Learning Power, Coaching and Personal Development

The ELLI in Business 'Proof of Concept' Project

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The report of project exploring the value and potential of the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory to frame coaching conversations for personal and professional development in a business context.

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1   Introduction

a. Context and purpose

Tom Chalk (TC) and Nigel Hewson (NH) became aware of the *Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory* (ELLI*) research during 2009 and attended a day in at the University of Bristol, also attended by the leaders of Waitrose's Learning and Personal Development Department, exploring the relevance of ELLI to the business context. Introducing Andy Black (AB) and Tessa Hammill (TH), of Saturn Consulting to the ELLI team, as trusted consultants and management coaches, they agreed to further explore, through a small 'proof of concept' study, whether and how ELLI might be of benefit to the Bank. This is the report of that study, with all names changed to protect the anonymity of the Bank.

Three stages were envisaged, starting with this limited 'proof of concept' study over three to four months, moving on to a full 'Research and Development Project should the findings from this initial project warrant it, and ultimately a possible roll-out across a wider part of the organisation.

The following areas of investigation were agreed as potential learning objectives from working with ELLI and informed planning and methodology. Those in blue (marked *) were addressed specifically through this initial 'proof of concept' project (see section 3 'Findings'):

1. How does Learning Power (as measured by ELLI) relate to YF scores and dimensions?
2. What is the learning power profile of the sample?*
3. What are practical and helpful intervention strategies to use to change learning power in the business context?*
4. What are the (qualitative) outcomes following interventions in terms of learning power and other (quantitative) outcome measures, e.g. YF pulse survey
5. What is the business impact of outcomes, to drive business case
6. How to make this different from all the other PD stuff
7. How does this approach fit with other tools/competency frameworks
8. Can ELLI provide benefits in a business context?*
9. How valid is ELLI valid in this context?
10. How do we need to adapt the language/presentation of ELLI survey and tools to the business context?* i.e. branding and adapting implementation
11. How do we make the model self-sustaining?

The following were seen as potential changes to the status quo that might benefit the company and/or its people and be facilitated by use of the ELLI inventory:

1. Improve YF scores where relevant
2. Measurably improve 'real world learning capability' at individual, team (and dept) level - sustainably

3. Deliver a scalable approach (to change management and PDP) which can be used across marketing and other areas
4. Enable business to maximise benefit of new, 'high learning leverage' systems
5. Improve attitudes to self, work, learning

*See **Appendix 1** for a one-page Introduction to ELLI.

b. Success Criteria

It was agreed that the concept would be 'proved' to merit further Research and Development if the following were found to be true:

1. That it was possible to explain the principles and theory of ELLI to business executives in a way that made sense to them and enabled them to understand its relevance to their context
2. That (all or most of) the participants engaged with the concepts and strategies in coaching conversations and were able to apply them to their work and learning
3. That those who did so found them helpful to their professional purpose and goals
4. That a sustainable model for application and use could be found in the business structure.

2   Methodology

a. Planning

TS met with TC and NH for half a day on 7th December 2009 when the learning objectives above were discussed and TS drew up a provisional schedule for consultation, including a one-day course to familiarise participants with ELLI which was then planned in close consultation with AB and TH. The principal intervention following that was to be a brief series of coaching conversations, using ELLI profiles as a starting point and frame of reference, running from mid-January 2010 through to the end of March (later extended to the end of April).

See **Appendix 2** for the schedule in its final form, following consultation and amendment in the light of developments.

b. Familiarisation Course

The project started with 19 participants attending the familiarisation course at the Gogarburn HQ Training Centre in Edinburgh on 23rd-24th January 2010. It included, after a brief introduction to the purpose of the course and presentation on ELLI, the opportunity for participants to complete their own profiles, using the ELLI online inventory. The group explored their profiles in coaching-style conversations with each other on the morning of the second day, which continued in interactive workshop style to explore the potential application of ELLI-related coaching in the RBP context. Previously published resources, developed and tested in a schools context, were adapted by participants for use as strategies to choose from, to improve learning capacity in a business context.

See **Appendix 3** for the familiarisation course programme.

c. Coaching conversations

TS, AB and TH divided the group between them, taking six participants each (7 for TS) and doubling up on some of the first conversations to ensure consistency of approach. Coaches and their 'learners' agreed to frequency and timing of subsequent conversations, which were generally characterised by attention to:

- confidential use of the ELLI profile as a starting point
- exploration of relative strengths and weaknesses in terms of 'Learning Power'
- connections between these and the learner's experience, especially in the workplace
- opportunities and strategies for building on strengths and addressing weaknesses
- potential and actual impact of the strategies on work, performance and satisfaction

Generally, three-to-four such conversations were conducted, mainly face-to-face, but some by audio link, between the day of the course and the end of April.

A set of change strategies, developed for use in school contexts and edited and adapted by the group as part of the familiarisation workshop, was circulated as an aide memoire.

Coaches, at least for the first one or two times, would follow conversations up with a brief written summary, sent confidentially by email to the learner, of the key points and strategies discussed.

d. Quantitative and qualitative data and analysis

Quantitative data about the learning power of the group was collected automatically by the ELLI online inventory. Individual feedback was used to frame the coaching conversations, whilst analysis of the group's collective learning power profile was fed back to the group as part of the evaluation (see below). The sample was too small to warrant statistical analysis, so findings were used tentatively to stimulate discussion and interpretation by participants, rather than to make significant claims. No comparative pre-post analysis was undertaken, for the same reason.

Qualitative data was collected through a standard (anonymous) feedback sheet on the Familiarisation Course, an anonymous coaching feedback survey (reported on in **section 3 Findings**, below) and verbatim notes taken during the evaluation meeting (see **Appendix 4**).

e. Evaluation

An evaluation workshop was organised via video link between Edinburgh and London on 6th May, attended by sixteen of the group. The analysis of quantitative data was presented and discussed in four groups and notes were taken of the summary conclusions reached and suggestions for the way forward. These are reported on in **section 3 Findings**, below.

See **Appendix 5** for the Evaluation Workshop programme.

3   Findings and Evidence

Some, though not all of the learning objectives identified (in section 1, Introduction, above) were addressed by this short 'Proof of Concept' project with its limited methodology and sample size.

a. The Learning Power Profile of the Sample

The following frequency tables and commentary were presented at the Evaluation Workshop:


Changing and Learning:

This is really strong. Ten of the group report themselves as 'very like me', being above 80% in this Dimension (four at the maximum point in their spider diagrams). The other nine are 'quite like me' and there is no apparent significant weakness in the self reports. It suggests that there is a good recognition of continual learning and change in individuals, rather than a feeling of being 'stuck as you are' and having 'nowhere to go' in your learning.
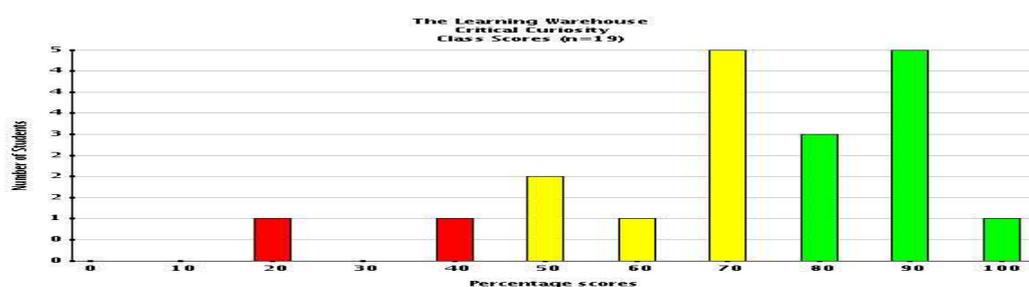
Critical Curiosity:

Here, almost half the group reports itself to be strong in this Dimension and nearly another third at the upper end of the middle band, whilst the other five are spread further across the spectrum, with just two people feeling this is 'not very like me'. This has featured in some of the conversations as people have seen the value of using questioning to really understand a stakeholder's position in order to be able to support and influence them better.

The Learning Warehouse
Meaning Making
Class Scores (n=19)
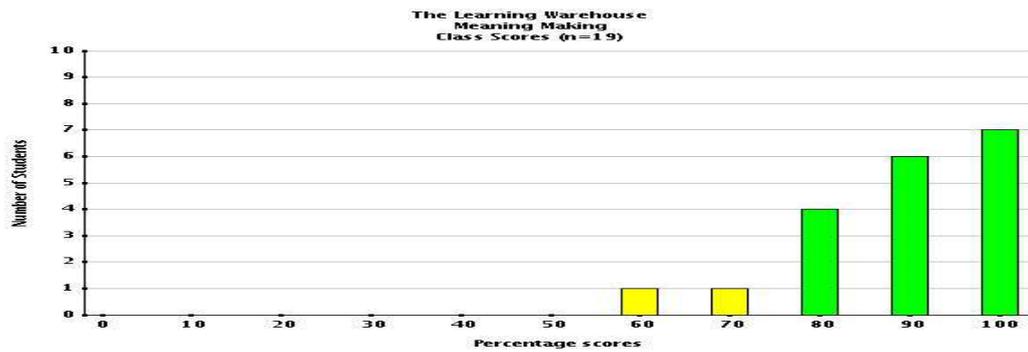
Meaning Making:

Note the difference in the vertical axis here – numbers climb more steeply. This is the strongest dimension in the group by far, indicating a readiness to connect and combine learning from different contexts, including own experience, to see relevance and make sense of what is encountered. This suggests a powerful intellectual grasp of the new learning available in the context.

The Learning Warehouse
Creativity
Class Scores (n=19)

Creativity:

This is more evenly distributed across the spectrum than any so far. It is split roughly between a third of the group reporting themselves as relatively strong in this, a third as in the middle and a third as relatively weak. It suggests that, whilst some are able and prepared to do things their own way, bring their imagination and intuition to bear on their learning and even be 'playful' about it, there are as many who tend to 'stick to the rules' or follow the procedures and patterns they are used to, sticking to the script or feeling there is 'a way of doing things', especially where learning is concerned. One interesting thing to discuss about this is how it relates to the *attitude to risk* in the organisational culture.

The Learning Warehouse
Resilience
Class Scores (n=19)
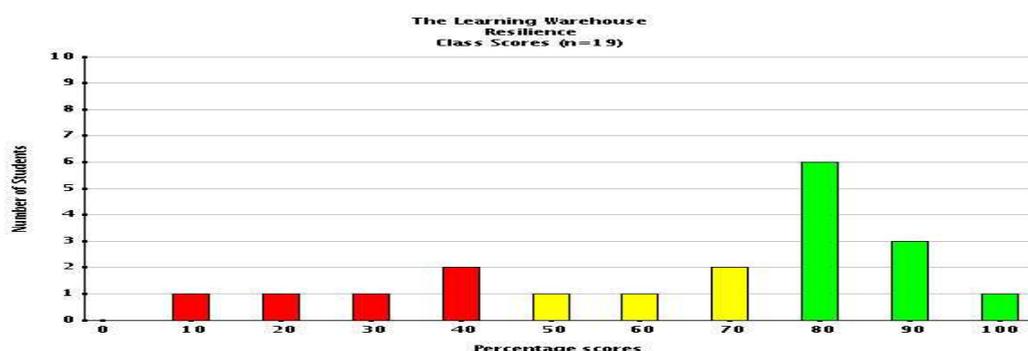
Resilience:

This is also spread across the spectrum, but with more (just over half) of the group reporting themselves as strong in this dimension – i.e. *not* fragile and dependent. The other half of the group report themselves as either in the middle or having significant scope for development in this dimension, self-reported weakness in which is sometimes associated with anxiety about failure in high achievers, especially when combined with high levels of *Changing and Learning* and *Meaning Making* which are both very strong here in the group generally*.*

The Learning Warehouse
Strategic Awareness
Class Scores (n=19)
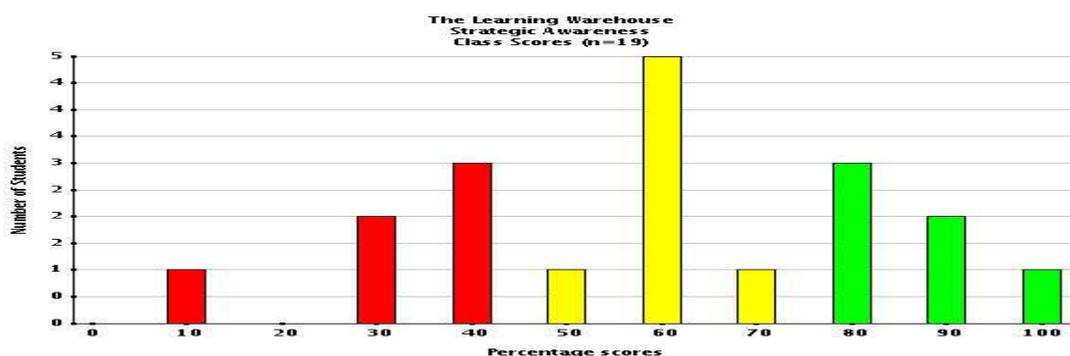
Strategic Awareness:

This is also spread quite evenly across the spectrum with roughly a third reporting high levels, a third in the middle and a third relatively low levels of *Strategic Awareness*. This is another dimension that figured quite prominently in the coaching conversations. Remembering that the data can reflect as much the context of the learning as the learners themselves, the discussion point here might be about whether the culture encourages or inhibits the development of this dimension, particularly in the way 'Business As Usual' attitudes and being 'in delivery mode' can make it more difficult to step back and identify strategic priorities, reflect on quality and prepare thoughtfully for key meetings and critical decision-making, rather than simply 'playing by ear'.

The Learning Warehouse
Learning Relationships
Class Scores (n=19)
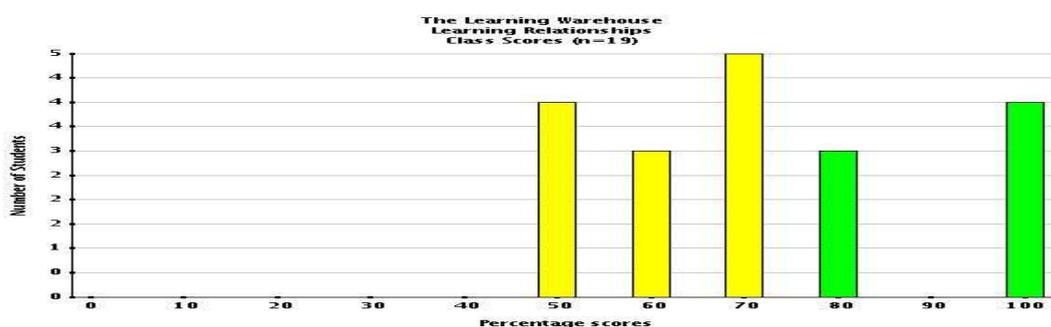
Learning Relationships:

This is another strong dimension in this group, with no one reporting themselves as weak in it and just over a third being strong. It suggests that people are, on the whole, ready to seek advice and work as a team as well as being able to manage alone when they have to. Those who still have scope and desire to become stronger in this dimension will probably reflect on how much more they

might learn by calling more intentionally on their social and professional resources and seeking support, advice and inspiration from others – possibly bringing their *Critical Curiosity* more into play in the context of their relationships.

Overall Interpretation

The group is particularly strong in three of the seven dimensions of Learning Power: *Changing and Learning, Meaning Making* and *Learning Relationships*. This would indicate a relatively high achieving and communicative group of people confident of their capacity to learn, adapt, relate and consult. They are particularly strong in making sense of what they encounter. Whatever challenges they face, which might include that of reinforcing some of the other learning power dimensions, these strengths will be of great service to them.

Of the four dimensions in which their self-reported strengths and weaknesses are more evenly spread, two of them, *Creativity* and *Resilience*, are particularly personal: being about individuals finding their own way of doing things, thinking 'outside the box', overcoming any fear of failure and following through their intentions. The other two, *Critical Curiosity* and *Strategic Awareness*, are often as much about the learning context as about the individuals concerned: potentially illuminating such issues as whether they have sufficient opportunity and encouragement to question, challenge and seek answers, or to step back, reflect, prioritise, plan, take responsibility and direct their own learning and professional development.

b. What are practical and helpful intervention strategies to use to change learning power in the business context?

In this project, although the group contributed to some useful editing and adaptation of existing, published change strategies, the coaching conversations were the principal intervention. It was anticipated that their quality and effectiveness would depend on at least three factors:

- the coaches' and learners' understanding of the seven Learning Power Dimensions
- their ability to relate them to daily experience and consider how they might apply to it
- their willingness to try out change strategies developed through the quality conversations

Finding: **All of the four groups in the Evaluation Workshop reported aspects of the one-to-one coaching as being amongst the 'positive features' of the ELLI programme.**

Finding: **The Coaching Feedback forms, returned anonymously, indicated that a majority of the group found the coaching beneficial, whilst a minority had doubts about its impact and relevance.**

Evidence included:

- *The coaching has helped me to look again at what opportunities there may be in my job that the ELLI principles can be applied to, and in doing so add value to the existing task*

- *It has to an extent, challenged me to question decisions/logic more often, to gain better understanding, and generally to seek a deeper understanding of technical issues.*

- *I found the course invaluable in identifying areas/dimensions which I need to develop. Discussion with (my coach) provided me with confidence to tackle some of those areas, putting in practice some pointers … to implement daily during business engagement with others.*

- *I don't think ELLI has had any immediate impact as although I found the ELLI profile interesting I struggled to understand how it impacted on my work as it was focused on how you learn*

- *I enjoyed the coaching sessions as it helped me look at my role from a different perspective, and also it made me take a little time to evaluate what work I had done prior to each session*

- *I recommend that we have the external coaches for longer. This will provide more opportunities for both parties to work together and turning development areas in to a habitual strength.*

c. Can ELLI provide benefits in a business context?

Both the group feedback in the Evaluation Workshop and comments made in the anonymous Coaching Feedback survey suggested that benefits had accrued from the project, both personally, for a significant proportion of the individuals involved, and potentially for the business as a whole.

Finding: a number of the participants experienced personal benefit in terms of their work

Evidence included:

- *Personally, I found it quite useful and would be interested to see how my sessions developed and how this could be embedded longer term. I think it is a very personal experience and I think perhaps in a working environment it may not be of interest to absolutely everyone. However I think there is an opportunity for everyone to gain something from this type of coaching if it's made available*

- *I was able to open up about my strengths and weaknesses with someone who is not a colleague.*

- *The coaching provided a safe and non-work environment in which to discuss ideas/opportunities in a way that would be very difficult within the normal work relationships.*

- *It was useful to talk to someone outside the business about concerns and issues although I still struggled to see the benefit of it in relation to ELLI*

- *The coaching sessions were good at helping me apply the dimensions to real life examples. The coach used open questions and made me think about situations in work where I wouldn't have thought twice about, and didn't just accept the simple first answer.*

- *The most beneficial aspect I found about ELLI was to highlight the critical criteria about my life and how they are intertwined with one another*

Finding: **some participants saw material and practical benefits to the business as a whole and ways in which it might be improved by further application of this experience**

Evidence included:

- *I think the collaboration from all internal and external stakeholders has been really good, and there are lessons to learn from this in future exercises*

- *One of the things for me is being able to take time to evaluate and think about a task before and after to progress and use ELLI to add value/learn. At the moment there is no time allowed to do this due to resource commitments*

- *It has begun to change the way some of my interactions with reportees are working and has made a material difference to the priorities I see for team development in the next year*

- *I derived greatest benefit from the coaching in its own right, not necessarily from ELLI. RBP in my experience is poor at coaching.*

Finding: **the experienced, qualified leadership coaches on the team reported that the ELLI tool and individual profiles offered a helpful framework for coaching conversations because they were grounded in self-report, owned by the individual, therefore developmental without being judgemental.**

Evidence was from informal discussion and feedback.

d. How do we need to adapt the language/presentation of ELLI survey and tools to the business context?

Although the prevailing view was positive, the coaching feedback forms contained some mixed opinions about the possibility and value of adapting ELLI to the business context.

Finding: **although the ELLI coaching experience was generally welcomed and found valuable, the current business context, culture and morale were seen by a some people as likely to impede their own or others' receptiveness to ELLI**

Evidence included:

- *The coaching was good but the use of ELLI itself I don't think was relevant on the basis that the coaching felt like the right thing to be doing but not necessarily on the context of learning.*

- *Personally ELLI is not something I would recommend implementing within RBP. It is currently challenging to find time to complete PDP's and end of yr reviews, therefore it would require significant change in culture to successfully introduce a new model. I have worked with may learning models previously and I would treat ELLI (and I believe colleagues would behave similarly) like yet another initiative*

which may have buzz and momentum for a week or so but will fizzle out as unfortunately no one will have time or find use to follow it through

- *ELLI has many merits and I can understand its value, however an important factor to consider is that many people within Marketing at the moment do not feel recognised/rewarded and morale is quite low. AS we are approaching another restructure, a view may be that it would be more beneficial to invest in retraining and rewarding our people than investing in a new coaching programme.*

- *personally I found it quite useful and would be interested to see how my sessions developed and how this could be embedded longer term. I think it is a very personal experience and I think perhaps in a working environment it may not be of interest to absolutely everyone. However I think there is an opportunity for everyone to gain something from this type of coaching if it's made available.*

The evaluation workshop concluded with the Edinburgh group discussing and summarising their views about the proposition for Learning Power going forward.

Finding: effective coaching framed by the ELLI tool, if elective and not imposed, could enhance the PDP process and move the company towards becoming a 'learning organisation'

Evidence included:

- *We focus the proposition on providing a better way of supporting PDP's, enabling them to become active, meaningful documents that are genuinely owned and value by staff (linking into recent Workouts where this is recognised as high priority but 'too hard')*

- *The key to this is the provision of an effective personal coaching approach, using both external and internal coaching resources as appropriate. Longer term this should be managed internally by upskilling line managers to be coaches (which in itself provides personal development).*

- *This coaching will focus on a series of focused and structured conversations supporting personal development of individuals, connecting into the existing PDP and competency frameworks*

- *ELLI would form the foundation for this coaching, providing a common language for discussion, and providing an effective start point for the coaching conversation as well as a way of measuring and assessing ongoing personal development.*

- *ELLI profile helps individuals improve their contribution/add greater value by prompting them (in a supportive way) to take a different approach to their work activities/challenges.*

- *ELLI should be elective - of greatest value to individuals who can view their work activities/challenges as learning opportunities.*

- *ELLI is 'non-threatening' as it is not linked to the organisation's competency framework (not sure whether there would be any sensitivities around this point??)*

- *ELLI could be the key ingredient to RBP becoming a Learning Organisation. (This may be of interest to HR)*

Feedback from the familiarisation course, coaching forms and evaluation workshop contained quite a strong consensus about some practical ways in which the model could be improved and adapted to the business context. These included a clearer rationale at the start, experiencing and interpreting the profiles before the theory, using case studies from business environments and adapting the language and materials to the context (which was understood to be work in progress).

Finding: **the ways in which ELLI and its application are introduced and mediated to a business audience need to convey, powerfully and quickly, their relevance and potential value to people under pressure in a corporate environment**

Evidence included:

- *Would like to have known more about ELLI earlier in the process – took a while to get to grips with the 7 dimensions*
- *Presentation should have been adapted for the audience*
- *Individuals could have done ELLI profile earlier in the process – maybe provided more of an unbiased and less rushed*
- *Complete profile before session*
- *Would be better if the first session was more focused on a corporate environment and context*
- *Initial session could be condensed and include case studies*
- *More focus on how the dimensions relate to business*

e. Summary of findings

   i. All of the four groups in the Evaluation Workshop reported aspects of the one-to-one coaching as being amongst the 'positive features' of the ELLI programme.
  ii. The Coaching Feedback forms, returned anonymously, indicated that a majority of the group found the coaching beneficial, whilst a minority had doubts about its impact and relevance
 iii. a number of the participants experienced personal benefit in terms of their work
  iv. some participants saw material and practical benefits to the business as a whole and ways in which it might be improved by further application of this experience
   v. the experienced, qualified leadership coaches on the team reported that the ELLI tool and individual profiles offered a helpful framework for coaching conversations because they were grounded in self-report, owned by the individual, therefore developmental without being judgemental
  vi. although the ELLI coaching experience was generally welcomed and found valuable, the current business context, culture and morale were seen by some people as likely to impede their own or others' receptiveness to ELLI
 vii. effective coaching framed by the ELLI tool, if elective and not imposed, could enhance the PDP process and move the company towards becoming a 'learning organisation'
viii. the ways in which ELLI and its application are introduced and mediated to a business audience need to convey, powerfully and quickly, their relevance and potential value to people under pressure in a corporate environment.

4   Conclusions

The evidence is quite strong that the first three success criteria of this limited 'proof of concept' study were largely met:

- it was possible to explain the principles and theory of ELLI to business executives in a way that made sense to them and enabled them to understand its relevance to their context
- most of the participants engaged with the concepts and strategies in coaching conversations and were able to apply them to their work and learning
- those who did so generally found them helpful to their professional purpose and goals

Though it was clear – and part of the project's purpose to establish – that the model would need further adaptation to this context, it was generally agreed that this would be unproblematic and beneficial. Although there were exceptions to this consensus, they were in a fairly small minority.

That leaves the question of whether a sustainable model for application and use can be found in the business structure.

The clearest feedback on this was three-fold. Firstly, a consensus emerged that Personal Development Planning (PDP) could be made more meaningful, active and better 'owned' and valued through being framed and supported by ELLI-related coaching conversations. This might make the existing PDP programme significantly more cost-effective. Secondly, the principle was widely supported, implicitly or explicitly, that use of ELLI and associated coaching would need to be 'elective' rather than imposed. Thirdly, it was recognised that integrating such an approach into management practice could ultimately be achieved more securely – and economically – by using external expertise to build capacity *within* the organisation, perhaps with a mixture of peer-coaching, external coaching and coaching-style conversations by line managers, all informed by ELLI principles and profiling, developing a 'learning culture' that spreads organically, through personal and collective choice, rather than by policy or dictat.

The valuable by-product of such a system would be the availability of (anonymous) Learning Power data for institutional self-evaluation and improved selection and targeting of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. Costs could be more than off-set by savings in the CPD budget. The data for this sample, summarised and briefly interpreted in section 3a above, are too small to be analysed for statistical significance.

With a more substantial sample size, however, this kind of analysis can be a powerful and robust aid to strategic planning and human resource management. We have seen that the Learning Power profile of this sample indicates a relatively high achieving and communicative group of people, confident of their capacity to learn, adapt, relate and consult and particularly strong in making sense of what they encounter. Of the four Learning Power dimensions in which they have, between them, most scope for development, two, *Creativity* and *Resilience*, are particularly personal: being about individuals finding their own way of doing things, thinking 'outside the box', overcoming any fear of failure and following through their intentions.   The other two, *Critical Curiosity* and *Strategic Awareness*, we noted, are often as much about the learning context as about the individuals concerned.

It is worth considering for a moment the potential value to the business of developing *Strategic Awareness* at any level of responsibility and what may be missed without it. How well does an organisation want its people to be able to prioritise their time and effort, relate daily decisions to strategic priorities, accept responsibility and work with a sense of purpose and direction? Are these qualities and dispositions worth investing in at every level in the management structure?

If a prevailing culture is characterised by a 'heads down' and 'nose-to-tail' approach to task accomplishment, with less time or value given to strategic or reflective thinking, then *Strategic Awareness* will be harder to foster in it. Equally, if responsibility for strategy is concentrated in some roles or levels of management and operational delivery in others, then those with the operational functions will have less scope for developing *Strategic Awareness*. Since this includes taking responsibility for one's own learning and development and seeing how operational details relate to a bigger picture and purpose, the whole organisation might profit from investing in a more conducive context for *Strategic Awareness* to flourish.

Similarly with *Critical Curiosity*, a culture of acceptable risk-taking and openness to questioning is a pre-condition for people to develop the habits of inquiry, challenging assumptions and increasing their influence by seeking out and understanding their stakeholders' points of view.

Both of these dimensions featured quite strongly in the coaching conversations, in terms of their usefulness to individual and corporate goals. As well as fostering these two dimensions through personal professional development programmes, it may be worth considering a collective approach to creating a more conducive context for them to develop in.

The question to end with, then, is about how far and how fast the organisation is able and willing to move towards becoming a 'learning organisation', with all the benefits of enhanced motivation, relationships, focus, adaptability, creativity, problem solving, personal and collective responsibility? Arising from that, how worthwhile would it be to take the research and development of this approach a stage further, adapting it in the light of the feedback above and gathering more robust data, from a larger sample, about its reliability, validity and efficacy in the context of RBP in 2010?

6. Recommendations:

    a. To note the content and findings of this report
    b. To explore further, through research and development in collaboration, how
        i. ELLI can be fully validated in this context
        ii. the method of its implementation can be still better adapted
        iii. the PDP process could benefit from being framed in this way
        iv. a model of implementation might offer sustainable and affordable benefit to the company.