

## Training For Taxing Times

By Jonathan Webb, Overview - Issue 12 - 1998

Civil Service College development training in creative thinking has helped the Customs and Excise London Central Collection to negotiate a tricky period of transition. Jonathan Webb, of the Civil Service College, reports.

The recent history of HM Customs & Excise London Central Collection is one characterised by major change, according to Executive Unit Head Jim Maclean. In the last two years in particular, the organisation has had to accommodate major human resources re-structuring involving the closure of offices and changes in working practices. The future promises further far-reaching change.

Such change, says Jim, has placed considerable stress on people within the organisation, and on their working relationships. He explains: "Change, and the prospect of change, makes people feel insecure and undervalued. As a management team, we felt very strongly that we wanted to do the right thing by our people during this period, and were happy that our intentions toward them had been good. However, subsequent feedback during the Investors in People process showed that good intentions were not sufficient – people still felt threatened, and weren't happy. It became clear to us that we weren't getting our message through, and that we needed to work at creating a culture that was inclusive, and gave people control."

I was against that backdrop that Jim brought in Nancy Kline and Duncan McKenzie of the Civil Services College to run a two-day workshop – *Leadership in a Thinking Environment* – for senior managements.

The workshop challenged participants to create conditions in which people could think well. According to Jim the process was not as straightforward as it sounds, and provided a good deal of soul searching amongst those present. He explains: "We have a senior management team that is all male, white and middle-aged, working in a company where two-thirds of people are under 30, 40 per cent are women and 25 per cent are from ethnic minorities. We found that our methods of working were not appropriate to that wider situation, and the workshop helped us establish methods of communication that we knew would work – it was painful, but it was a necessary commitment to our people."

Most people recognise a scenario in which they have to fight to be heard in a meeting, only to be ignored or interrupted when they get the chance to speak. When you speak you risk criticism. The further you are down the corporate pecking order, the bigger the problem can become. Compound the situation with cultural or gender differences and the situation becomes more difficult still.

As Jim says: "The result is never positive – it can make you angry and resentful. A room full of people plotting revenge on each other for not allowing them time to speak, or dismissing their ideas, does not make for constructive decision-making."

*Leadership in a Thinking Environment*, developed by Nancy Kline, has a very simple premise at its heart – that good thinking takes place under specific conditions, and that people can support each other to explore ideas to their fullest, and most useful, extent. The Customs & Excise workshop explored the role of leadership in establishing the conditions for this to take place, and placed an onus on the chair of a meeting to give people time to speak in which it was guaranteed they would not be interrupted. The workshop also explored the value of encouragement to a speaker, and how incisive, rather than critical, questioning can help an idea evolve.

Jim says: “To us, with our backgrounds, this was both new and tough. Like many others we had become used to fighting for a space in meetings, and then defending our ideas against all corners. It was alien – but we all saw that it could work.”

Following the workshop Jim and Duncan had kept an ‘open line’, and at Duncan’s suggestion Jim agreed that applying the methods learned to a live, working situation would be valuable. In the Spring of 1997 Duncan and Nancy went into the London Central Collection’s Islington office to work again with the senior managers. But this time it was for real.

Jim recalls: “It was hard work – not only did we have to bear in mind what we were being told by the trainers, we also had to concentrate our minds on getting a real, and very important, piece of work done.”

The final session of the programme involved a business meeting, supported by Duncan and Nancy, to be conducted according to the conditions necessary for ‘The Thinking Environment’. Jim says: “We were all a little apprehensive, and some of the team feared that the method we had chosen would make for a rather stilted, joyless meeting. Nancy reassured us that once we felt a little more familiar with the rules we would start to have fun with them. As we got warmed up that was precisely what happened. The result, I might say, was excellent.”

Despite his delight at the way the sessions had gone, Jim remains under no illusions that work is still required. He says: “We have set up systems that we hope will allow this method of thinking and behaving to permeate the whole organisation – but we recognise that it won’t happen just because we want it to. To this end the new methods are being disseminated through the organisation by our development team, and we have introduced 360\* feedback. I am pleased to say that many of our people, when asked, have been very positive indeed and recognise the commitment that we have made to them.”

In the longer term, Jim is trying to establish a culture that can accommodate further change without unnecessary pain. He says: “At the moment we all work in offices, as is typical. In the future, with technology advancing the way it has, it may be more sensible for us to work in a different workforce using remote communication. On the people front, it doesn’t take a genius to work out that our senior management team in ten years’ time will be far more diverse in terms of gender and culture. I hope we have set up a system that will be constructive and appropriate to them.”

In terms of business results, 1996-7 has been a record year for London Central Collection, an achievement that Jim considers relevant to the work done with the Civil Service College. He concludes; “All of our work revolves around us working with customers – and it goes without saying that the better we are able to listen to them, the better our results will be.”