

## Creating behavioural change through assessment?

Liz Bowen-Clewley, Greg Clewley, Jenny Grainger – Competency International Ltd, New Zealand

Colin McDonnell – Tai Poutini Polytechnic, New Zealand

Stan Whitefield – Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand

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#### Abstract

*Assessment by Professional Conversation™ (APC) was originally developed as a tool for assessing current competence for high level, integrated performance, mainly in the management and service sectors. Use of the method in a wide range of contexts over a number of years suggested that there were significant other benefits for both candidates and employers and that far from being solely an assessment process it is a high level learning process in its own right which promotes significant behavioural change. Improved performance, higher levels of motivation and commitment to further learning have been directly attributed to the APC process. To determine whether there are sufficient data to support this claim, users of the process, in conjunction with CIL agreed to undertake research within their candidate population. Initial data has been collected through candidate surveys and compared with evaluation data collected by Ministry of Social Development (MSD). Follow-up interviews have yet to be undertaken with candidates and employers as a change of government and economic imperatives have limited access to these people. Case studies are also being developed. The interim results of this research will be reported in this paper.*

#### 1. Introduction

In 1998, Dr Chris Devereux from the United Kingdom and Liz Bowen-Clewley of New Zealand were both working in the field of assessing workplace learning against competency standards and met to discuss their conceptual frameworks and methodologies.

Independently they had reached similar conclusions that traditional methods of workplace assessment such as observation and questioning had proved to be limited when assessing integrated, high-level work performance. They concluded that there was a need for an additional methodology to assess such integrated knowledge and skills that had often been obtained by a mixture of informal and formal learning and for which recognition of current competence was an appropriate form of assessment.

Devereux had developed an assessment methodology called Professional Conversation for use in the assessment, initially, of customer service skills that he described in his handbook *Rigour without Rigidity*<sup>1</sup>. This approach has been adapted by Bowen-Clewley and used in New Zealand and South Africa for the assessment of management competence, both in contextualised situations (asset management) and in broad based management (meat processing, teaching and mining). It is now widely used through government departments, private companies and for individuals. The underlying premises and strategies of the methodology were reported at the IAEA Conference in Singapore in 2002.

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<sup>1</sup> Devereux, C (1997) *Rigour Without Rigidity* WA Consultants

Use of the method in this wide range of contexts over a number of years suggested that there were significant additional benefits for both candidates and employers and that far from being solely an assessment process, it is a high level learning process in its own right that promotes significant behavioural change. Anecdote has suggested that improved performance, higher levels of motivation and commitment to further learning can be directly attributed to the APC process.

Two organisations in particular have adopted the methodology, the Ministry of Social Development and Tai Poutini Polytechnic (TPP). The staff involved in implementing and monitoring APC in both organisations are convinced that there is a wider benefit to both individual and organisations, and in order to determine the validity of this hypothesis CIL, MSD and Tai Poutini Polytechnic agreed to conduct qualitative research using a questionnaire followed by a semi structured interview technique.

This was intended to explore:

- the extent to which the APC preparation, and overall assessment process has contributed to a student's learning and development
- the identification of any learning and development component in APC
- the manner in, or process by which any learning has occurred
- the outcomes or benefits of any learning and development to the student and the employer which might occur/have occurred as part of the APC assessment process.

## 2. Useful Definitions

- Recognition of Current Competence  
A formal assessment of a candidate's performance in relation to specified unit standards or learning outcomes
- APC  
A learning and assessment methodology for assessing workplace learning through Recognition of Current Competence. The technique allows students to demonstrate their understanding and give examples of their skills and attitudes through discussion and the collection of supporting evidence.
- Learning and Development  
Learning is a permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of experience. There are several aspects to this definition:
  - Firstly, learning involves a change in attitude or behaviour
  - Secondly, learning involves some form of practical experience
  - Thirdly, this practical experience must be reinforced over time for learning to take place
 Development is the process of helping individuals to develop and fulfil their potential

## 3. Methodology

### *Sample*

Two groups were to be surveyed:

- APC candidates from the last 5 years
- Employers of participants who respond

Questionnaires<sup>2</sup> were sent by MSD<sup>3</sup>, Tai Poutini and CIL co-ordinators on a random basis to a maximum of 100 candidates.

### *Analysis of Data*

The data was collated, synthesised and analysed to particularly reflect:

- Issues, trends, themes synthesised from the responses for each question
- The identification of any specific Learning and Development components in the APC process
- The extent to which the participant responses reflect APC as a Learning and Development tool (as distinct from an Assessment tool).
- The extent to which the APC process has contributed to students' learning and development
- The manner in, or process by which any learning has occurred
- The outcomes and benefits which can be attributed to the Learning and Development components

Initial case studies were developed to support the issues and the themes raised.

### *Ethics*

- Participants were given the option of anonymity. Where this is selected, employers will not be followed up.
- All data will remain confidential with no information attributed to named individuals
- Participants were made aware that the information will be the subject of a conference paper

## **4. Some thoughts on the underpinning theory on behavioural change**

In thinking about APC as a tool for influencing behavioural change we have been strongly influenced by a number of theorists:

- Daniel Goleman and his work around emotional intelligence
- Chris Argyris and Donald Schön and their work on generative learning
- Derek Melser and his ground breaking work on thinking as a socially mediated action in its own terms.

### 4.1 Goleman<sup>4</sup> identifies five components of emotional intelligence:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Motivation
- Empathy
- Social skills

Under the facilitation of a coach or mentor, the processes of reflection, questioning and justification of their behaviours and approaches to leadership and methods of solving problems, students develop far greater self-awareness. This leads to greater self-confidence – they clearly know what they know and believe it, and what

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire is available on request

<sup>3</sup> Questionnaires were sent to a different sample in MSD from those involved in their review

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Goleman *Leadership That Gets Results* Harvard Business Review Article Mar 01, 2000

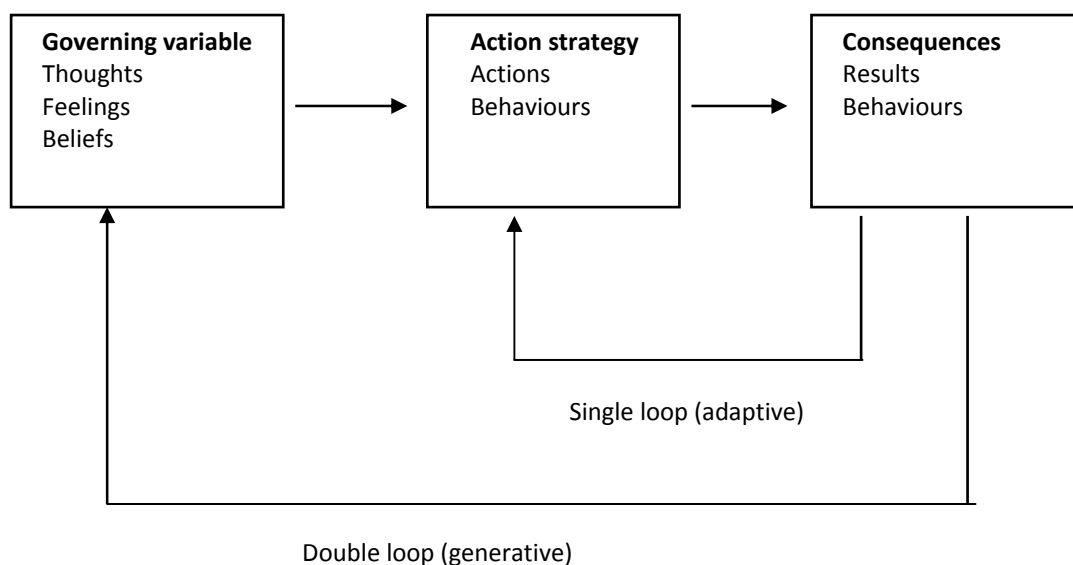
they are good at and believe it. APC provides independent verification of this, and this has a significant impact, especially if the participant does not have qualifications and have learned on the job.

This process also provides the base information for the self-regulation component where students identify areas where they may need to control or redirect their disruptive impulses and moods and work to their strengths rather than weaknesses.

4.2 Argyris<sup>5</sup> and Schön's work on the notion of mental maps and their related single and double loop learning also indicates how behavioural change takes place. For Argyris and Schön (1978) learning involves the detection and correction of error. They suggested that for many people, where something goes wrong, a starting point is to look for another strategy that will address and work within the governing variables. In other words, given or chosen goals, values, plans and rules are operationalised rather than questioned. According to Argyris and Schön (this is single-loop learning. See Fig. 1 below)

An alternative response is to question the governing variables themselves; to subject them to critical scrutiny. This they describe as double-loop learning. Such learning may then lead to an alteration in the governing variables and, thus, a shift in the way in which strategies and consequences are framed. This they see as critical to professional learning and as what distinguishes professional from non-professional behaviour.

Figure 1 Single and double loop learning



This emphasis on reflective practice is critical to establishing and maintaining behavioural change as it creates new paradigms for the learner.

<sup>5</sup> Argyris, M. and Schön, D. (1974) *Theory in Practice. Increasing professional effectiveness*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Derek Melser is a new entrant in the field of cognition. His book *The Act of Thinking*<sup>6</sup> challenges the core assumption of cognitive science – that thinking goes on in the head. Melser argues that thinking is not an intracranial process of any kind, mental or neural, but rather it is a learned action of the person which is socially mediated. For Melser, rather than thinking being a process that begins in the head but extends beyond it, it is a personal-level activity, something that a person does through his/her actions. Since Melser views such activities as disjoint from natural processes, thinking is not a natural process at all, the sort of thing that we might study scientifically. Thus, thinking is a personal action that calls for a different kind of study, one that draws on empathy, interpretation, and hermeneutics.

At the heart of Melser's view is the principle that to understand what thinking is, one needs to understand how it is that thinking originates. He presents his own theory of 'token concerting' according to which thinking is a special kind of token performance by the individual, of certain social and concerted action. Thus in his analysis the act of APC creates thought and it is thought that leads to decisions about actions and the need for change.

All three of these theorists provide a basis of legitimisation of APC as a learning and development process which, through reflection as part of emotional intelligence and the mediated action of conversation focused on current behaviour, leads to the potential for behavioural change. Graphically this can be represented in Fig. 2 below.

Figure 2 Processes leading to behaviour change through APC



<sup>6</sup> Melser, D *The Act of Thinking*, MIT Press 2004

## 5. The Ministry of Social Development perspective

At some point in their lives, most New Zealanders will have contact with us as we manage most of the delivery of social services in New Zealand. We work closely with partner agencies and service providers to help people get the support they need, when they need it, no matter where it has to be found.

Effective leadership is the key to our being a successful organisation. It requires a blend of knowledge and skills drawn from a number of disciplines and relevant across industries. While many of the skills leading to successful leadership are generic across industries, each can be applied to the context specific requirements of a specific sector.

MSD's external environment and its roles and focus have changed, resulting in changes in the way we work and how we work with people. To work effectively in this environment, we needed to have a clear idea of the skills and attributes of our people and be able to effectively and efficiently target learning and development programmes and initiatives for greatest benefit to both staff and the organisation.

These themes are incorporated within our Capability Development Strategy. The strategy highlights the need for people with strong brokerage, facilitation and negotiation skills supported by excellent relationship management skills, good judgement and consistent values.

In 2002 MSD decided to implement two national qualifications for its managers:

- National Certificate in First-line Management (Level 4)
- National Certificate in Public Sector Services (Middle Management) (Leadership) – Level 5

In consultation with the contractors we agreed to use Assessment by Professional Conversation™ as the primary assessment tool for a number of reasons set out below:

- We were looking to assess large numbers of experienced managers, some of whom had been managers for a number of years.
- APC provided an excellent tool to allow the managers to gain recognition for the skills they already had and through the reflective practice of the assessment, it allowed them to take ownership of their skill base and provided opportunities for self directed skills improvement.
- Our managers are busy people and find it hard to make extra time for writing up screeds of paper work that might otherwise be required to complete the qualifications.
- Many of our managers, particularly those who had been with the organisation for a long time had not had particularly positive experiences in the traditional education system and were not keen on sitting paper based examinations and the like.
- The opportunity to gain a qualification through the retrospective collection of evidence to demonstrate competence appealed to our managers.

In the six years to 2008 that we have been offering the qualifications through APC, in excess of 518 qualifications have been awarded to our managers with over 80% of those engaging in the process completing within the agreed training agreement time frame.

The qualifications awarded are broken down as follows:

- NC in first-line Management (Level 4) = 261
- NC in Public Sector (Middle Management) Leadership Level 5 = 257

Of those who completed the work-based qualifications a number have since gone on to engage in other courses of study seeking further qualifications and have stated that the confidence they gained through the APC model of assessment has been a significant contributing factor in their decision to do this. Two of those have since completed a Masters in Public Policy through Victoria University.

#### *Candidate Feedback on the Process*

Candidate feedback has generally been positive and the following is a collation of candidate comment on the different aspects of the qualification, the process of assessment and generally how they felt about doing the qualifications. This feedback has been provided through face-to-face interviews with candidates, as well as an evaluation survey<sup>7</sup>. The following information is provided from collated extracts from the survey:

- The majority of participants found that by engaging in the qualification process they lifted their perception of the job and that they enjoyed the reflective nature of the assessment. Some identified that it allowed them to identify bad habits that had crept into their work and they were able to correct them.
- Other common responses were that the candidates appreciated the recognition of their work and felt more valued as a result and that it was good to have a recognised and transportable qualification.
- Participants felt that they had been generally well supported throughout the process by their assessors and their managers.
- Most of the respondents expressed their thanks for the opportunity to be a part of the programme. They were also very positive about the content of the qualification and the impact it has had on them as they have worked through the process.

Behavioural change reported by staff and supervisors included:

- More likely to develop their own staff
- More self confident
- More interested in continued learning and actively seek new learning opportunities
- More inclined to review their own management and leadership styles
- More self awareness
- Better understanding of their staff and their needs
- Feel more valued by the organisation

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<sup>7</sup> Grealish, D Review of Students, Seniors & Integrity Services Qualifications : Leadership Qualifications Survey March 2009

## 6. The results of the questionnaire to date

100 questionnaires have been sent out with a current return rate of 29%. It is anticipated that a further 20% will be received. Follow up interviews with candidates and employers are still in progress so the data below represents interim results. The data below relates specifically to candidate feedback.

- a. Issues, trends, themes synthesised from the responses for each question
  - i. Growth in self confidence
  - ii. Increased use of reflection both personally and with staff
  - iii. Identification of personal skills which are embedded in job performance
  - iv. Value placed by organisation on the results of the process (both positive and negative comments)
  - v. Focus on personal performance
  
- b. The identification of any specific Learning and Development components in the APC process
  - i. Reflective practice
  - ii. Importance of coaching
  - iii. Importance of regular feedback on performance
  - iv. Need for managers to have performance development plans as well as their staff
  - v. Importance of modelling desired behaviours
  - vi. Improved understanding of change management and the Treaty of Waitangi
  
- c. The extent to which the participant responses reflect APC as a Learning and Development tool (as distinct from an Assessment tool)
  - i. Award of qualification very important as a recognition tool
  - ii. However the components listed in b. above identified as separate learning components
  
- d. The extent to which the APC process has contributed to students' learning and development
  - i. Confirmation of skills and related growth
  - ii. Significant reshaping of performance
  - iii. Likelihood to review own practice and performance
  
- e. The manner in, or process by, which any learning has occurred
  - i. Reflection
  - ii. Review of work activities
  - iii. Focused case studies
  - iv. Conversation with assessor
  - v. Independent study
  - vi. Identification of other ways of doing things
  - vii. Challenge from the assessor to improve level of performance i.e. management reporting
  
- f. The outcomes and benefits which can be attributed to the Learning and Development components
  - i. Greater confidence



- ii. Recognition by self and employer
- iii. Raised level of performance
- iv. Clarification of strengths and areas for improvement
- v. Greater motivation to grow and learn
- vi. Improved management and development of staff

## 7. The stories<sup>8</sup>

### Sylvia

Sylvia had been working in the organisation for 15 years and had entered with no formal qualifications. She had a very negative perspective on formal learning and assessment and was very reluctant to engage in the qualification process and required a considerable amount of coaxing and encouragement to get started.

Once she completed her facilitation into the process she found that she was actually enjoying the reflective nature of the assessment and began to look forward to her assessment sessions. She also found that she was beginning to feel more valued both within herself and by the organisation. Through the process she was able to identify that she had a set of valuable and sought after skills and this in turn gave her the confidence she needed to move onward in her career.

She was the first person in her family to have completed a nationally recognised qualification, which became a source of pride not only for her but for her family. From there she began to pursue other developmental opportunities within the organisation and was able to secure a scholarship to undertake the Masters in Public Policy. She completed this and recently moved into a senior management role with another related State Sector organisation.

### Stewart

Stewart had always been a high flyer in his workplace and entered the assessment process with great scepticism and thought he'd 'wing it' so didn't do much preparation. He discovered that not only could he not 'wing it', but he was also challenged on many of his perceptions about leadership and management which fell into a fairly dictatorial approach.

Through considerable discussion with his assessor and even more personal reflection he started to try out some alternative techniques in the workplace and in his next two sessions reported some interesting results in the increase in morale of his people and the improved outcomes in their work. On verification all his verifiers noted a huge change in his management style and spoke positively about this.

Stewart became a total convert to APC and encouraged others to undertake the process. He took leave of absence from his organisation to undertake some work in another agency and was so successful that they persuaded him to stay on.

Stewart often talks about APC to organisations thinking of implementing the process and directly attributes his growing career success to the realisations and personal growth that came from it.

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<sup>8</sup> Names and organisations have been changed to retain confidentiality

### Neesha

Neesha was a university graduate who took on a first line management role. She struggled with actually managing people and her boss suggested she do APC to see if that might help identify what her problems were and give her some strategies to deal with them. She was very distressed with the situation that had emerged where people were exercising passive resistance to her management requests and whilst feeling a bit resentful as she had a university qualification, agreed to give it a try.

She had collected an enormous amount of evidence and was minutely prepared for the assessment process, but spent most of the first session in tears. She and her assessor explored the causes of her distress and discussed some strategies she might try. They agreed to give her some time before her next assessment to try things out.

At her second session she talked about what she had implemented and that it was improving her relationships within her team. She was able to discuss some of the excellent evidence she had brought relating to the other aspects of her job and after verifications was awarded with those competencies.

Her third session focused again on her people management skills. This time she was able to reflect on what she had changed and learned and what other things she might work towards. She'd gone back to her text books and realised what they meant in practical terms and was excited with those discoveries. Her verifiers noted her improved skills but her assessor decided to have a fourth session in another two months to see whether the behaviours had been embedded. They had and her boss was delighted. She was awarded with the outstanding competencies and the qualification. It was at a much 'lower' level than her degree but in her feedback she said she'd learned more about managing people from that process than in the whole course of her academic study.

### Ron

Ron was encouraged by a colleague to undertake professional conversation as they both felt he was stuck in a comfortable but undemanding job. Slightly apprehensively Ron decided to do a sector specific management national certificate targeted at middle management. After his first assessment session he was hooked. On award of the first qualification he immediately enrolled in a further higher level national diploma and was well on the way to achieving it when a new and very challenging job came up in management but outside his current area of expertise. He attributes his decision to apply to the confidence the assessment process had given him and to his immense surprise was appointed.

He put his assessment process on hold in order to build his expertise in the new role, but after 6 months decided that the evidence he'd gathered would be ideal for his assessment. It was. He completed the Level 5 diploma although he had to do some additional study in financial management.

This year, after 18 months in the job he decided to enrol for the Level 6 national diploma; unbeknown to the assessor he'd been collecting evidence over the whole time of his growing knowledge and skills. He said that he views the process as a reward for his own reflection and development.

His manager is ecstatic and has decided to offer the process throughout the middle and senior management of the organisation as to quote her, 'Every time Ron goes off to do his assessment, he comes back re-motivated, with new ideas and with an exceptional awareness of his own performance. His staff thinks he walks on water and their performance has improved significantly as well. What are you doing to these people?'

## **8. Conclusion**

There is still further work to be done on this project but it is interesting that the conclusions from both the MSD review and this research are very similar. Interviews will be undertaken with both candidates and employers and the data further analysed to determine whether the hypothesis that APC is a learning and development tool that facilitates behavioural change in leaders and managers is correct. However these initial data do suggest that the anecdotal evidence will be borne out. If so, APC could become a powerful tool in developing and growing effective leaders and managers.