

LEARNING 'LIVE': HOW GE LEADERS LEARNT ABOUT LEADERSHIP BY HELPING A KENYAN SCHOOL

This two day programme, aimed at high-potential leaders, took an innovative approach fuelled by the collaborative mindset of three business partners. When there is enough trust between people to take risks, the results can be exciting.

Who was involved?

James Waithaka and Karen Waithaka Ngugi are the proprietors and directors of Summit Schools, Maragua, Kenya. (We were introduced through our contacts at Extraordinary Leadership.) This self-sufficient primary and secondary school had a vision to grow the number of pupils to over double the size. Growing the school capacity has implications for school facilities and infrastructure, including the need for access to more water.

GE Healthcare has built a reputation for excellence in leadership development over decades. Their leaders demand learning approaches that are challenging, relevant and credible. Our GE client – Mary Ellen Rogahn – was also open to experimenting with evolving new approaches.

Anne Stenbom returned from a learning visit to Summit Schools with a passion to engage GE leaders in the same kind of encounter, albeit from a classroom setting. Her co-tutor was Rob Sheffield, from Bluegreen Learning, who has vast experience in facilitating “live case” action learning programmes. They had worked together since 2004 and built trust through working on difficult assignments. They had also learnt to welcome each other’s willingness to try new approaches.

The Challenge

The challenge was how to engage 135 leaders from over twenty countries in four cohorts on a two-day leadership programme. It was to be run, at different times, in Istanbul (Turkey), Waukesha (USA) and Uppsala (Sweden). The formal learning aims for participants covered leadership effectiveness, cross-cultural intelligence and personal accountability – all based on a model of understanding and applying emotional intelligence. The overall theme was the GE Growth Value of Inclusiveness.

“My personal learning goal was around team and collaboration... I wanted to and did respect everyone’s views... I think teamwork and collaboration are really based on mutual respect and trust.”
(Nigerian participant)

The Big Idea: open innovation applied to leadership learning

Our solution was to design an experiential two-day programme that invited the GEHC leaders to work on real challenges to aid Summit Schools' plans for growth. It was a type of live case study, with James and Karen as the clients, GEHC leaders using their talents and skills as a resource group, and Rob and Anne being custodians of the learning process.

Designing the case study

With the client

We agreed with James the five pressing challenges for his school that were timely, relevant and most impactful. (See the descriptions below for more details of these five challenges).

We also agreed that James would brief the group by phone during the programme and be available at the end of the event, to receive a Skype presentation on the group's work and give them immediate feedback.

The learning process

It is possible to become absorbed in an interesting project and learn very little! We planned for learning to be a central part of the experience:

- Participants were required to demonstrate personal accountability by considering the skills they wanted to practice over the two days. They were then able to receive feedback from fellow participants on their individual learning goals.
- We anticipated that teams would form around the five specific challenge areas, although we left specific organization up to the individual groups.
- A representative from each challenge team was nominated for the "senior leadership team". This team's role was to provide overall direction, collaboration across teams and space for ongoing reflection. Its prime purpose was to ensure that learning needs were being met.
- A "media team" was established and members from the challenge teams captured the learning from the overall group on video. This team presented their findings to the overall group after the client presentation on Day 2.

Rob and Anne also gave formal inputs on relevant topics through the two days, including leadership effectiveness, problem solving styles, cross cultural awareness and complexity and organizational change.

The challenges set

1. Teaching

Summit Schools believe that it is important to train their own teachers. This would ensure that teachers remain at Summit Schools and not use them as a stepping school to a government post (where they receive a

"The great thing is that it was this emotional intelligence that people demonstrated... they really empathised with this story and collaborated very fast for that. The emotional intelligence is to be able to achieve something that you never think before to do – to be involved, to feel accountable for that and to stay focused on the goal."
(Italian participant)

higher salary). How can Summit Schools ensure that professional teaching standards are maintained and over short and longer term, so that a high calibre of staff is recruited and retained.

2. Facilities

Produce a project plan for the development of facilities (sewage, electricity, school buildings and accommodation) to cater for triple the current number of pupils. Identify project management dependencies. This should include upkeep and renovation of existing facilities as well as new development.

3. Funding

Calculate estimated and make proposals to raise funds for multiple projects required to develop Summit Schools for an intake of 500 pupils. Take into account possible currency fluctuations.

4. STEP Analysis

Conduct an analysis to identify and analyse any current or future risks (social, economical, environmental, technological, political) and create a project plan with key dependencies highlighted. Identify comparative projects which could serve as reference projects. If possible, provide a network of contacts for understanding lessons learned.

5. Funding for a bore hole

Create a fund-raising plan to raise £20,000 by end of July, in order to enable the commencement of a project to provide a well in August this year.*

Project Benefits

- The proposals put forward to Summit Schools ranged from the specific and immediately applicable to the more general. Many ideas were generated, with varying degrees of relevance and practicality. One group was able to commit tangible support to Summit Schools by tapping into a company internal charity support fund.
- A number of participants committed to support the cause after the class (in their own time). They met multiple times on a voluntary basis and organised themselves using a decentralized “shared leadership model”.

The Results

Across the four programmes the great majority of the 135 participants found the experience unusual, relevant and exciting. One participant said that in all training in his 10 years with the corporation it was by far the best (because of the case study). Another participant said that he had been on many training courses with case studies, “but never a live one and never one like this. It was so inspiring, and very timely, given what the company is currently trying to achieve.”

Participants learned lessons of leadership from Karen and James, two visionary leaders on a different continent who continue to be undeterred by challenges others might consider insurmountable.

“My learning experience: a very emotional one – we have a very strong co-operation with a storm of ideas to solve issues they face in Kenya on the specific project. The team members were trying to come together and find the ideal solution. It was a very good experience for me.”
(Greek participant)

*Challenge number 5 was part of a much larger project coordinated by WellBoring with contributions from many people and organisations. Click on the link below to find out more about the eventual outcome for the Summit Schools.
<http://www.wellboring.org/projects/completed-projects/summit-schools,-maragua,-kenya/>

“We were all touched. We get so caught up in our corporate lifestyles – culture, vocabulary – and were challenged to think about our role in a global community.”
(USA participant)

For more details

or a chat about how ‘live’ learning could work for you, contact Anne:

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Participants’ learning

- By the end of day 1, teams had formed and had defined and shared their personal learning goals. Most reported a strong task focus on the challenge set and rapid idea generation. Participants quickly got into problem-solving mode, and there was a high level of energy and excitement. At the same time the teams realised they needed to manage their time, focus on their learning goals and connect with others to avoid duplication and benefit from what each team was generating.
- Some participants from the first cohort donated their efforts and time to communicate their learning to participants in the following programmes. Post-class they were able to practice working across the boundaries of cultures, cross-generational issues and time zones. They were also confronted with the difficulty of focusing on this project when every day work and family life takes precedence.
- The beauty of the case-study challenge was that it provided a way for leaders to put their energy for learning at the service of a greater cause – a form of sustainable learning! It also mirrored one of the daily challenges of their working lives: how to extract meaningful learning about leadership while completing an absorbing, purposeful task.

Tutors’ learning

- The design helped make the learning ‘stick’. The immediacy of the case design brought emotions to the fore: hope, pride, frustration, anxiety, empathy, excitement. The presence of these emotions helped participants identify, regulate and utilise them for the benefit of project and learning goals.
- The programme gave more realistic and deeper learning for participants because they negotiated with each other, ‘live’ on real work.
- It provided tangible benefits to the case study client, in a number of ways (immediate and longer term). In so doing, it also contributed to the Corporate Social Responsibility agenda of the organization.
- Running a programme like this pushed the boundaries of comfort zone, not just for the participants, but for all involved. It was a learning and growing experience, based on mutual trust, and resulted in closer working relationships.
- The design can serve as a template for other live learning experiences, benefiting much wider communities than those directly involved in the training session.