# Learning legacy

Lessons learned from the London 2012 Games construction project

## Organisation learning at the Olympic Delivery Authority


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**Abstract**

The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) required sustained high performance within a pressured environment across all phases of its seven-year life cycle. In people management terms, this presented unique organisational learning challenges and opportunities.

The ODA's early Learning and Development (L&D) position in the StartUp Phase was that most personal learning and development would be gained via experiencing the once-in-a-lifetime project and that people were expected to 'hit the ground running'. As the organisation became more sophisticated and the pace of change quickened into the delivery phase, it demanded different skill sets and behaviours, and hence the L&D approach was updated to integrate organisation development (OD). It was designed to act as a change catalyst to facilitate and drive performance, leading employee engagement and underpinning retention. Towards the conclusion of the Programme, the L&D approach changed into transition mode, providing support to employees for career transition while continuing to focus on delivery and close out.

A blended organisational learning programme was implemented incorporating multi-layered tools that promoted coaching and mentoring, allowed swift acquisition of knowledge, embedded team facilitation, drove change management capability, built personal resilience and wellbeing, and underpinned professional learning. Each element was delivered in a proportionate and timely way, taking cognisance of the business context and requirement to drive organisational learning in advance of the need to apply it.

This approach was in line with best practice highlighted in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD's) 2012 Learning and Talent Development Survey. The approach successfully:

- aligned business drivers and organisational learning;
- promoted a collaborative and open learning culture;
- delivered self-managed learning in a fast-paced environment.

The two key drivers of success were:

- a thorough alignment of organisational learning with business milestones that proactively drove performance and supported individuals to self manage their development;
- the ODA's top leaders being champions of organisational learning.

The Learning and Development strategy was to appoint people as near the finished article as possible and focus training and development on areas of critical impact.

## The organisational learning culture

The ODA's Learning & Development Strategy formed part of the organisation's overarching People Strategy as endorsed by the ODA's Executive Management Board in October 2007. The strategy set out the organisation's position on L&D, determining that ODA would complete personal development reviews for all staff, appoint people who were as near to 'the finished article' as possible, and focus training and development on areas of critical impact. It recognised that most personal learning would come from applying prior knowledge and skills, and that training would be delivered in a targeted and proportionate way. In particular it noted that strategically, the ODA was a delivery organisation, not a training organisation.

The organisational learning approach was divided into three phases:

### Start Up Phase

The ODA's Start Up Phase reflected the need to resource the organisation with staff who already had the skills and knowledge to make decisive and well-informed decisions that would have an immediate impact in a fast-moving environment. Early work focused on designing, embedding and promoting the ODA's Learning & Development Strategy with a variety of training activities selected with these principles in mind.

The cornerstone of the ODA's learning offer was the provision of individual executive coaches for the top leadership team to enable them to explore issues relating to their roles, the organisation, or personal development.

### Delivery Phase

In 2009 the ODA entered a phase where employees were driving hard to achieve delivery of key construction milestones. Roles were expanding and individuals needed to develop further in their jobs to meet changing demands and new skills requirements. In many cases, the skills requirements were beyond those which could be delivered via on-the-job training or day-to-day skills acquisition. The need to recruit people as near to the finished product as possible remained, but the organisation had to ensure the skills and knowledge of existing employees remained current and relevant. Talent needed to be managed and potential realised so that employees developed in line with programme requirements and their professional peers in other organisations.

The ODA's organisational learning culture was proactively repositioned from a passive but supportive position that suited organisational start up to one in which L&D were integrated into OD to better support delivery of business objectives and milestones. The goal was to establish a learning culture that would facilitate organisational change and build leadership capability, embed resilience and retain talent. Learning had to be primarily self-managed with minimal managerial intervention and with the Human Resources (HR) team acting as a 'guiding hand' and supportive enabler.

The HR team was repositioned as a centre for professional advice and leadership on all OD and learning aspects. Professional capability levels were enhanced within the team through personal and professional development programmes.

The Delivery Phase approach set out a closer alignment in the relationship between learning and organisation effectiveness. The business case was approved, including additional budgetary provision, year-on-year for the remaining four years of the ODA's main programme of work. This position was in sharp contrast to the industry norm of diminishing learning budgets.

Figure 1: ODA's three-phase approach to organisational learning

The L&D programme was geared to signpost ahead of each stage of the ODA's organisation life cycle so that the skills, knowledge and approach required in the coming phase were being delivered ahead of the actual requirement.

### Transition Phase

As the programme began to reach its conclusion, the focus shifted towards career transition, ensuring that employees had access to a wide range of transition support as they left the ODA. A Career Transition and Outplacement Programme was established – its design aimed to be flexible to put all directly-employed ODA staff in a position where they could maximise their experiences and also maintain contact with the programme once they had left.

## Barriers to organisational learning

The ODA had a number of barriers that had to be overcome to embed its organisational learning. These included:

- **Time:** There could be no slippage in delivery timescales. Time was precious and it was difficult to pull people away from the task in hand or the 'day job' to focus on development.
- **Sheer scale:** The task of delivering the ODA's ambitious programme of work was daunting, and the personal pressure to sustain high performance was unrelenting, thus creating risks around personal and organisational resilience.
- **A can-do environment:** Some people were reluctant to say when they were struggling.
- **Constant change:** There was no steady state – his created personal and organisational tensions in an environment where change needed to be second nature for all.
- **Expectation that everyone already has the right skills:** There was an assumption that people 'would hit the ground running' with no training requirements. This proved not to be the case as the organisation evolved.

## Establishing the organisational learning requirements

The ODA used a series of diagnostic assessment tools to identify training requirements and determine the best delivery methods to ensure alignment with business goals and milestones. Data-gathering tools included:

- One-to-one discussions with Directors and senior ODA managers about business goals and milestones in each organisational phase and mapping the individual's skills against these.
- Monitoring personal performance development plans and performance management review outputs.
- Succession planning and talent/risk management reviews.

## Learning solution

In order to overcome the barriers to organisational learning, a fully blended and flexible L&D offering was established, enabling individuals to customise their own development plans to reflect their requirements and learning styles. Time was a critical factor and solutions therefore sharply focused on short bursts of learning that ensured critical delivery milestones were uninterrupted.

The ODA geared the L&D programme to signpost ahead of each stage of the ODA's organisation life cycle so that the skills, knowledge and approach required in the coming phase were being delivered ahead of the actual requirement.

The learning activities adopted included:

**a) Facilitated workshops led by HR**

The ODA conducted 50+ facilitated workshops led predominantly by ODA's Head of HR and Organisation Effectiveness. Workshops were individually tailored and specifically designed to guide managers and teams through change and transition. Workshops covered:

- success measures for the ODA and the team involved;
- key phases of the organisation and what teams needed to achieve at each stage;
- stakeholder management mapping and skills acquisition, values, behaviours and culture;
- team profiling (for example, use of Myers-Briggs/Belbin psychometric tools);
- operational delivery challenges;
- action planning.

**b) Knowledge nuggets**

To ensure that L&D was available to all and mirrored skills requirements at all stages, ODA worked with a number of external organisations to deliver a diverse 'knowledge nugget' programme. Over 50 different knowledge nuggets were offered over a three-year

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period, ranging in length from 45–180 minutes per session. Over 800 places were taken up. A wide spectrum of skills and knowledge sessions were offered, focusing on managing self and others through change, skills acquisition, wellbeing and knowledge advancement.

**c) Individual skills development**
The ODA met individual development needs via tailored training activities. Learning subjects were wide-ranging and included media skills, presentation, time management, project management and IT skills, together with professional qualification attainment.

**d) Coaching for all staff**
The ODA developed a comprehensive three-tiered coaching model that ensured coaching was accessible to every member of staff. The model is described in Figure 3.

Leaders and senior executives were encouraged to participate in the coaching programme to help them develop change and leadership capability and meet individual training needs.
A coach selection process was facilitated via the HR team during which initial coaching requirements were captured and agreed with the participant – HR brokered the coaching partnerships between the manager and coach to ensure clarity of understanding and definition of the personal development requirement.

The participant made the final selection of their preferred coach. Five external coaching organisations were enlisted to provide high-calibre executive coaches for those senior managers who wanted a coach.

The Executive Coaching Programme received a satisfaction score of 8.8/10 from senior managers. As a consequence of the benefits they personally derived, the Executive team endorsed the above model and coaching was made available to all staff for personal development and career transition purposes. Personal coaches were introduced for one or two coaching surgeries a month, with one-hour slots available. This was increased to twice-weekly sessions during the career transition phase of the organisation. A self-managed appointment system was adopted to enable staff to determine their own coaching programme. Sessions were fully booked and

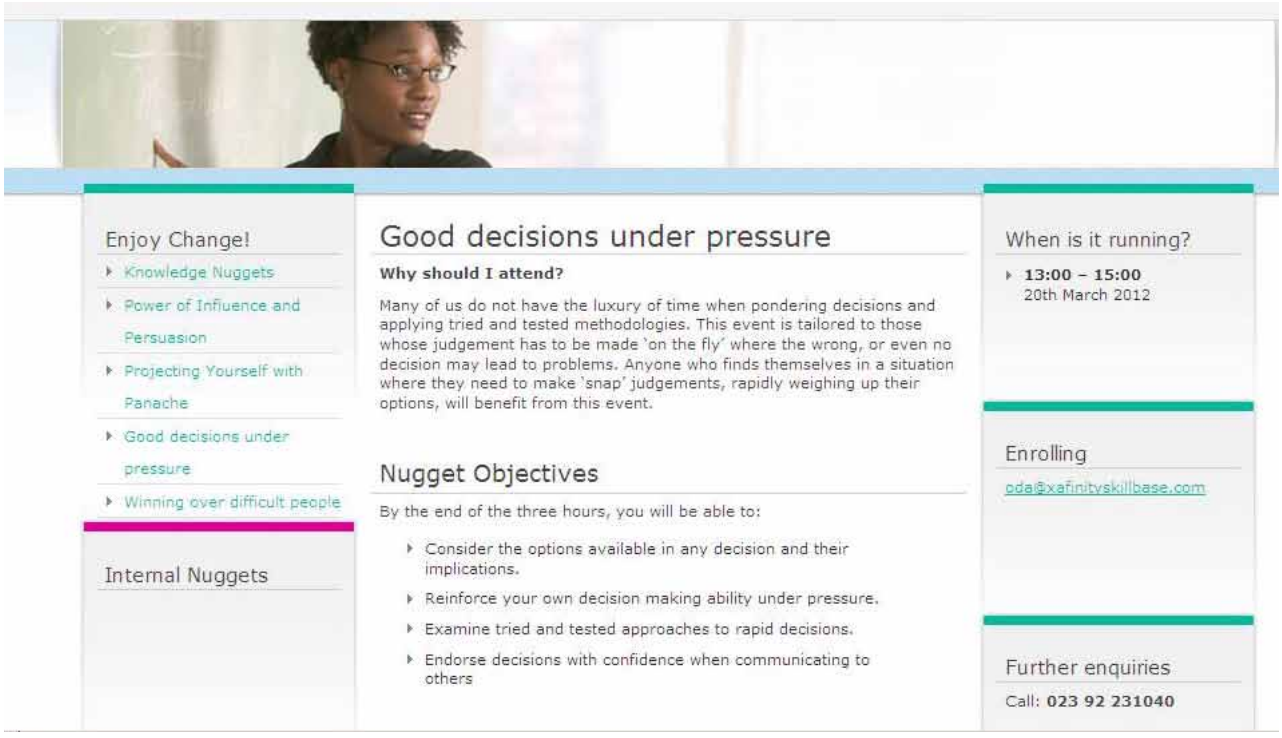

Figure 2: Example of knowledge nugget training session

there was evidence that employees found this an invaluable tool in their development and transition to roles outside the ODA.

Coaching became the bedrock of the ODA's organisational learning and change programme, and its success and impact on the delivery of the ODA's business goals cannot be underestimated. This correlates with findings from the CIPD 2012 Learning and Talent Development Survey, where respondents reported that coaching was the most effective in-house learning and talent management activity undertaken by organisations.

Figure 3: ODA's three-tired coaching model

**e) Mentoring**

Mentoring schemes were established externally and internally. Links were forged with the National Mentoring Consortium in a joint venture to offer employees the opportunity to become a mentor to an undergraduate from an ethnic minority background or with a disability. Mentoring partnerships also existed with London First, Greenwich University and other academic establishments.

Four mentoring circles were set up and operated across the ODA to enable mentoring of peers and colleagues by ODA employees. Forty-five employees joined the circles and anecdotal feedback described them as a success.

Over 40 employees, at all levels of the organisation, became mentors – with many mentoring more than one individual. As a measure of commitment to fostering a mentoring culture, the ODA established a 'Mentor/ Mentee of the Year' scheme for those participating in the externally-focused mentoring scheme.

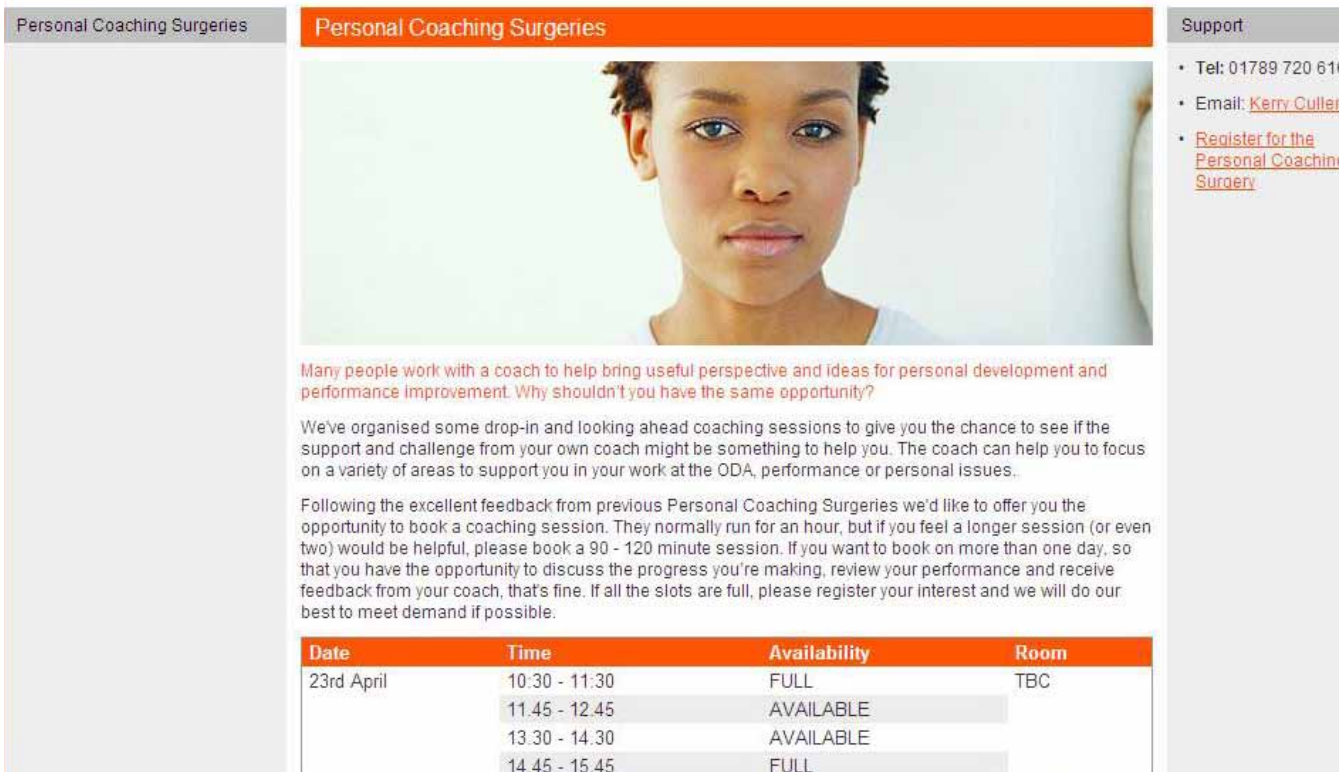


Figure 4: Personal coaching model

An Athlete at Work Programme, was implemented to ensure all employees had readily available access to workshops on stress management, resilience building, managing mind and body, and nutrition.

**f) Tailored operational leadership programme**

The ODA's Transport team were required to move from strategic planning and transport design and policy mode – required in start-up – to full operational delivery of Games-time activities. The team had oversight of all ODA-related Games–time transport operations, significant stakeholder management challenges and actual delivery of some elements of the transport system and travel demand management.

This required a change in leadership, team and individual behaviours as well as the acquisition of new skill sets, especially as many employees had not previously worked in an operational environment. The ODA collaborated with an external supplier to develop and deliver a tailored operational leadership programme for all ODA transport managers to ensure the smooth transition to full operational level during Games time. This programme was commissioned and championed by the Director of Transport who saw it as a vital support mechanism for gearing his team up for the highly demanding Games-time operational phase. Scenario testing was a key feature and capability was tested via exercises that mirrored a 'live' operational environment.

**g) 360° feedback**

The ODA used a series of 360° feedback tools for both performance management and personal development purposes to promote self awareness and skills development. This enabled employees to gain insights into how they were perceived by others and highlighted areas for personal development. The 360° programme was launched by the Chief Executive Officer who strongly encouraged participation, thus contributing to 97 per cent take-up.

**h) Diversity workshops**

A key priority theme for the ODA, employees had access to equality and inclusion training and briefing sessions covering a wide range of related topics. Diversity Champions were appointed at the most senior levels of the organisation to drive the agenda and show leadership and accountability in this important area.

**i) Athlete at Work Programme**

With time at a premium and individuals managing high workloads, ODA needed employees to achieve the right degree of personal work/life balance and resilience to avoid burn-out. An Athlete at Work Programme, managed by K2 Performance, was implemented to ensure all employees had readily-

Figure 5: ODA Career Transition Programme

available access to workshops on stress management, resilience building, managing mind and body, and nutrition. The ODA adopted a holistic approach on wellbeing matters, dovetailing the Athlete at Work Programme with other wellbeing programmes run by the ODA, for example health and wellbeing weeks, gym membership, employee assistance programmes etc.

**j) Changing gear**

As the programme began to reach its conclusion, the ODA commenced its Career Transition and Outplacement Programme to ensure that employees had access to a wide range of transition support as they left the ODA.

The Career Transition and Outplacement Programme consisted of:

- individual outplacement/ retraining
- career transition workshops
- career transition awareness briefings
- career transition nuggets
- one-to-one career consultant surgery sessions
- talent marketing events
- The Network – online job network

## Evaluation

The ODA adopted a light-touch approach to evaluation of training success given the pace of change and need to continually adapt the learning portfolio. This is in line with the findings of CIPD's 2012 Annual Survey on Learning and Talent. Each learning intervention was monitored for participant feedback – the scores were then reviewed and appropriate adjustments made as the programme morphed.

Feedback interviews were conducted with those executives who participated in the coaching programme to understand the personal benefits gained and encourage their support in embedding a coaching and mentoring culture. Individuals who had personal stories of learning success were actively encouraged to share these stories openly with peers and colleagues. Through these methods, the success of the learning proposition was evaluated and socialised.

## Lessons learned

a) While the HR team were the experts and champions of L&D strategy and good practice, senior managers outside the HR function had to be openly engaged and actively champion development to promote the benefits to their teams.

b) The alignment of L&D with business milestones and distinct organisational phases was critical; learning drove and enhanced performance only when there was good synergy between these elements. This accords with the findings of CIPD's 2012 Learning and Talent Development Survey that found that bite-sized learning, a people-centric approach and the development of the HR team to enable delivery were all elements of best practice.

c) A blended, multi-faceted approach enabled employees to choose what was relevant to them, in real time, and in a way that matched availability of time, skill sets and learning styles.

d) Ensuring that wellbeing was an integral feature of the L&D programme. The ODA was therefore among the one-in-six organisations that incorporated the connection between exercise and increased learning performance into their L&D practices.

e) Self management of learning was very well received, enabling personal responsibility for learning to be established and processes for approval to be minimised.

f) There were very real challenges in getting employees to focus on personal development while under intense pressure to deliver. Implementing small, bite-sized knowledge nuggets (45–180 minutes maximum) helped draw employees into development activities. Small wins were important and success celebrated through story telling.

g) Development of the HR team's skills in advising and guiding learning and alignment with OD activities was critical. This was

55 per cent return on investment on the L&D spend over the programme.

## Conclusion

ODA's organisational learning programme positively impacted retention, engagement and employee capability and performance, and it contributed towards the ODA's delivery of its challenging and changing programme of work. Specific L&D success measures included:

- The L&D spend over the programme has resulted in an approximate 55 per cent return on investment taking into account savings in recruitment costs and absence costs.
- Coaching programmes attained an overall evaluation score of 8.8/10. Directors, managers and employees openly talked about the difference coaching made in helping them meet the challenges of their jobs and deliver peak performance.
- More than 800 places were taken up on the knowledge nuggets programme; stress management, personal resilience, wellbeing, change management and CV writing were the most popular nuggets.
- More than 40 staff mentored individuals externally and internally, and 25 staff joined our internal mentoring circles.
- An average score of 8.9/10 was achieved across all training programmes.
- Sickness absence levels at 1.4 per cent – roughly half the industry average – throughout the toughest phase of the delivery schedule.
- Retention was managed – only 11 per cent unplanned attrition rate.

The ODA's efforts in delivering best practice has been recognised externally – the ODA HR team were finalists in CIPD's 2011 Organisational Learning Awards and were Personnel Today's HR Team of the Year Award Finalists 2011.

The alignment of L&D with business milestones and distinct organisational phases was critical.

best achieved via in-house coaching and mentoring. This follows the 'Change Catalyst' for Learning and Talent Development defined by the CIPD and enabled HR to become the facilitator and enabler of change and the collaborative partner to the rest of the ODA in effecting strategic change.

h) Creating a coaching and mentoring culture created a 'people-centric' approach to learning, and was a powerful message in the importance of the individual to the organisation.

## References


1 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Learning and Talent Development: Annual survey report 2012. CIPD 2012. Available from: www.cipd.co.uk/research/_learning-talent-development (accessed 4 January 2013)


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