

## News

# Managing upwards and adopting a flexible approach

**Anthony Manduca**

The capacity of any organisation will be restricted by the skills and competences of its employees, according to Steve Tarr, managing director of Mdina Partnership, which offers development and training support to various business entities.

"Anyone acquainted with this subject recognises that steady success is achieved by organisations who constantly invest in the growth, development and skills of their people," Mr Tarr tells The Times Business in an interview.

"The fact that stagnating organisations are those that do not invest in training at all or else resort to training only when problems arise is not just a coincidence. Investing in an amount of people development on a regular basis will pay off in the end. In fact, the majority of organisations that are perceived as being successful certainly invest in training and development."

Mdina Partnership was originally formed by Mr Tarr 31 years ago and is based in London. It has companies in different locations namely in Malta (Mdina Partnership Malta), Germany (Mdina Germany) and the United States of America (Mdina Americas). It is also discussing the opening of an additional office in Belgium (Mdina Belgium). At present, the team consists of 13 members and is expected to grow to a total of 20 by the end of this year.

The company's client portfolio is vast and clients have different profiles in terms of size and business nature. "In fact we have experience in varying industries such as manufacturing, financial, automotive, professional services and construction. The company enjoys longstanding relationships with some of Malta's leading organisations, ranging from large privately owned companies to smaller scale business entities," he says.

Mr Tarr says that for as long as he has been involved in people development, the academic world has stressed the importance of

linking one's academic background to the real business world. However, he points out, in his experience, only a few have managed to do so.

"I think that the academic world should ideally engage in meaningful discussions with the business world, both with large corporations as well as with small to medium sized businesses. Such business entities would really benefit from employing someone with a solid academic background mixed with practical experience from the business world. This can only be achieved by delivering lectures through a blend of experienced business people as well as people who have never worked in a business environment but have the required qualifications to lecture on the subject."

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Mr Tarr stresses, however, that training in isolation will not be effective. "Before we undertake any training and development programme, we engage in the 'research stage', which mainly consists of conducting interviews with the managers of the training participants and with the training participants themselves.

"These interviews serve as a tool to identify any potential obstacles, challenges or issues that could affect the outcome of the training and development programme. Any obstacles that crop up are discussed with senior management and a plan to address these issues is designed. Sometimes the objectives and method of training originally planned are changed in order to reflect the findings high-



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lighted during the research stage," he says.

How important is it for executives to be trained to be flexible and to adapt to their bosses even if these are not particularly understanding?

"During our development programmes we encourage participants to talk about existing challenges that affect their ability to achieve their objectives. It is very common for people to blame their boss for issues such as lack of listening and communication skills, or failure to delegate authority and responsibility. Employees need to understand that their boss is less inclined to change, particularly if he/she is the owner of the business or is managing a family business."

Mr Tarr says it is mainly the participants' own ability in 'managing upwards' that will actually affect

their performance and their relationship with their boss. "Managing upwards", he says, is the participant's ability to adopt a flexible approach and their ability to manage the particular situation they are being faced with.

"Managing upwards" is a key subject that we implement and delve into in most of our training programmes, in fact we dedicate a substantial amount of time on this topic due to its importance."

He says that before the company starts any development project the client is asked how he wants to measure the effectiveness of the training and development programme. Effectiveness is measured through a range of online such as the company's online DART system, which captures the participants' views towards their own skills, attributes and knowledge together with the respective

views of their managers towards the same criteria.

"The DART system is a scoring system carried out prior to the commencement of the training programme and at the end of the programme.

"The two scoring results are compared in order to identify the improvement in the scoring of the participants after they undertake the programme.

"This tool incorporates an element of self-appraisal but also quantifies differences and makes comparisons between the individuals' views and that of their own managers; most people give themselves a lower ranking than that given to them by other people with respect to different criteria. We constantly get excellent feedback from our clients and we publish some of this feedback on our website," he says.



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