Learning with Colleagues

By ERIK DE HAAN
Published by Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke. 2005.
Hardback, 227pp, £25.00
ISBN 1-4039-4287-0

Coaching with Colleagues

By ERIK DE HAAN & YVONNE BURGER
Published by Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke. 2005.
Hardback, 185pp, £25.00
ISBN 1-4039-4323-0

These two new books by Ashridge Consulting’s Erik de Haan are texts about the development of our professional skills and abilities. They are written in the context of organisation and management development, but the methods covered are applicable to any professional activity where peer consultation and peer coaching is part of the professional development process. So they would be equally at home in schools and universities, community and social work departments, hospitals and medical practices, and legal and accounting firms.

Both are highly practical and readable texts—the sub-title of each is ‘an action guide’. In the case of Learning with Colleagues it is an action guide to peer consultation, and for Coaching with Colleagues, an action guide for one-to-one learning. Each chapter is complimented by a summary, clear tables and diagrams, and each main section of the books have a clearly written introduction to the context and content. Cartoons provide some light relief and a different perspective to the text. They are practical handbooks for practitioners in every sense.

Although being simultaneously published in English, the original Dutch edition of Learning with Colleagues pre-dates its companion by some three years. There were written in sequence, and the Coaching with Colleagues text makes a number of references to models and arguments developed in its sister book. This is where my one, small criticism lies. I did not read them in the sequence they were written and became a little frustrated at the prior references. I think I might have been more frustrated if I didn’t have the other book to refer to. This apart, the books do stand alone well and can be read independently, though they do work better in tandem to give a comprehensive view of professional development in both the group and one-to-one context.

De Haan brings together a comprehensive summary, explanation and comparison of different methods for consultation and coaching so that we as facilitators and practitioners can identify the most appropriate for the situation. He also builds a progressive experience through the books using Kolb’s learning framework, which works particularly well. Kolb’s Learning Styles Inventory is included as an appendix in Learning with Colleagues, and other appendices in both books include practical guides to observation forms, log books and coaching behaviours.

Learning with Colleagues investigates peer consultation and action learning practices, and a no less than fifteen consultation methods; it looks at the issues faced when facilitating peer consultation groups and has an insightful section on learning from experience where a case study using de Haan’s own diary of learning from initial, frustrating attempts to create the book
illustrate the lessons. Finally it discusses the development from consultation groups to learning networks and the use of project-based action learning and self-managed learning. Like the use of his own learning journal, de Haan uses case studies and practical examples throughout to illustrate the text, and there is a major case study on the application of peer consulting through action learning at the BBC.

Although shorter, Coaching with Colleagues is no less comprehensive in its summary of methodologies (some seven are identified). It begins with a contextual discussion and introduction, posing the question ‘What are we actually talking about?’, then looking at different approaches in depth from those with a skills focus to those with a psychoanalysis focus ‘How do you go about it?’, and finally reflecting on the skills of the coach and the context for, and limitations of, coaching ‘Who coaches where?’. As a text on coaching alone, it provides a detailed underpinning of theory and practice which would enhance the knowledge of any professional or managerial coach.

Professionals today, in whatever field, have an increasing need for life-long learning. Many professional bodies insist on continuing professional development as a pre-requisite to maintaining professional qualifications. While much of this professional development takes place through interaction with peers and colleagues, it is often done without planning and often by accident. What de Haan and his collaborators gives us is a clear framework to better organise, supervise and facilitate our own professional development, and to advise our own colleagues and their organisations. How better to learn the discipline from the practical experience of leaders in their field?

GEOF COX,
New Directions Ltd
Consultant and author