessment informed program topics. Kinark identified two high-level objectives for the program:

1. All managers will acquire the skills, knowledge and abilities to be change agents and leaders
2. Senior managers will have developed and enhanced defined competencies at an advanced leadership level that enables them to:
 - Lead and support Kinark managers
 - Set the model for community partnership.

The program was designed to promote: reflection and learning; skill development and mastery; peer support and teamwork; and innovation and creativity. Key program topics were mapped out over ten sessions (see next page). Four advanced leadership sessions were designed for the Senior Leadership Team.

Kinark's Management Development Journey

All Managers as Change Agents & Leaders

1. Management Development – A Journey



Managing Self

2. Understanding Self and Self in Relation to Others

Managing Individuals & Teams

3. Communication & Coaching
4. Supervision
5. Teambuilding
6. Conflict Resolution, Problem-solving & Decision-making

Strategic Leadership: Organization & Community

7. Strategic/Creative Thinking and Planning
8. Community Relations and Connections – ambassadorial and negotiation functions
9. Accountability and Alignment
10. Sustainability and Celebration



Advanced Leadership Sessions for Senior Managers

1. Mastery of Self
2. Leading and Managing Managers
3. Organizational Leadership
4. Community Partnership

Program Features: *these program 'features' informed the design of each session. Sessions were designed just prior to delivery to keep the content current and build on the insights and questions that arose during previous sessions.*

- ✓ **Dialogue and reflection:** were used as primary learning vehicles
- ✓ **A strength-based approach:** celebrated and reinforced individual assets
- ✓ **Adult learning approaches:** were applied throughout
- ✓ **A variety of learning techniques:** accommodated diverse learning styles and balanced theory with practice
- ✓ **Real issues/actual situations:** enhanced the learning experience and ensured learning was grounded in Kinark's realities and context
- ✓ **Learning reinforcement/support:** articles and books were referenced for each session
- ✓ **Cross-fertilization of ideas:** was encouraged during and between sessions
- ✓ **Patterns, issues and disconnects:** were identified in sessions for the Senior Leadership Team to reflect on and address in their four strategic leadership sessions
- ✓ **Ongoing evaluation:** was an integral part of making the program a success

Key Design Elements

This section outlines key design elements. These elements increased managers' engagement in the program; made learning relevant; and facilitated the transfer of learning from sessions to the workplace. They were selected based on feedback from participants and our reflections throughout the program.

Reflection and Dialogue

Managers valued the opportunity to connect, reflect, and engage in dialogue on real work challenges in a safe environment. They shared experiences and provided mutual support and advice in small and large group formats. Managers were encouraged to continue the conversations in other settings. *93% of managers surveyed rated the incorporation of real work issues as 'useful' or 'very useful'. 88% of managers surveyed indicated they 'sometimes' or 'often' discussed related issues and questions with colleagues. Since completing the program 79% of managers indicated they have continued to discuss issues with colleagues.*

"Development programs come in to help managers make meaning of their experience by reflecting on it personally and with their colleagues... Intrinsic in this development should be the carrying of the learning back to the workplace for impact on the organization."
Henry Mintzberg - Managing

Session Groupings

Each session was offered four times monthly to accommodate managers' schedules. This resulted in a different mix of managers at each session. Consequently, over the course of the program, managers had an opportunity to connect and learn with senior leadership team members and colleagues from different regions. The varied composition of the monthly sessions kept the discussion fresh and resulted in

different group dynamics. One manager noted that the collective learning experience "was at least as important as the content". A sense of being a leadership 'group', within a dispersed organization emerged. *85% of managers surveyed rated learning with managers from different Kinark departments/programs as useful or very useful.*

***In Leadership Development Training Transfer: A Case Study of Post-Training Determinants** Yabome Gilpin-Jackson and Gervase Bushe found that "...having one's boss take the same training was strongly associated with post-training utilization."*

DiSC®

The widely used DiSC® Personal Profile tool was selected to assist individual managers in better understanding their own and others' personal styles (e.g. strengths and weakness related to working, learning, and communicating). This tool introduced in Session 2 remained a touchstone throughout. In addition to helping managers increase their self-awareness, DiSC® helped them identify and amplify the diversity of skills and styles that exist within Kinark. DiSC® provided managers with a common language and approach for recognizing and responding to others' styles, and valuing diversity. *89% of managers surveyed rated the DiSC® tool as 'useful' or 'very useful'.*

"Organizational effectiveness is [] increasingly dependent on valid communication across subcultural boundaries. Integration across subcultures (the essential coordination problem) will increasingly hinge on the ability to develop an overarching common language and mental model. Any form of organizational learning, therefore, will require the evolution of shared mental models that cut across the subcultures of the organization." - Edgar H. Schein, On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

This approach, process and mindset asks individuals and groups to focus on what really works in order to amplify strengths and draw on resulting positive energy. Prior to the start of the Management Development Program, Kinark introduced AI as a preferred orientation to its work. To support this parallel culture shift the five-step AI process was regularly referenced and embedded into applications throughout the Management Development Program. Managers found the reinforcement and opportunities to apply AI approaches in a low-risk environment helpful in shifting their mindsets. *One manager noted during an interview that “the AI language and framework have helped reframe the way I talk to and manage my staff – using a positive approach”.*

“AI is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them... AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential... The discovery, dream, design and destiny model links the energy of the positive core to changes never thought possible.” - Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, Appreciative Inquiry Handbook.

Toolkits and Recommended Readings

Recommended readings were distributed in advance of each session along with the agenda. A toolkit of electronic resources and a slide deck were handed out at each session. Managers had an opportunity to apply some of the tools during sessions, while others were provided as additional resources. Between sessions managers were encouraged to share and apply the tools and activities with their teams, and to continue reflecting by using assessment tools. In the survey managers indicated they valued the practicality and

‘shareability’ of the toolkit resources: 84% of managers surveyed rated toolkit resources as ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ while 76% of managers ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ read recommended articles. 82% of managers surveyed ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ reviewed and/or used toolkit resources during the program while the same number ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ shared resources with their team. Since completing the program 64% of managers indicated they have referred back to these materials.

Application and Sustainability

As noted above, the application of learning was encouraged throughout the program to strengthen a culture of continuous learning. The program concluded with an ‘All Managers Meeting’ that celebrated growth and change. Managers shared reflections on the journey and memorable moments, while the Senior Leadership Team reinforced the notion of Kinark becoming a ‘learning organization’ (see inset on page 7). A variety of strategies for sustaining a culture of learning were discussed. 92% of managers surveyed indicated they ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ applied concepts from the sessions in their work during the program. 55% of managers surveyed have continued to share materials with colleagues or team members since the program ended.

In the interest of sustaining the learning and orienting new managers to Kinark’s management approach, three series of six abbreviated 3.5-hour sessions⁴ (the original sessions were 6 hours) were delivered in 2008 and 2009.

⁴ 86% of participants from both the longer and shorter sessions rated the session length as about right. 89% indicated that the monthly frequency was “about right”.

Findings

We and Kinark were interested in assessing the program's impact on individuals and the organizational culture. We appreciate the difficulty in assessing the extent to which any changes at Kinark can be attributed directly to the Management Development Program. Nonetheless, two processes were undertaken to assess results. Kinark repeated its Task Cycle Competency survey in 2009 after the completion of the program. Then in early 2011, VMS conducted an online survey of all participants and interviewed ten individuals. We asked managers about their experience in the program and in applying the learnings, and about whether they recognized any shifts in Kinark's culture related to management and learning.

Task-Cycle Competency Report

A composite report of the Task Cycle Competency (TCC) from 2009 (one year after the completion of the program) indicates some significant positive shifts in a number of managerial skills compared to the 2004 assessment⁵. When interpreting these shifts we considered the turnover and growth in Kinark's management team. Another variation concerned a slightly redefined set of TCC skills between the 2004 and 2009 instruments.

The TCC tool provides a 360 degree assessment of skills from the perspective of self, managers, peers, reports and others. TCC is informed by the research-based concept that "effective leadership is a mix of personal attributes and management skills, enabling leaders to bring positive

change to the organization and the people with whom they work." It explicitly acknowledges that these management skills can be learned.

The most significant positive changes between 2004 and 2009 were found in four skill categories: innovation and risk-taking; planning and collaboration; managing conflict; and coaching. Ratings in these categories moved from an average (40-50 centile) to a high average (60-70 centile) score. Collectively these shifts contributed to an overall reduction of tension throughout the organization.

The fact that Kinark uses an evidence-based tool to assess competencies attests to the organization's interest and investment in evaluation, benchmarking and strengthening managerial competencies.

Impact on Kinark's culture

The surveys and interviews conducted in 2009 shed some light on the impact the program had on Kinark's culture.

At an individual level, respondents indicated that they noticed positive changes in their own and others' management and leadership styles, communication, and approach to learning. Most (80%) of the managers surveyed indicated their style changed "somewhat" or "a great deal". The management team has become more consistent and aligned in their approach to management. A number of individuals commented that they and others are managing with increased confidence in their abilities.

Managers noted that they were more sensitive to communications, i.e. how they send messages and how their messages are received. They have a greater appreciation

⁵ Kinark's management team grew in that period from approximately 45 to 100; as noted earlier, abbreviated sessions were offered to new managers after the main program concluded in 2008 (approximately 100 managers participated in the full program) indicating turnover and growth.

for different points of view. Some stated they are more confident in engaging in difficult conversations with their staff.

Some managers continue to reach for resources and tools: 47% of managers surveyed indicated that since completing the program they have sought out additional information in the form of articles and books. It is unclear whether these individuals developed an appetite for learning during the program or have a natural affinity for learning. As noted earlier, some managers shared resources and learnings with their staff during and after the program – e.g. at team meetings and in coaching sessions.

At an organizational level, 70% of managers surveyed felt Kinark's management culture had shifted "somewhat" or "a great deal" as a result of the shared learning experience. Descriptions of cultural changes included references to increased personal accountability; shared decision-making (e.g. staff more engaged in decision-making processes); increase in mutual respect; and development of a more positive environment. This culture of positivity is likely a reflection of the extent to which Kinark's managers have adopted an AI mindset.

It does seem clear that Kinark developed pronounced characteristics of a stronger learning culture as a result of the management development journey and clinical transformation process. Although the only formal sustainability mechanism introduced was the three abbreviated Management Development Programs, many managers indicated they had continued to invest in their learning on some level. 83% of managers surveyed

noted that since completing the program they have been coaching their staff.

Is yours a learning organization?

Much has been written about learning organizations. Here are some characteristics we think reflect a culture of learning.

- *Senior managers champion and participate in learning*
- *Learning is defined as an expectation for all (e.g. in job descriptions)*
- *Performance management processes are in place*
- *Knowledge is actively created, shared and evaluated*
- *Information flows freely*
- *Ideas are invited and valued – regardless of their source*
- *Staff are encouraged to experiment and learn from mistakes*
- *Staff engage in personal and group reflection*
- *Staff see one another as resources*
- *Diversity and talents are valued*
- *Learning opportunities are provided*
- *Incentives are offered to encourage continuous learning*

Conclusion

We have used Kinark's experience to reflect on the design and assess the impact of an in-house Management Development Program. Since the program was delivered in parallel with a clinical transformation process we were not able to separate the impact of the program from the impact of the clinical transformation. Turnover and growth within the management team also complicated the assessment process.

Nevertheless positive changes were identified by many along with significant

'lessons learned'. Some action learning strategies may be of interest to organizations that are not prepared to undertake such an extensive management development program.

Making time for learning is a real challenge for most managers, yet as we experienced in Kinark's Management Development Program weaving learning into day-to-day work is practical and valuable.

Organizations of all sizes can engage these learning strategies to guide management development.

Learning Strategies

During interviews in 2011, Kinark's managers described creative ways they have incorporated learning into their daily work. Here are some strategies used by Kinark's managers and by staff in other organizations for your consideration.

- **Reflecting on practice:** regularly considering lessons learned during or at the end of initiatives... engaging others in reflection by asking, *'Why did this work so well, what could we have done better, what might we change?'*
- **Engaging in honest dialogue about work processes, collaboration and challenges:** being curious and asking questions; engaging in conversations as learning opportunities by asking, *'What did we learn, what do we still need to learn?'*
- **Sharing resources and tools with colleagues:** passing on articles with some personal comments, *'I found it really interesting that..., how do you think we could adapt this?'*
- **Reminding people of what was learned:** referring back to insights or decisions made, *'Remember that we agreed to make it a practice to...'*

- **Making better use travel time:** setting aside some articles or podcasts to review en route; travelling with a colleague with whom you can engage in discussion outside the workplace.

As Mintzberg, author of "Managing" points out, "managing is learned on the job, enhanced by a variety of experiences" and "development programs come in to help managers make meaning of their experience, by reflecting on it personally and with their colleagues". The learnings need to be brought back to the workplace to share with others – this is what contributes to an organization's overall development. This cascading effect – managers sharing their learnings with staff teams and through coaching – serves to reinforce individuals' learning and spreads the benefits beyond the management team.

An organization can develop its managers and shift its culture in a variety of ways while focusing on creating the space and opportunities for reflection, self-development and continuous learning. Managers can organize short sessions (e.g. 75 minutes) with peers, teams or in small groups to engage in **self-directed learning**. With minimal direction, managers can benefit from having the space to reflect together on a topic, exchange advice and innovate new solutions. Weaving learning into daily work addresses both the challenge of sustaining learning and making time for structured learning.

***"Leaders must be fearless in learning from experience. High-performing, innovative organizations are able to reflect, at all levels, on their own practices, learn from their successes and failures, and achieve their results through intentional actions."* – Christian Bason, Leading Public Sector Innovation**

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