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Re-imagining Performance Management A Practice Insight Working Paper by Gary Handforth



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Re-imagining performance management

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‘Performance Management’ - *a process by which managers and employees work together to plan, monitor and review an employee's work objectives and overall contribution to the organization.*

‘Appraisal’ – *the act of estimating or judging the nature or value of something or someone.*

‘Collaboration’ – *‘the act of working with someone to produce something’*

Introduction

I've always been interested in understanding what the word ‘collaboration’, in a specific sense, actually means and what can be better understood about any practical application of collaborative group learning practices and team development in all of the schools I have ever worked in. Whether this is through our (Bright Futures Educational Trust) current whole Trust peer review model ‘Educational Review’, our Primary classroom ‘Reflective Inquiry’ approach for developing reflective practitioners, or our work on building a research community through ‘Practitioner Inquiry’. All of these approaches have a strong focus on

collaboration, team development and an emphasis on utilising and developing coaching principles from facilitators to develop individual and collective reflexivity.

Following a recent experience whilst establishing the annual cycle of performance management with individual middle leaders in a primary school, I decided to take a closer look at how we currently view and manage this system in our schools, asking: Could there be a better way for developing and applying a more collaborative process and group learning opportunity with performance management? This question led me to consider how a more collective approach could be adopted which could better promote self and group reflection by taking a wider view of reality. That through prompting individual actions that work in a relational sense to the work and actions of others, ultimately creating a more practical and realistic approach that better reflects reality and where we are all held accountable to each other.

Working with ImpactEd and Leeds Beckett University, and supporting the wider ambitions to develop rigorous inquiry across our schools, this particular year-long study aims to explore how a more collective and collaborative approach to performance management and personal and professional development may be influenced by team working. The study aims to weave group coaching into the staff appraisal process, using collaborative methods to encourage joint practice opportunities. Over the course of this year, Bright Futures Educational Trust (BFET) is partnering with ImpactEd and Leeds Beckett to trial and evaluate a collaborative coaching method with Primary Learning Assistants, Key workers and Lunchtime Organisers (lunchtime support) across 3 schools. During this period, myself and a number of trained coaches/middle and senior leaders will facilitate small group staff sessions, using individual and paired activities for participants to reflect on their work and to analyse the impact of their own and others skills and knowledge.

Individuals share their professional aims and objectives and, as a group, and if appropriate, agree on a common objective for pupils, which is supported by their unique individual professional development objectives. These objectives

are then openly discussed and developed throughout the year through collaborative approaches and everyday working practices. This will differ according to particular roles and responsibilities e.g. for the lunchtime organisers, a more common pupil focused objective for all pupils may be more suitable, whereas for the Primary Learning Assistants and Mentors these may be focused at the individual child or small group level and be different in each key phase e.g. Early Years, Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2. In all situations, and through developing enabling conditions to encourage the development of group dynamics, the practitioner is also asked to reflect on their own professional and personal objectives in relation to the shared objective, unique to the individual but then openly shared with others.

The ambition is to reimagine traditional top-down accountability by instead using collaborative coaching methods to develop a more mutual and horizontal (or flat) accountability approach with a small team of people who are accountable to and for each other. The intention is for this to build both individual and staff (collective) agency and a strong sense of community through working towards common and aired goals, alongside the development of both personal and professional goals that will impact positively on self and pupil

outcomes. In the long term, to develop a culture of shared professional learning.

ImpactEd and BFET are working in partnership to develop the rationale for action, an outcomes framework, data collection and analysis and reporting methods. A Carnegie researcher (Leeds University) will add significant domain knowledge and expertise to this process.

What is performance management?

Performance management is usually determined by the following principles:

- Establish objectives at the beginning.
- Hold people to account by setting clear targets, goals and outcomes.
- Build in the necessary development of skills and knowledge to undertake the work.

Ultimately, this is to improve performance, and, in the case of schools, to improve the quality of provision which will impact positively on pupil outcomes. The measure of the impact (normally pupil grades) is often the main metric to which people are judged (at the end of the year) in terms of their overall effectiveness.

A typical Review meeting follows a basic structure:

- Goal setting
- Identifying specific tasks
- An agreement on methods of evaluation
- The nature of feedback and when to expect it (e.g. normally once or twice in the annual cycle e.g. mid-cycle review meeting, end of cycle meeting)
- Rating methods used for the end of cycle evaluation (e.g. met/not met/partially met)

Based on the recent experience of individual meetings with middle leaders, I decided to explore these traditional approaches and to consider how new collaborative methods of bringing individuals together to establish common goals, to reflect and then openly share individual personal and professional needs might be a smarter way of working together and one that could have greater benefits for themselves, the organisation and ultimately for the students whom they are working with.

Encouraging divergent thinking

Reality is diverse and our systems need to acknowledge this and to encourage more divergent thinking. After a series of nine, one-hour individual appraisal meetings with 'middle leaders' in a large primary school, I asked myself 'why am I holding

individual one-to-one meetings with people who have similar shared responsibilities and are working on many overlapping projects or ideas?' All are focused on common goals which are directly related to the school's development strategy and on pupil targets and many have similarities around professional development where each person could actively support the other. After 2 or 3 of these meetings, it became increasingly obvious that too many opportunities were being missed for each person to work together towards overall goals and to provide the support for each other's professional development, and that this shouldn't be left solely to chance. That we should be working with, alongside and in the natural nature of the diversity of the school systems and provide the space and time to reflect on how this continually develops and grows.

The work of the middle leaders had many cross-over elements: e.g. Pupil objectives for an attendance lead had a direct relationship with those of the behaviour lead and a creative arts lead. Their work also related to the leader on parental partnerships and so on. Regarding one without the other is a rather myopic, or mono-disciplinary view of education and does not necessarily reflect the reality of the complex school system and how we

(and things) work. That this view could be limiting the possibility of seeing how things work relationally and in a more multi or trans-disciplinary manner. At best, I was acting as a signpost for each of the middle leaders, signalling them to come together to discuss their work. At worst, as a blocker engaged in a model that prevents and frustrates the natural flow of information and knowledge already 'out there' in the school system. I would also be repeating this process during the mid-year review meetings. Like a hub attaching and binding the spokes of a wheel I felt that I needed to somehow remove the control of the hub from this process, relocate myself as a group facilitator and bring the middle leaders together as a group that would form a more dynamic, responsive and fluid system that more accurately reflects the diverse reality of a school, not as an overly rigid structure that attempts to place a sense of control through a series of pre-planned events that attempts to accurately predict all of the outcomes from the outset.

In a recent research paper from the CIPD; 'Could do Better: assessing what works in performance management' (Dec 2017), there lies a strong criticism of the more traditional performance reviews which is made on several grounds. They are seen to be:

- overly time-consuming
- energy-sapping
- disappointing and ultimately demotivating
- divisive and not conducive to co-operation and effective team-working;

and, most damningly:

- not effective drivers of performance.

Rob Lebow and Randy Spitzer (1991) support this view:

'too often, appraisal destroys human spirit and, in the span of a 30-minute meeting, can transform a vibrant, highly committed employee into a demoralized, indifferent wildflower who reads the want ads on the weekend....'

They go on to say....

'They don't work because most performance management appraisal systems are a form of judgement and control'

Furthermore, in a recent article in Harvard Business Review (2017), Cappelli and Tavis (2016) argue that current changes to performance management are a result of changing strategic priorities. Specifically, in advanced economies, there is now less need for individual accountability and more of a need for group development; for

greater agility and shorter-term targets; and for *teamwork rather than individual performance*. Suggesting that, what was appropriate several decades ago is an outdated method for achieving strategic goals and may no longer be the most appropriate method.

'Companies of all sizes are shifting away from annual appraisals to more regular 'check-ins' and frequent real-time feedback and the redesign of performance management is now a high priority for 79% of executives according to Deloitte'

I wonder if we work under a myth of control? That it is only through tightly managed systems and predetermined imposed structures and plans that we will be able to navigate the system better and accurately predict outcomes? It may well be true that such systems do have their time and place and that this may well depend on the nature and context of a system, but not always. Over the past 15 years and in many leadership positions, as an Assistant Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, Head teacher, and currently as Executive Headteacher and Director of Education in a Multi Academy Trust, I have conducted countless appraisal meetings and never or rarely have they tightly followed the initial path and plans neatly established from the outset.

What I have learned over this time is that the shortest point between A and B is not a straight line. The line evolves as we move through the process and it is only through regular 'check-ins' and feedback that we will be able to make sense of what we are doing and adjust the route along the way. What Argyris (2010) describes as 'double-loop' learning which provides a focus on the reasons for behaviours and visible emergent results, and not to simply act on the more mechanistic processes that may fail to address the underlying internal and external factors impacting on these visible outcomes as we move and progress. This asks us to find meaning together, in a group, and to suspend our individual assumptions (which may be limiting ones) and embedded and entrenched biases but to pause and consider the perspective of others before we rush to action.

So why are we still using a system that still places most of its emphasis on a one-to-one meeting, a one-to-one mid-point review and a one-to-one end of year review to assess or appraise performance over the course of an annual cycle? Surely, as we learn more about the complexity of modern workplaces, the increasing speed of information and changes to the educational system that are unprecedented e.g. mass

migration/movement of people, we would be better suited to become more adaptive and responsive and to look again at how we try to manage the workplace and manage people and performance.

'Managing' systems pre-supposes that we can somehow determine the path and predict the end points of something that is continually shifting, evolving, fluid, dynamic and changing. As Cappelli and Tavis argue, we live and work in different times and the management methods we once used are now outdated.

School systems are socially complex and not easily suited to be shepherded or annexed from the outset. These systems have a large degree of turbulence brought together through complex interconnections that emerge through a process of engagement, they don't always follow artificial boundaries. Consider the open water sea swimmer (water and waves provide a type of reality for the school's ever-changing environment). Each wave generates a new challenge and, no matter what we thought when looking out from the shore and how we read the waves before we set out, it is only through subjective experience that the body 'learns' to swim the next wave, adjusting along the way. We may have some basic 'facts' from which we work e.g. the rip tide, the swell, the weather conditions but this

isn't nearly enough. Sure, we need some facts from which to operate but surely we need to emulate this more chaotic type of system with something that provides regular feedback opportunities throughout the year, and not constrained to a mid-cycle meeting (how are we getting on after 20 waves?) or an end of year review (too late – already drowned). One which can make sense of the different experiences we encounter along the way, embedding high quality reflection, dialogue and feedback, together, with others and embedded as part of the process.

In the example, the swimmer has a type of 'know how' knowledge and, through active participation, develops their new knowledge as an emergent property dependent on the ever-changing conditions of the water (the 'real' school environment) - knowledge forming through the interpretation of each individual encounter. Along with their 'know that' knowledge – they 'know that' the weather is poor, that the rip tide is moving at 8ft per second, and the swell is generating large waves – it is through bringing both forms of knowledge together that is much more effective and, in the case of the sea swimmer, life-saving! Through bringing both knowledge and skills together, and particularly in collaboration with others, which brings in a much wider view of

experiences and different and diverse perspectives, then we would have a much fitter system that better reflects the reality of the diversity of school life. Diverse systems call for divergent thinking.

We can't always accurately predict school systems by an initial analysis of specific individual roles and then ascribing a set of pre-established actions to rigorously follow. No doubt, this is useful in the sense of 'Know That'. But we also need to cultivate regular meetings where we 'listen in' to emerging real-life examples and lived experiences from those 'in the sea'. Responding to our 'Know How' through sharing knowledge about what appears to be working and what doesn't and able to make real-time adjustments that better serve the needs of pupils in a timely manner.

Can we change the system? 'What if?'

What if we not only had more opportunities to 'check-in' but that we also brought teams or groups of people together as active participants?

What if, instead of one-to-one individual meetings with, in the case of this study, Learning Assistants, Mentors and Lunchtime Organisers that we brought

them together to explore collective and individual goals from the beginning?

What if we planned for regular feed-back meetings (check-ins) that would enable everybody to be able to pay attention to what emerges (for and from each other) as we move through the different waves of experiences?

What if the role of the 'appraiser' changed to one of the 'group supervisor/group coach/group facilitator' whose central role would be to create the necessary conditions for this type of reflection, dialogue and decision-making to take place within a group of people?

What if their role (and ultimately, their responsibility) would be to ensure that the process is robust, that both pupil, personal and professional targets/objectives were challenging and that the conditions of engagement provided high levels of support not just from themselves but from the others in the group?

These systems and conditions for professional learning would not only help develop deep and meaningful professional relationships across the school but could ultimately better serve the overall aims: to

improve individual (professional) performance that will impact positively on pupils as well as on the overall goals of the organisation.

What if we stopped trying to 'manage' a system but instead provided the opportunity for the system to manage itself, and in doing so, better reflect reality, becoming more adaptive, flexible and self-renewing.

At a time when we are:

- Dedicated to reducing Teacher workload
- Focusing on mental health and well-being
- Having high regard for work-life balance
- Maximising the benefit of support staff
- Trying to better understand collaboration and collaborative working processes
- Developing stronger accountability structures

Wouldn't working together in collaborative groups or teams be a better, more effective, coherent and efficient system?

How does this work?

Initial objective setting

I worked with 2 separate groups:

Lunchtime Organisers

Working with the lunchtime organisers, I had to consider that some roles in schools are not always conducive to outcome goals for pupils that might be specifically about academic task performance, test results etc... but that a more appropriate consideration should be on behaviour and learning objectives/outcomes that sometimes cannot be easily measured. I also noted that the language we sometimes use for teachers and school leaders e.g. targets, success criteria, timescales, may not be appropriate or easily accessible in the sense of truly understanding what these mean and applied meaningfully. I felt that the process we should use needs to lean towards a learning orientation rather than a performance orientation for appraisal, and that the complexity of the work may well dictate this e.g. the complexity of lunchtimes. This particular view encouraged me to think differently and to help them to set a general objective, one that comes from an initial collective group dialogue and group decision-making process and was not too singularly specific but covers a general theme or aim which could still be measured, to some

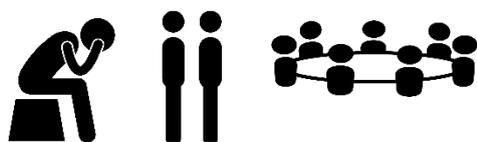
extent, in terms of its general impact. Although in most circumstances we follow the SMART objective setting process (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-related) and that these are suitably challenging, it is not necessarily always the case that this will be appropriate and that this approach could develop a rather reductive understanding of systems. Better, I think, and specifically for the complex work of the Lunchtime Organisers and lunchtimes, to have an overarching collective objective which everybody, in their own unique way, can work towards. The Lunchtime Organisers would still have a personal objective to which they are solely accountable but shared with others to develop mutual accountability – responsible to supporting and developing each other. This process is much better if all of these ideas came from the participants themselves as they will be more likely to invest their efforts if they thought of them themselves, a very human trait!

Primary learning assistants and mentors (PLA/PLM)

Working alongside middle leaders (who were to be the group coaches/facilitators throughout the year for the PLAs and PLOs) the initial meeting followed a similar pattern to that of the Lunchtime Organisers in that it consisted of

individuals 'telling their stories' about their work and a sharper focus on reflecting on their past and current work specific to their role and responsibility in the school (e.g. individual intervention programmes targeted at specific pupils or previous personal/professional development work, professional training and courses). The PLAs and PLMs share the successes and failures of these within paired and group settings. and because the quality of thinking depends on the quality of questions being asked, we train all of our group supervisors (in this case, the middle leaders) as coaches, not just through our Teaching School coaching programme but also through planned continual development in the form of supervisory sessions throughout the year. Because of this, it was possible to organise the session into smaller, phase teams from the outset.

How this worked – the initial meeting



For both groups, the initial meetings explored what we (as a collective) wanted to achieve and that a relationship was established between this and the school's development plans. For some, a powerful moment, as this was the first time they

had seen the plan in full detail. From this, we created a general objective with the Lunchtime Organisers but more specific and targeted objectives for the PLAs/Mentors. Through a planned process of individual reflection (I think), paired discussion (you think), opening up the possibility of 're-think', and whole group dialogue (we think), each person decided on how they would contribute to this.

This forms a collaborative team of individuals that will develop an approach to solving problems together. This method may not only help to develop the reflection skills of the individual, and avoid, to some extent, individual power dynamics taking over the group process, acting on what one person thinks from one person's perspective (everybody has a valid voice) but it could also bring about a greater sense of open and transparent (horizontal) accountability. In other words, everybody knows what everybody else is working on and that everybody is working towards a common and agreed objective that is closely linked to current school priorities.

This is a fully participative process and one which provides the opportunity for individuals to grasp their own reins of responsibility and allows them to put their

hearts into their work. As is the case of the open water swimmer, these meetings gave some clear parameters to start with (know that) but they also allow the system to develop, self-organising in a way that is natural to the people working within them and responding to their 'know how'.

This has a strong purpose from the outset, commits individual to personal actions and binds the group together to provide a pattern for their future behaviours.

'If an organisation asserts more control, people tend to withdraw or become disengaged'

and;

'They just do what they're told'

(Margaret Wheatley, Finding our way p.205)

The initial group meetings ensured that each participant first reflected on their place at work over the previous year(s) and that they were able to share this with others. From this, they then considered what their professional targets would be for the forthcoming year.

The structure of this meeting followed our trust-wide coaching model by asking:

- What is the current reality?
- What would the ideal scenario look like?
- What actions need to be taken?

We also considered; what is the likely impact of our work? How would we know? This developed into a common objective for the lunchtime organisers;

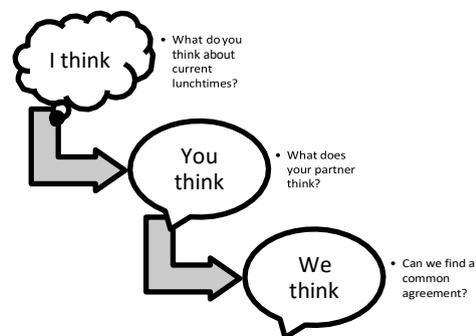
What are 'we' going to be working on?

This started with a 'I think – You think – We think' approach. Listening to ourselves and the views of all the people. This was a general objective for the Lunchtime Organisers but a more specific phase and role one for the PLAs and PLMs.

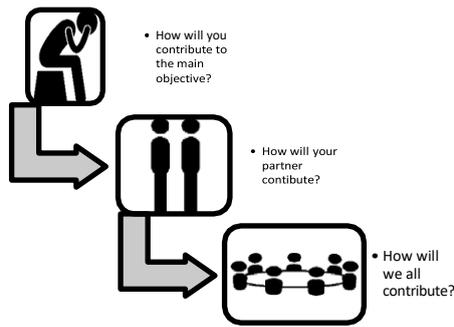
What are you going to be working on?

Drawing out the individual contribution towards the general objective.

Gaining perspectives of the current reality



And from this, develop the ideal and the actions we will take:



Mid-Cycle Reviews: On-going/Check-in meetings

For the middle leaders who are working with the PLAs and PLMs, we are embedding regular check-in meetings throughout the year and as part of their normal (phase) practice of team meetings. It is during these meetings where individuals will reflect on the progress of their work, to have their thinking explored and challenged as part of a group and their individual contributions. For this process, the middle leaders are also available for one-to-one discussions but the emphasis is on group work.

For the Lunchtime Organisers, and for more obvious practical reasons e.g. contractual availability, there is more of a focus on planned sessions where we can come together as a group to explore the collective objective and their individual contribution. These sessions will also provide training opportunities that have become more apparent as this system itself encourages better communication and openness.

As mentioned, there will be a supervisory session throughout the year between myself and the middle leaders who are responsible for the PLMs and PLAs. This is to explore how they are developing this process, what type of issues are emerging and how they can support each other.

End of year appraisal – no surprises

Several organisations that are grouped as part of the shift away from annual appraisals, in fact, continue to have end-of-year assessments (Baer 2014, Cappelli and Tavis 2016). For example, Adobe’s manager ‘check-ins’ may be regular and informal, but they are nonetheless ‘tied to people having yearly expectations’ (Baer 2014). However, a distinction is usually made in that these annual meetings are secondary to more regular meetings – they are a way of formalising the discussions that have already taken place during the year and potentially making the link with administrative decisions on pay, promotion and so on. There should be no surprises as the conversations are happening through the year anyway.

Our final review meetings would ask the individuals to present their work over the course of the year. The team coach encouraging questions from the group, where self-perception is held up and interrogated against peer perception as a more meaningful reflection on individual and group contributions.

If necessary, any issues regarding competency would still be able to be picked up in one-to-one meetings throughout the year, concerns of underperformance made apparent throughout the process and not as a surprise at the end of the year when it is too late to adjust.

Summary – ‘Walking the Talk’ or how this work is linked to our organisation's vision and core values

At Bright Futures Educational Trust, we hold our values of; Community, Integrity and Passion, and our vision: ‘the best for everyone, the best from everyone’ very close to our hearts and we constantly look for opportunities to make sure that these are in use and not just laminated signs put up on the corridors and classrooms in each of our schools. We actively explore opportunities to develop positive relationships and effective communication systems that will develop the very best from everybody in the organisation.

This approach develops and unlocks talents in all of our people: **‘the best from everyone’**

It also provides opportunities for people to work together on common goals: **‘the best for everyone’**

It follows that there could be a reduction in bureaucratic workload (by meeting everybody together and not as a long

series of one-to-one meetings). That we have more of a focus on intentionally developing meaningful relationships and learning communities (by design) where teaching and learning is seen as a team effort stimulated through enabling systems. Systems of professional learning where people come together to listen to each other, to identify and solve problems, to create new approaches and ideas, and to share in successes and failures. A more adaptive, rewarding and responsive system.

I see this as a radical shift in the way that people view their roles and responsibilities and not as a soft option that moves away from traditional vertically managed accountability. The open nature and transparency of the meetings may well create greater accountability as individual objectives and actions are exposed to a wider audience and thus creates greater mutual responsibility with the additional benefit of encouraging stronger support mechanisms across the school network to take root i.e. if I know what you are working on, this not only exposes your work but ensures that I’m in a better position to support you. If I know what you are working on, you are more accountable. This approach reflects the actual and real adverse nature of how systems are actually operating in a school setting – providing a better understanding

of the relational and systemic nature of things.

I believe that it is through individuals sharing their 'stories' that other people can help them to make sense of their experiences, explore new ideas, make better decisions and develop new professional habits, and from this, emerges stronger working relationships. I believe that it is within collaborative groups that the individual finds a place where their own internal reflections ('I think') is developed through the different interpretations and perspectives offered first with a partner ('You think') and then within the group ('We think'). Ultimately, both an individual and collective agency is cultivated and developed.

By using storytelling as a method of engaging individuals in a group process, we are able to make sense of our self and our past actions. They provide a way of understanding our experiences in order to strategise and plan. In other words, the regular meetings provide the space and time to explore the continuous chain of connected activities not, and seen more in the case of 1 or 2 meetings, as a discrete process that is occasionally revisited.

This approach does require deep levels of relational trust within the group which can be built up over time and must be expertly facilitated by an experienced group coach who must set the right conditions for

quality dialogue to be able to guide the group dialogic process as it emerges. Not an easy task!

A return to 'Collaboration'

Traditional models of appraisal are often centred around individual agency and individual performance levels, yet they often (always?) rely on the collaboration of others from within the network. We do see this shift towards collective agency in many flourishing school environments where processes and structures encourage this to happen, but not, I would hazard a guess, in many. The traditional model just feels counter-productive and is working against a naturally organising system. As my early frustrations of one-to-one meetings illustrated, there is a clear need to look at the (social) power of collective agency and the impact this could have on performance and better achieving the goals of the organisation, the goals of the individual and on pupil outcomes (and not necessarily always on test scores and exam results).

A focus on collaborative learning provides a different approach to understanding knowledge sharing, knowledge generation and knowledge transmission as part of normal and everyday work practices. Re-imagining performance management as a process of collaborative learning supports

the engagement of individuals working in a social system through a form of embodied learning ('know how') which makes better use of knowledge and applies it to particular contexts.

It is through establishing collaborative environments that we may be able to better explore individual assumptions and biases and our take on reality. What 'I think' may not be what 'you think' and it is through collaborative environments that we are able to listen to and take on new perspectives and to better avoid possible recycling of redundant patterns of thought and behaviours from one realm to another,

or from one year to another. Perhaps, by establishing more collaborative environments, we can affect the way we share, generate and transmit knowledge and provide a strong platform from which to develop professional skills and tune into our personal ambitions. By doing so we need to focus more on the environment of how to establish group settings where dialogue is encouraged, where meaning is explored and interpreted and where collective and individual actions are developed. Not only a more effective and efficient system but also a better place to work.

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