

Marketing Project Groups

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This paper describes the essential structure of the MPG without describing the events which characterise participants' experience of it. The intention in writing this draft is to establish a common view of the design

Introduction

The primary aim of these workshops is to introduce the strategic marketing dimension within the business. As will become apparent in what follows, this dimension is conceived of as a *total* approach to marketing bearing on all aspects of the way the business operates: it is intended to call issues of marketing and market focus into question across the business as a whole. The objectives are set out as follows:

- To raise and further the awareness of the importance of marketing and market focus in the management of a business. Insofar as MPG also acts as a catalyst for change in the business, this is of secondary importance.
- To develop general management skills associated with producing the project and working in a cross-business project team, calling in additional resources as necessary.
- To enable delegates to 'helicopter' issues, ie develop the ability to use conceptual skills and critical thinking from a market-related stand-point.

It is for this reason that change is seen as being of secondary importance. It is not that change is not intended. Only that change is seen as a side-effect of the workshop process rather than the primary focus of the design.

The primary focus therefore is on the development of strategic marketing and general management skills - the ability of the participants on MPG to manage in terms of the business as a whole. It is this ability which is seen as the necessary condition for bringing about change.

The emphasis on critical skills is in order to qualify the basis on which these general management skills are applied. In effect, participants are expected to be able to exercise 'quality control' over the way in which they manage. It is the application of these critical skills therefore which link the general management skills to change: participants are expected to introduce change into the organisation because they want to see it happen - not because the workshop process wants it to happen.

Crucial to the overall success of the process is the Chief Executive's commitment to it. The CEO's patronage of the process starts and finishes it, and ensures that it is taken seriously by the line. As such the process constitutes part of the CEO's overall development agenda for the business. Significant in the way this patronage operates is the distinction maintained between the *client system* and the *sponsoring system*. This sponsoring system ensures that, while projects must succeed on their merits in the eyes of the client system, the project has the opportunity to demonstrate its merits.

The sequence of events

The MPG process runs over a period of about 9 months to a year. The length of this time-frame is intended to balance the need to produce practical consequences while creating a sufficient space for learning. The first three meetings are intended to set up the overall shape of the process. After that it settles down to a review process which concentrates on the MPG/Project team levels, leaving the project teams to work at the other levels in between MPG meetings. Project team members are spending about 1 day per week on the overall process.

The first three meetings

1: Project selection

The first and third sessions are 2-day events. The CEO sets the Group context in which the MPG operates, and starts the process off by helping to set MPG participants' expectations. As successive MPG's have run, this has become easier, as new participants have been able to talk to 'old-boys'.

After setting the context and expectations, the design of the overall process and learning objectives are shared with the participants, so that they can orientate themselves to what follows. They are also given their first introduction to strategic marketing concepts in order to begin to give them a way of thinking about their projects.

Each participant comes to MPG with a project. It is put to him as follows:

"Identify a market-related project which you would like to undertake within your business. This project should address an area of concern to yourself as a manager and should be capable of being completed within the 9-10 months of the MPG programme. If it would help, your manager will be prepared to discuss likely areas with you..... you should be prepared to argue for the adoption of your project at the first meeting, as only three of the nine will be pursued by the teams."

The process now involves each participant proposing his project to the others, so that three teams can be formed working on three projects. The formation of the teams is a balancing act between geography, function and business; and ensuring that only one member of the team comes from the business whose project is adopted. The criteria used for the selection of the project are as follows:

"The project should be about issues that matter to the business, have ground-level application, and can make a noticeable difference to the business' awareness of customer and market related issues - the projects should therefore have both strategic and current significance.

To achieve this, projects should meet four criteria:

- *It should matter*: there should be an identified client and sponsor for the project to whom the team can relate and report.
- *It should be practical*: the project should be based on data and the result of the project should produce ground-level consequences, i.e. produce a tangible effect.
- *It should 'connect'*: the project should build on or take account of existing structures and 'culture', i.e. it must take notice of what is possible.

- *It should add value:* the outcome of the project should be to give the business an 'angle' or leading edge over its competitors. "

This is essentially a process of developing commitment to their projects. Once formed, the project teams concentrate on syndicate work, thinking through how they will approach their projects, what their priorities are, and preparing to present their thinking to the other project teams. These project proposals attempt to define:

- (i) what the problem is,
- (ii) who is in the client system,
- (iii) what the possible outcomes and payoffs are, and
- (iv) how the project team will work.

The instructions are as follows:

"Assess the practical problems you are likely to encounter in your project. You may find it helpful to look at past MPG reports as a guide-line, and prepare initial headings for your final report as a way of defining the areas in which you intend to gather material to support your project's conclusions. You will need to:

Consider what data there are which are readily accessible (both on the business and its markets), and what can be achieved by additional research?

Establish an interview schedule for initial discussions with interested parties and likely suppliers of data.

Identify what resources you think you may require over and above yourselves.

Prepare to make a presentation of your likely forward research strategy - say 30 minutes - at the beginning of the third meeting. "

2: Initial hypotheses

This is a one-day review meeting. By this time the teams will have done initial work collecting data and interviewing with the client to define the (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv) above. This meeting provides an opportunity to take a first 'look' at projects to see how they are shaping up and to begin to think about the client system. Some more theory is introduced to give project teams a way of structuring data about the business|market relationship and the particular way in which it operates. This is used to discuss the nature of the business problems being faced. The effect of this process is to begin to articulate the nature of their client system *as distinct from* the business and its problems which they are ultimately concerned with.

3: The Client System

This third session is another 2-day one. It concentrates on the client systems the projects face, and the particular ways the project teams see them operating. Presentations are made along the lines established in the first meeting, which are video-recorded so that project teams can refer back later in the MPG process to what they said when they started....

Secondly, there is a discussion of the particular ways in which different members of their client systems approach the possible outcome of the project as a way of approaching the issues of sponsorship which they will face. By the end of this process, the project teams have developed a strong sense of their projects, and the challenges they face in taking them to a successful outcome. The remaining time is taken up in syndicate work,

revising the presentation they made for the first session. The aim is to review the terms of each project and its associated timescales again in terms of the (1), (ii), (iii) and (iv) above.

4-8: Presenting problems and 'real' problems

The meetings from now on take a different form. The meetings start with an update on progress by the project teams followed by a joint review of the progress being made by each project; and the rest of the time is spent problem-solving with individual teams around specific issues they face. These meetings culminate in an internal presentation of results which is made to a 'friendly' outsider and is videoed at around meeting 8.

This review process returns repeatedly to the hypotheses they are working with, and their relation to and consequences for the client system. Thus the teams continually re-visit the client system and business issues they are encountering, paying particular attention to checking the projects against the four criteria as a way of raising further questions.

To be successful, the project team has to identify the 'problems' or 'challenges' facing its client system, and develop ways of overcoming them. Some issues keep repeating, although with a slightly different flavour each time. Other projects keep coming up against new problems. For the review process, the problem is the 'presenting problem' - it is what the project team presents as the problem facing their client system. What the critical review asks of the project team is that they should develop a sense of the 'real' problem by being able to call into question their view of:

- why you think 'the problem' is a problem;
- what your working hypothesis is as to who has an interest in that problem;
- what your theory/approach is for addressing that problem in that form; and
- what you are going to do to prove you are right.

As the reviews continue, a pattern begins to build up in the project team's process. The questioning creates a constant interplay between individual project team members' views of what the issues are, the data that the team has on what is 'actually' happening, and the project's own way of putting all of this together. The concept of a 'real' problem therefore emerges as something 'other' than what is presented as the problem facing the client system. It is in relation to this 'real' problem therefore that the project team works towards a successful outcome.

Most of the work the project teams are doing takes place between the review meetings. It is here that the quality of sponsorship and the access to the line becomes crucial.

In addition to this 'political' dimension of the process there is the question of data. The way the project teams work with data is what forms their basis for influencing. Thus the resourcing of the projects also becomes very important. In addition to their ability to commission research, they have to be able to analyse and present their data as part of an overall argument: what starts as an individual 'hunch' has to become a reality for the organisation through the way the group process of the team works.

9-10: The final report

The project teams engage in a lot of lobbying prior to this final meeting.¹ This is to ensure that the meeting is formal recognition of what has already been agreed. The presentation is made to the client and the CEO. The CEO then conducts a review with clients 6 months later on with the project team to evaluate the project's success. Finally, MPG participants review the process against its learning objectives.

Outcomes

Over the course of MPG, a number of projects were completed looking at all aspects of the strategic market development of the business. In terms of the learning outcomes for participants however, the following list produced by one MPG gives some indication:

- The need to define problem
- Using a logical approach to analysing data and drawing conclusions
- Being able to take an overview and see a problem in a wider context
- Being able to look at other companies
- Being conceptual - thinking behind the problem - and seeing the long term vs the short term
- Coping with something out of a 'safe' environment
- time management
- handling uncertainty
- understanding other peoples' aims
- learning about data sources and how to tap into information
- teamworking skills
- commercial language
- looking at what the customer wants
- the development of subordinates
- building empathy with the team and other contacts
- networking
- dealing with deadline pressures
- managing the tension between MPG and business learning
- awareness that one can create/manage own agenda
- awareness of ability to influence the way things develop
- learning by doing
- the importance of 'gestation' in learning
- experiencing blind alleys
- staying power

¹ Participants of the MPG process have learnt to differentiate levels of process, but managers in the sponsoring system may not have. Thus although all levels are always present, depending on the way the organisation works (*operational, functional, positional, relational*), some levels may not be articulated. This sets a "**strategy ceiling**" on what issues can be addressed, by the sponsoring and client systems. Addressing the problems of the strategy ceiling are the point at which the MPG process shifts from being a management development process to being organisation development.

- coping with organisational change

Some of the difficulties were:

- Time spent travelling
- difficulty of presenting to own boss
- criticism of time away from job
- 9 months a bit too long