

The Concept of TLC: Trainer, Leader, Coach

Merrelyn Emery, July 1992

One of the disturbing features of the new wave is the increasing trend towards trying to change the role of supervisor to that of 'trainer, leader and coach'. It is easy to see the superficial attractions of this approach as it appears to offer the learning organization and increased productivity without having to change the bureaucratic structure.

What it really shows is that understanding of the design principles has not kept pace with the rush to make change. Once the design principles and their implications are understood, the idea of a TLC makes no sense whatsoever. The design principles cannot be mixed.

If an organization is structured according to the second principle, redundancy of functions, and a group responsible for its own management decides in some situations to delegate responsibility for control or co-ordination to one of its members, then that is their own legitimate concern. It shows that DP2 may at times include a DP1 operational structure. But as this power of delegation of responsibility is still held by the group, the genotypical structure remains one of redundancy of functions.

When an organization is structured according to the first design principle, redundancy of parts, with roles and responsibilities enshrined in individual duty statements and job specifications, then these are the legal and binding agreements. Regardless of informal arrangements, communications and other training of supervisors and changing their name and role to TLC, their binding responsibilities for coordination and control of the level of operation below them remain intact.

The logic of this is simply that while a DP2 structure may contain elements of DP1, the reverse cannot hold. (Herbst, 1990) The concept of TLC is, therefore, a nonsense. It sounds pretty but does nothing to change the structure to one in which people are genuinely working as responsible, self managing adults. It is only by changing the design principle that the conditions for continuing learning and the productivity accruing from dignity, respect and creativity can be instituted and sustained.

Let me illustrate this with a recent example.

A large company has devoted significant resources to explicitly securing a 'learning organization'. One of the approaches tried was a corruption of the Participative Design Workshop involving the concept of the transition of the supervisor (S1) to Trainer, Leader and Coach. (TLC)

The initial motivation of the Steering Committee overlooking organizational development sprang from a belief that the workforce was not 'ready' to move to self managing groups and that there must be a way of bringing them up to scratch and easing them into it gently.

While some sections of the organization were clearly told that the transition of S1 to TLC was merely a step along the way to self management, others developed the idea that the one and only transition to be effected was that of S1 to TLC. The resulting confusion of course caused problems of its own. This was not helped by the overheads developed by some of the internal change agents. These showed the traditional diagrams of DP1 and 2 organizational modules but with the self managing group having a position above. The only difference shown then by the DP1 and 2 modules was that in the first, people were drawn as individuals with an S1 while in the second, they were drawn as a group with a TLC.

Because this is recommended by some prestigious consultants, no thought had been given to the practical consequences of introducing such a distortion. Nor did those advocating this approach warn of any of the quite predictable contradictions and problems involved. Much time and money had been spent on training to turn the S1s into TLCs.

The practical problems appeared immediately after implementation began. During a meeting of managers from one part of the organization, one after another of the managers reported various forms of standoff and disaffection between the so called self managing groups and their TLCs. Even the managers who were in favour of retaining the concept of TLCs reported increasing problems.

I also attended a meeting of a so called self managing group whose implementation began on 6 April. I met with them in the afternoon of 18 June after they had spent most of the day evaluating their experience and judging the situation to be untenable. All of the problems were documented and they bore no ill against their TLC, wishing instead to protect her from having to expose and report on the unworkability of the design.

Just a few moments analysis shows that the notion of TLC involves two problems:

Problem 1

The roles of leaders and trainers or teachers are quite different, to say nothing about the role of a 'coach'. The skills and behaviours required of them are quite different and in some instances would be in conflict. To have all of these rolled into the one person at the same time is clearly a source of confusion and unfulfilled expectations.

Problem 2

The concept of TLC induces a crisis of responsibility. A self managing group is clearly told that it is responsible for its own coordination, control and outputs. But the ex- S1, TLC placed as either 'team leader', coach or trainer, is just as clearly still in a higher level of the hierarchy or placed in a position of responsibility *for the team*. **Who then is responsible?**

These problems were perceived by those put into the position of this pseudo self management. Different managers had variously communicated to either TLCs or the groups creating further confusion and generally getting people's backs up. Workers who believed they had been constituted as responsible self managing groups felt betrayed when managers communicated only with TLCs. Despite all the training and encouragement to be warm fuzzies, some TLCs realized they still had responsibility for the groups and continued behaving like S1s. Communications handed down to TLCs were selectively not being passed on just as happens in a usual bureaucratic structure. They and their like minded managers worked to discourage further moves towards self management.

In the Participative Design workshop we ran for this organization with four teams, the workers and TLCs had as usual, no problems dealing with clear, accurate explanations of DP1 and 2. Not did they have any problems designing workable DP2 solutions. Recognizing the experience carried by TLCs, they designed structures using genuinely self managing groups with self managing groups of previous TLCs as resources.

They thus created group to group relationships of symmetrical dependence between different levels of a functional hierarchy rather than continuing the one to one relation of asymmetrical dominance of an S1 to subordinate or the utter confusion of a TLC to a so called self managing group.

This example highlights one of the critical differences between introducing change through the PD workshop and other more diffuse methods. The PD workshop specifically includes a third part in which the groups go back over their skills matrix to determine and make explicit the training required to make their design work. These requirements may range from nil to a few needing only informal training on the job to some involving external formal courses.

This sequence of arriving at the best design followed by spelling out their various training requirements leaves the group in control of future training. Training on the job which in many cases is no more than experienced members providing greater experience of some tasks for other members makes it clear that no one person in the group or section has all the experience, knowledge or expertise in training to be the 'trainer'.

If education or training off the job is required, the group simply goes to management with its analysis and negotiates the schedule for that.

Without these steps, it is easy to look at a design and simply say that training is required, particularly so if the design process has been under the control of a manager or a consultant. This automatically leads to the conclusion that 'the workers are not ready for self management' which further leads to the need for a 'trainer', leader or coach. Such externally based designs and perceptions, and even PD workshops which finish with the design rather than the third stage of working through the requirements raised by the design, leave the loophole into which the concept of TLC may be plugged.

When the full working through of the design and its implications remain under the control of the group, such a concept never arises.

In reporting my experiences and discussing these issues with managers and the Steering Committee, I recommended that in pursuing their vision and values they should not attempt to introduce TLCs into other parts of the organization. I explained that what I had seen in other sections was a workforce who was more than ready and willing to be responsibly self managing. It then became clear that the concept of TLC had been seen by some as a way of avoiding the hard work of genuine democratization towards a 'learning organization'. Some admitted they could not even conceive of an organization without supervisors. This is, of course, a result of the belief that oneself is the only responsible human in the world. In management circles it translates into the belief that workers are by definition irresponsible and must come under constant supervision.

But as workers know themselves to be responsible, we have here the foundation of the 'them and us' syndrome. This is accentuated when workers have been fully trained and many in this organization had been. Today's workforce is increasingly well educated and sophisticated in analysis of social systems. It is common for them to express their perception of the discrepancy between being treated as responsible adults in their family and community life and as children at work. Renaming S1s as TLCs does nothing to bridge this gap.

The concept of TLC is nothing more than a modern version of the old *Human Relations* theory. It does not address the fundamental structural changes which bring learning, responsible adult behaviour and productivity. It is a con because it pretends to be something which it is not and to deliver something which it can't.

This is certainly not the first time the concept of TLC has been criticized or found not to work. It is fashionable today to advocate or at least turn a blind eye to advocacy of the concept of TLCs. But those who do this should be aware that such behaviour is detrimental to the people involved, the

organization and the community which hopes for the most efficient and effective path to productive workplaces in which people can learn and grow.

Reference

Herbst, David P. The Battle of Design Principles. In Felix Frei and Invars Udris (Eds). (1990). *Das Bild der Arbeit*. Verlag Hans Huber pp258-268.