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Maybe I can fly: Nurturing personal and collective learning in professional learning communities

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Abstract

The research described in this paper is part of a wider exploration of organisational learning and some of the social-psychological mechanisms which underlie the individual-organisation learning relationship. Adopting a grounded theory approach, qualitative data was obtained during email interviews with fifteen foundation degree students concerning their work-related experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. The importance of this focus group lies in their potential contribution to the ECM agenda in educational institutions. This group is aspirational, potentially influential, flexible and extremely varied in background, education and training. The TAs and HLTAs work across the institution with often the most challenging of children and behaviours; negotiating and renegotiating their own personal and professional identities against a background of, in many cases, low pay and status. It follows that the pastoral care and support that they receive as para- or emergent professionals will have a significant effect on the pastoral care and support that they, in turn, can give to the children in their charge. The research underlines the impact of psychological contracting and the impact of affirming or breaching people's expectations of feeling safe, being valued as a person and for their work and receiving enacted support for personal, professional and career development. It also emphasises the need for leaders and managers, when bringing about transformational change, to have an informed appreciation of how the processes of psychological contracting can influence people's behaviours.

Key words

Learning communities; psychological contracting; change.

Background and rationale for the research

In recent times, policy initiatives associated with inclusion and the remodelling of the wider children's workforce have resulted in the creation of new roles for TAs and HLTAs in schools and colleges. Often, these roles involve workers attending to the pastoral care and learning needs of young people. Concerns have

been raised regarding the TAs' and HLTAs' professional status, their qualifications for the roles they undertake, and their opportunities for professional development (see Edmond & Price, 2009).

This paper contains an account of a small-scale investigation undertaken with a view to generating a list of grounded themes, ideas, questions and hypotheses that could act as a guide for future research into the nurturing of professional learning in an expanding children's workforce.

It is commonplace for schools and colleges to claim they are looking to become a professional learning community (PLC). This concept is widely used to convey a vision of a community wherein people are learning with and from one another at a time of rapid and continuous change (Starkey, 1996; Bolam *et al.*, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007; Stoll & Seashore, 2007;). Although there are few reported examples of the PLC (Stoll & Seashore 2007), the power of the concept lies in the way it points to, and opens up, new opportunities to investigate the conditions for the nurturing of professional learning.

When investigating this subject, there are some useful conceptual starting points. First, according to Lave & Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998), social participation is a process of learning, i.e. people acquire and use knowledge when engaging with one another to pursue shared goals. Wenger suggests organisations can usefully be construed as constellations of informal communities of practice, formed by people who come together to create a practice to get jobs done. He argues that, when engaging with one another in this way, people achieve a number of outcomes: Firstly, they create their own reified practices, routines, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories, and, develop and preserve a sense of personal identity. Secondly, they assign meanings – a way of talking about their changing experiences, and abilities, and to explain the way things are in their immediate environment, and the world at large. Thirdly, they develop practice, i.e. personal and shared competence to do what needs to be done. Fourthly, they create a sense of community, a way of talking about the social configurations in which they engage. Finally, they create a sense of identity, a way of talking about personal and shared histories - notions of who they are, and how they 'fit' within the community (Wenger, 1998).

The theory of informal communities of practice is useful, not least because it highlights the importance of the relationship between social participation and learning within the workplace. However, Lave and Wenger are silent on the substantive issues of power and its expression, and on the existence and impact of conflicting individual ideologies within organisations. That people choose to join and participate in informal communities of practice is more or less assumed. There is no apparent attempt to acknowledge the possibility, or take account, of competing personal visions, conflicts of interest, dysfunctional learning, or industrial unrest.

Approaching the task of explaining and accounting for the existence of conflicts of interest, dysfunctional learning, and unrest in organisational life, Burgoyne & Jackson (1997) claim the organisation is an arena wherein people interact in an attempt to confirm, reinforce, promote, reconcile, and resolve their own conflicting purposes, as well as to respond to wider organisational issues. This perspective is useful

because of the way in which it acknowledges the inevitability of power and conflict within social settings; the way it highlights the potential for investigating the social processes through which personal and shared understandings are negotiated within organisational settings; and, how it opens up possibilities of investigating the processes through which people arrive at the point where they become willing, or unwilling, to create and engage in informal communities of practice. It also opens up possibilities of investigating and contributing to theory concerning the processes of psychological contracting, i.e. employer and employee perceptions and expectations concerning the employment relationship, perceived shortcomings in the employment relationship, and corresponding changes in the individual-organisation learning relationship (Hayes and Dyer, 1999; Leach, 2002; Conway & Briner, (2005).

The design and conduct of the study

Qualitative data was obtained during email interviews with fifteen part-time foundation degree students concerning their work-related experiences and the meanings they assign to them. All the students are employed in schools, and, as part of their studies, they are required to carry out work-based tasks, and to plan and carry out one or more pieces of practitioner-based research.

Prior to the onset of the investigation, students were approached via email, inviting them to take part in the investigation. The nature and purpose of the investigation was explained, and, in line with common practice, they were assured their privacy and anonymity would be protected.

The complex nature of the study demanded a qualitative research strategy that pays attention to the meanings embedded in participant accounts of their everyday experiences. Consequently, when designing the interview schedule, important aims were to devise methods of exploring student perceptions and understanding concerning the influence of their studies in terms of their learning and behaviour in the workplace; the meanings they ascribe to their everyday working experiences; how these experiences help shape their sense of professional identity and career direction, and their experiences of knowledge creation and sharing in the workplace. The resulting schedule contained the following questions which were sent out one at a time during the interviews:

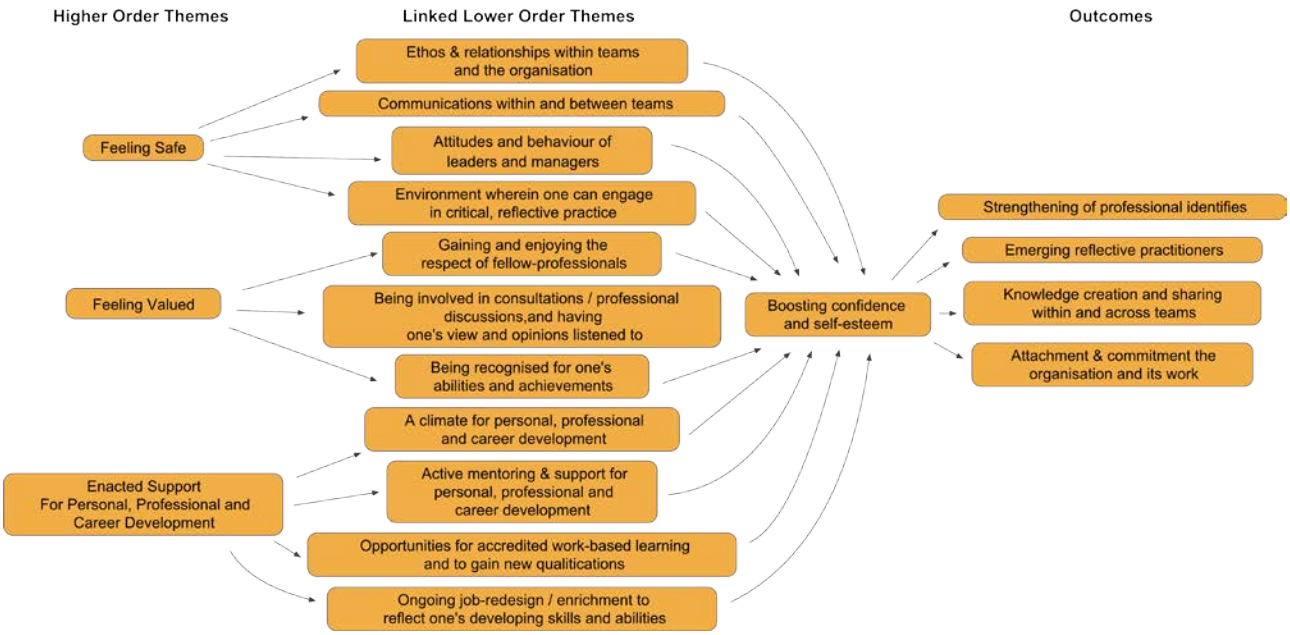
1. *How have your experiences whilst studying at the university affected the way you think about and view your every-day working life*?
2. *In what way have formative experiences in your everyday working-life shaped your sense of professional identity*?
3. *What images would you use to describe your career so far, and how you would like it to develop?*
4. *In what way is your sense of professional identity taking shape as you work alongside colleagues and with your tutors at university*.
5. *What is it like to work with other people in your workplace? What images would you use to describe and explain these working relationships*?

Pleasingly, the interviews quickly developed into a series of online conversations during which participants introduced and responded to themes that subsequent questions were intended to uncover. At other times, some of the responses invited one or more follow-up questions. There were also differences in the time it took to conduct the individual interviews. Some were conducted in a matter of a day or two, largely because of the speed with which the interviewee and I were able to respond to one another. At other times, we each required more time to consider our responses.

Data preparation, coding and analysis

A grounded approach as described by Pidgeon & Henwood (1994, 1997) was used when preparing, coding and analysing the large quantities of unstructured data gathered during the interviews. This involved reading through the students' narratives to tentatively identify and label emergent themes, a process that was continued with until themes were judged to accurately reflect the meanings and implications contained in their statements, i.e. the themes were judged to 'fit' the data well (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Gradually, as the analysis was developed, a cluster of thematic categories were identified and labelled as being significant (figure 1).

Figure 1: The Analysis



Analysis: Emerging Themes

To ensure their anonymity, pseudonyms are used when referring, with their permission, to people's comments during this account of the analysis.

Accepting Lemon and Taylor's advice (1997, p. 237), the first stage of the analysis involved the reading and rereading of the transcripts in order to gain 'a feel for them,' and to allow potential meanings to emerge

from the data. To illustrate the nature of the material, some examples drawn from the transcripts are recorded below.

> **Emma**
>
> I have gained greatly in confidence, and studying for the degree has in some way increased my morale and self-esteem over the years. I always felt my voice had gone unheard in the past, only being a mere nursery nurse, but now I am able to talk more confidently at meetings in school. I now feel more adventurous and more confident to embark on new ventures with an added benefit in my professional knowledge and skills.

> **Clare**
>
> I was only thinking the other day and questioning how much I can remember from my studying. I would say the main thing I put into practice in every day life is analysing children, or even my working colleagues…. I think it becomes a bit obsessive and sometimes close colleagues laugh at me for being like this… Sometimes I just listen and say nothing as I totally disagree, particularly when it is related to a child's behaviour. I would question why that child is behaving in that manner and not put the blame on the child, but I think this is sometimes ignored.

In many cases when working with rich, qualitative data, statements have multiple meanings, and it is important to capture as many of these as possible. Consequently, as the analysis developed, a cluster of higher and lower level thematic categories were identified and labelled as being significant in relation to the topic of nurturing personal and collective learning in professional learning communities (Figure 2)

As Lemon and Taylor explain, (1997, 237), individual statements can indicate a number of themes, and the frequency with which a theme is mentioned is an indication of its strength. However, as in this instance, ongoing reflections concerning the emergent meanings contained in people's statements uncovered some deeper, underlying higher order themes, and supporting lower order themes. In this study, three higher order themes emerge: people feeling safe, feeling valued, and being beneficiaries of enacted support for personal, professional and career development.

Feeling Safe and Feeling Valued

Frequently, people's stories illustrate the extent to which feelings of psychological safety and being valued in the workplace boosts their confidence, self-image and feelings of professional identity. Most revealing is the extent to which individual stories focus on their learning during the foundation degree programme, and how they look to use this learning in their workplace. Particularly pleasing from our point of view is the extent to which their learning on the course is empowering them within the workplace. Several spoke of feeling more confident when engaging in professional conversations with colleagues, and corresponding positive changes in their colleagues' perceptions of them:

Fiona

The greatest achievement since starting at university is my increasing confidence. I feel that I can now join in conversations and be confident about what I am talking about. The more my confidence grows the more I want to do.

Margaret

My mentor, having seen my assignments, persuaded me to give some input into various staff INSET sessions and also to lead a staff training morning for LSAs. Doing these, and receiving feedback both from the head and other staff members has boosted my confidence and the fact that teaching staff have come to me to ask my opinion has helped me to feel I am regarded as a professional colleague.

The salience of the two inter-related categories is illustrated in other people's stories, including those in which concerns are expressed about not always feeling safe or valued:

Ann

I feel the head certainly does not think of me as a professional and she commented recently that we (support staff) are 'value for money.' I felt quite offended by this comment. I was asked recently to go on a trip with Year 1. It was short notice but I agreed as long as it was O.K. with the nursery teacher. It later emerged that the LSAs had refused to go without a teacher for their class and I found out that the head told the nursery teacher that I, as a nursery nurse, was the nearest thing to a teacher she could spare. I felt that she had used me.

Sally

I felt de-valued when they got rid of nursery nurses, then we retrained as HLTAs, and yet nothing changes. We do the same job on low pay and when a teacher is absent we get less pay again to teach the classes.

Hannah

Although my confidence is growing in the classroom, I still do not like to cover lessons when certain teaching assistants are supporting me. I feel that some assistants, particularly the HLTAs, can look down at you when taking whole classes.

Fiona

Unfortunately, some teachers still think of us as pot washers.

Equally revealing is a perceived link between feeling safe and valued and people's confidence and willingness to share information and ideas and to engage in professional discussions:

Ann

I think people need to feel comfortable with their colleagues to share ideas. If they are made to feel inferior or as if their opinion does not count, then they will be reluctant. …Another reason people may be reluctant to share ideas is they don't want someone else to take their idea and use it as their own.

Katie

> There are times when we informally work together due to the relationships built up. This mainly tends to be in the staff room at playtimes or lunch or during the morning briefing, all informal chat is to be kept confidential and not to be taken out of the staff room.

Enacted support for personal, professional and career development

Reading through the transcripts, the extent to which the analysis cast light on people's perceptions and understandings concerning their work-related experiences during their studies, and some months after graduating, is apparent. Most striking is the extent to which they speak of a period of transition in their personal and professional lives, resulting in enhanced self-confidence and feelings of self-worth, a heightened sense of professional identity, and, for some but not everyone, a feeling their careers are rejuvenated. Concluding statements from Margaret's story capture this mood. Responding to the question *'What images would you use to describe your career so far, and how you would like it to develop?'* she has this to say:

> One of the first images that came to mind was one of eagles! A mother eagle nurtures her young in the nest where it stretches its wings and flaps them to make them stronger. When she believes it to be ready to fly, she then nudges the chick until it is on the edge of the nest, encouraging it to take off. Finally, I have heard, she will push it out of the nest! She will catch it on her back if it drops too far, putting it back in the nest.
>
> When I first left school I trained to be a physiotherapist and so learnt what it means to be 'a professional'. I think I also learnt a number of skills which I have brought with me into my current job. However, I was away from work for about 14 years and during that time my confidence in myself and my abilities was quite low. Through being in my current working environment, I think that I have been nurtured and encouraged in a safe environment, where expectations of both staff and children are high. I began as a 'helping Mum', gradually volunteering more of my time. I was encouraged to apply for an LSA post when one became vacant because the staff must have seen some potential there! In this supportive environment I have been allowed to stretch my wings and try things out as part of my development. I was encouraged to apply for HLTA status and with that role came added responsibilities and the opportunity to stretch myself further. I was actively encouraged to apply for the FD course, and sessions with my mentor have certainly stretched my thinking and brought me new challenges. It was my mentor (the head teacher) who 'pushed me out of the nest' by giving me opportunities to share my learning both with other support staff and also teaching staff – something that was well out of my comfort zone! But I can return to the security of the nest and now feel more confident about jumping off the edge from time to time. My belief in my own abilities has been increased and I am now thinking about what the future might hold. I would very much like to continue this learning journey by completing the degree, something I really wasn't sure I was capable of when I started. People are also asking me if I am going to continue into teaching. At one time I would not have considered it possible, but now it is something I am seriously thinking about. My thinking has changed through being in a 'can do' culture both at school and at home (my family have been incredibly supportive and encouraging throughout the course). Maybe I <u>can</u> fly!

Commenting on their experiences, others similarly refer to the valued support they receive from their mentor and from colleagues, and its impact on them. For example, Katie says:

> Whilst leading an after school club, a senior member of staff suggested I look into teaching as I have a good relationship with the children and that she could see that the children were enjoying the club and my input. The same teacher later approached me with details of the Foundation Degree, which at first I was reluctant to consider. Since then, not only have I started the Foundation Degree course, I have also achieved an NVQ2 in ICT and achieved my HLTA status.

Some describe how the course is enabling or has enabled them to be more reflective practitioners, and how this is having a direct impact in their work and the wider work of the unit within which they work:

> **Amy**
>
> Studying has greatly influenced the way I think about and view my working life. My studies evolved around my work practice and greatly informed my understanding and approach to many areas. I am a lot more confident in my role and was given extra responsibilities all through my study period in response to my growing confidence…. I feel that others within my school, parents included, are more aware of my role and responsibilities. I take the whole class on my own now, as a HLTA. Having learnt so much about myself and my subject area has also given me the confidence to tackle new projects.
>
> **Margaret**
>
> By completing the work-based tasks, it has made me think more in-depth about the job I am doing, the theory behind my action and the roles of others within the school

Many speak of how, with their mentor and colleagues' support, their roles are being redefined and, in some instances, enriched:

> **Fiona**
>
> I have taken on a role of team leader which I would not have done before. I am now in the third year and I have moved slightly away from the foundation stage and into Key stage 2, teaching year 3 and 6 art
>
> **Louise**
>
> The view I have at the moment is my role will be constantly changing and flexible. It will probably change depending upon the pupil's needs and welfare in school, and of course this will never be the same from day to day/year to year. My job description has changed since writing it 3 weeks ago and it will probably change again next term!

On the other hand, since graduating, some speak of a growing sense of frustration and concern because their roles remain the same. Claire, for example, says:

> My role as a learning support assistant is restricted in terms of how much of what I have learnt can be put into practice. Much of my time is spent following the teacher's instructions. Rarely do I have the opportunity to implement any of my initiative. The only opportunities that allow me to use my initiative is when I am working with an ELS programme or when I work with the children in the after school club.

Discussion and conclusions

An important outcome of this study is the realisation that previously discussed conceptualisations of the individual-organisation relationship can be brought together to form a tentative hypothesis to shed light on the relationship between personal and collective learning, and the processes of knowledge creation and sharing within organisational settings. Firstly, that the organisation can be usefully construed as a network of informal communities of practice, wherein people interact to meet their own, sometimes competing needs, and to learn how to do what needs to be done (Burgoyne and Jackson, 1997; Wenger, 1998) Secondly, that the way in which people negotiate, agree to create, and engage in these informal communities of practice, can be usefully explained in terms of an ongoing process of psychological contracting (Hayes & Dyer, 1999; Leach, 2002; Conway & Briner (2005).

It is apparent from the analysis that, when describing their everyday working experiences and the meanings they assign to them, the students are implicitly describing aspects of an ongoing process of emergent psychological contracting, operating at all times within their organisational settings. This process is represented in figure 2, which is grounded in the core analysis, and is best likened to unscripted drama. It is argued that new possibilities for investigating the changing individual-organisation learning relationship and the way knowledge is created and shared within organisational settings unfold when taking account of the everyday processes of psychological contracting; processes during which people's expectations of feeling safe, being valued as a person and for their work, and being beneficiaries of enacted support for personal, professional and career development are affirmed or breached. The 'contributory factors' are the content of the process of psychological contracting, which cause people to feel an implicit, unspoken psychological contract is being affirmed, renegotiated, or violated. The potential consequences among workers, when their expectations concerning psychological contract are affirmed, are feelings of enhanced self-confidence and esteem, a strengthening of their professional identities, their emergence as reflective practitioners, their willingness to engage in processes of knowledge creation and sharing within and across teams, and feelings of attachment to the organisation and its work.

In terms of people feeling safe, contributory factors are their perceptions concerning the ethos and relationships within teams and the organisation, the nature of communications within the team, and across the organisation, the attitudes and behaviours of leaders and managers, and the extent to which the working environment is one wherein they can safely engage in critical reflective practice.

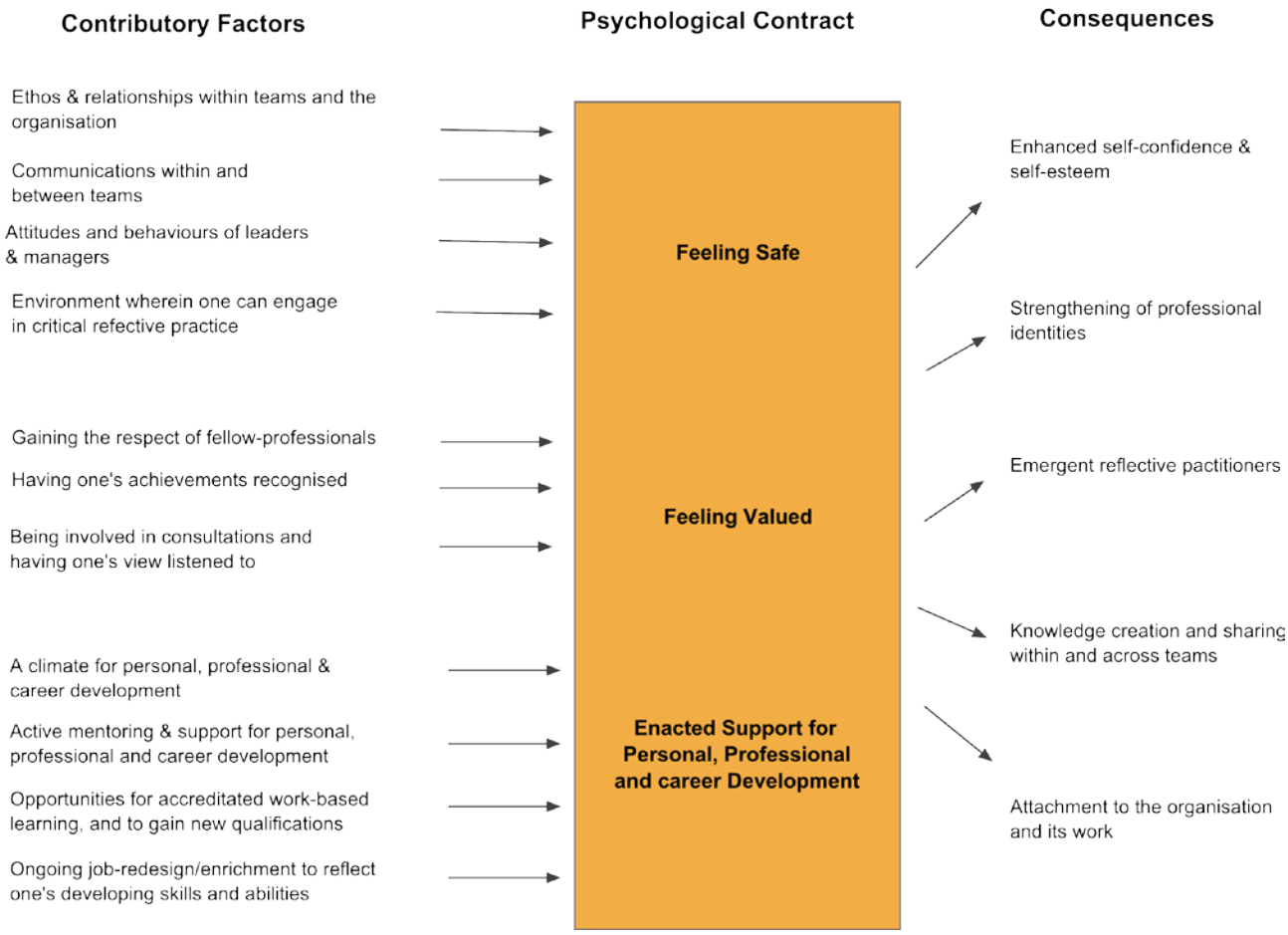
In terms of people feeling they are valued, contributory factors are their perceptions concerning the extent to which they have the respect of colleagues, leaders and managers, and, that colleagues, leaders and manager value the work they do, and their achievements. This includes being involved in professional conversations and having one's views listened to.

Most revealing is the extent to which individual stories focus on the importance of being beneficiaries of enacted support for personal, professional and career development. The emphasis is on 'enacted' and not

just ‘vocalised’ support. This involves notions of working in a safe and supportive organisation culture and climate, active mentoring, the supply of opportunities for accredited training and to gain new qualifications, and, a commitment to ensuring the work a person is ask to do is self-fulfilling and allows them to feel they can make best use of their developing knowledge and skills.

Figure 2

The ongoing process of psychological contracting and the changing individual-organisation relationship



Nowadays, it is commonplace for theorists and practitioners alike to claim that an organisation’s greatest resource is its people. The organisation’s future, it is suggested, is dependent in its willingness to nurture, build on and tap into people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all organisational levels and to embrace change (Senge, 1990). However, employee resistance to change has long been an issue of research interest, and a concern for leaders and managers. Commenting on this issue, King and Anderson assert:

> Resistance has been seen at best as disruptive and troublesome and at worst as a coordinated process of radical militancy designed to undermine the very fabric of managerial control. …Resistance has almost always been characterised as irrational, counter-productive behaviour engaged in by a minority of workers to the inevitable detriment of the organisation, and, in the long term, to the disbenefit of those employees themselves. (2002, p.195)

Far from being 'irrational', from the employee's perspective, her, or his, resistance to change might be construed as a rational response to the circumstances within which they find themselves. Well-managed change can produce a workforce that is committed, enthusiastic, and ready to deal with the challenges and stresses of demanding working practices. Badly managed change, however, has a graver psychological impact, producing staff who feel betrayed, mismanaged, or who are operating under unnecessarily stressful conditions (West & Wallace, 1991; West & Anderson, 1992). This in turn leads to problems with staff retention problems, apathy, burnout, and in some cases even malpractice.

The concept of the psychological contract at work is centred around the human sense of belonging, and unspoken assumptions of loyalty, reciprocity, and organisational commitment. Although recent changes to working practices have meant that the old concept of "jobs for life" is no longer to be expected, the overall concept of reciprocity between employer and employee ("you'll do right by us and we'll do right by you") has as much meaning in the modern world as it ever did (Hayes & Dyer, 1999). Consequently, it is apparent that, when planning, leading and managing interventions to encourage and support transformational learning within organisational contexts, successful outcomes are more likely when leaders and managers have an informed appreciation of how the processes of psychological contracting can often influence people's behaviours.

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