

Case Study: Essex County Council



Essex County Council IT Services Division was the subject of a study which aimed to establish whether scenario planning increases organisational learning within a management team. Banxia® Decision Explorer® was used, in conjunction with one-to-one interviews, to identify and to analyse changes in individuals' understanding of the organisation's current and future strategic situation.

"Without Decision Explorer® it would not have been possible to create, manipulate and compare perspectives across the whole management team"

"The [scenario building] process helped management and staff to develop an action programme that was more robust against the uncertainties prevailing within local government"

The study was undertaken by Brian Cox, who is Principal Consultant with Woolwich plc (formerly the Woolwich Building Society) and is also pursuing a Ph.D. by part-time study at Strathclyde Graduate Business School. Brian's approach involved interviewing individuals before and after a one-day scenario building and half-day scenario implications workshops. The cognitive maps produced from these interviews were then compared and contrasted, in order to establish whether organisational learning had increased within the team. For example, was a view or opinion (perhaps in terms of a threat or an opportunity) as perceived by one individual before the workshops, transferred to others following the workshops.



Brian Cox

Feedback since the exercise has been very encouraging. Essex County Council like all local authorities has had to change the way in which it operates, in order to comply with the requirements of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). Prior to CCT, the various departments within the council all supported one another, with very little formality in terms of contracts, service level agreements and so on. Information about a department's plans, budgets etc. were all, in the main, freely available. With the advent of CCT this 'soft-split' between departments was replaced with a somewhat 'harder-split', where departments tender for work and offer their services to both internal and external providers - in other words they behave like commercial suppliers, with the award of a contract or project being based on competition and value for money. As a result, barriers have tended to go up between the client-side functions - those acquiring services - and the provider-side functions - those supplying the services. Information was no longer freely shared and staff tended to associate with others within their own domain, rather than more widely, as had been the case prior to the introduction of CCT.

Len Graves, Corporate IT & Financial Services Officer, thought that within the current operating environment adopting a 'softer-split' was probably the right decision, although against the backdrop of local government's very uncertain future, he was less sure of its success. His team also seemed to be very divided as to whether the current hard-split or the old soft-split was the best approach. Communicating the 'softer-split' ethos and getting buy-in from his management team, and later from the whole



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department, would be quite a challenge. Although it is arguable that the actions resulting from the existence of a softer-split may play some part in the outcomes of any plan, how the 'softer-split' approach would be implemented and its success were also very dependent upon factors that neither Len nor his department could or can influence. The decision was therefore taken to test-out 'moving to a softer-split' using the scenario planning programme.

Decision Explorer[®] and the interview/mapping exercise helped Brian to understand the current situation within the Council and were also a necessary part of the process of establishing improvements in organisational learning. Knowledge of the current situation, as represented in the Decision Explorer maps, was used to provide a focus for the scenario planning workshops. These workshops focused on topics which an analysis of the maps had revealed as key issues and concerns for the managers. Feedback from Essex County Council since the workshops and on the exercise as a whole, has been very encouraging with Len Graves commenting that the scenario planning programme allowed his management team "to obtain a common and, to a large extent, agreed understanding of the need for and direction of change" ... "The process helped management and staff develop an action programme that was more robust against the uncertainties prevailing within local government"

Brian had found that paper-based mapping exercises had had a tendency to be oriented towards the interviewer rather than the interviewee, making it difficult to jointly develop the map. Decision Explorer[®] made the capture and manipulation of the information in the maps far easier and more efficient. And Brian found that "interviewees seemed keener to participate in the creation and development of the maps" when using Decision Explorer[®], because the computer maps were something that both parties, interviewer and interviewee, could see, discuss and control. Inter- and intra-map comparisons were also far easier to perform using Decision Explorer[®] and, as an added bonus, the maps were of a far higher presentation quality than was previously possible with pen and paper!



Working with the Decision Explorer[®] maps

For further information about Decision Explorer[®] and how it can help your business, please contact:

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