Comfort, stretch and panic: introducing a CPD framework for service and professional development

Maria Mirza
Deputy Head of Learning Services
Edge Hill University
Email: Maria.Mirza@ edgehill.a.uk

Carol Chatten
Learning Technology Development Officer
Edge Hill University
Email: Carol.Chatten@ edgehill.ac.uk

Emily Moffat
Woodlands Deputy Librarian
Edge Hill University
Email: Emily.Moffat@edgehill.ac.uk

Introduction

Professional excellence is a result not simply of what staff do, but also how they do it. Engaging staff in professional development activities which enable them to reflect actively on the underlying behaviour patterns that distinguish effective performance in a professional role can be a powerful approach to continuing professional development (CPD). Behaviours are not always explicitly dealt with by many professional competency CPD frameworks and can be sometimes difficult to define in a standardised way; one example is when we talk about 'flexibility' or 'team work', which mean different things to different people.

A recognition of this particular gap in our overall approach to CPD was one of the triggers that led our service to become a pilot project for the AUA (Association of University Administrators) to work with a behaviour-based framework that they had developed for the sector as a tool to sup-

port personal and professional development.[1] The framework offers a model of professional behaviours and focuses on nine key behavioural groups (managing self and personal skills, delivering excellent service, finding innovative solutions, embracing change, using resources, providing direction, developing self and others, working with people and achieving results). When reviewing the suitability of the AUA CPD framework for our specific context, its appeal lay in the focus on behaviours and its very broad applicability to a range of different professional roles. As a diverse service, which encompasses a number of different professional groups (e.g. librarians, learning technologists, media technologists, and learning disability support (SPLD) advisors), finding a development framework that was both flexible and relevant to all groups was quite challenging.

Edge Hill University is one of the fastest growing universities in the UK; it has trebled in size since 2000, having changed from being a college of higher education to full university status in 2006. This growth has been accompanied by a period of accelerated cultural change within the institution; this in turn has demanded an equivalent rapid pace of change in the organisation of services and in the professional skills required in those who deliver these services.

Our project aimed to enable staff in key operational roles to focus in a very structured way on their current and potential future contribution to our service objectives and workforce development whilst offering a set of opportunities to enhance individual professional development and career options. The 'tier' of staff identified for participation in the project were typically graduates in their first or second professional post, occupying grade 6 or 7 roles and among whom we would normally look for our natural pool of internal candidates for secondments to project work or, in some cases, for promotion to higher grade responsibilities. We felt the AUA CPD framework could act as a useful tool to facilitate our key service and workforce development objectives; through a range of activities linked to the behavioural framework individuals would also gain:

- improved awareness of their strengths and areas for growth through a process of self-assessment
- increased capacity and confidence to lead service developments within the scope of their own roles
- increased ownership of their own professional development.

Ten participants formed the pilot group, taking part in a series of activities over a six-month period. Work began with a self-reflection exercise against the behavioural framework, production of a personal development plan (PDP) based on the reflection activity and structured feedback from their line manager. This groundwork equipped participants to lead on service-wide projects that would not only equip them with new areas of 'knowledge' but also stretch them in the behavioural areas identified on their PDP.

CASE STUDY: 'GRADE 6' PROJECT

Emily is Deputy Librarian at the Woodlands site in Chorley and Carol is a Learning Technology Development Officer based at the Ormskirk campus. Our project had two strands: exploring the patron-driven model of e-book acquisition (PDA) and investigating the downloading of e-books onto mobile devices. It quickly became apparent that Emily's knowledge of acquisitions processes and Carol's technical expertise complemented each other well. We were both equally committed to the success of the project, having identified early on that we would only take away from the project what we were willing to put in.

We had both found it challenging to find the time to expand our skills in our day-to-day jobs. The project's intention was to open up opportunities to develop our skills and we were very pleased to have this chance to move from our 'comfort zone' into our 'stretch zone' as the AUA describes.
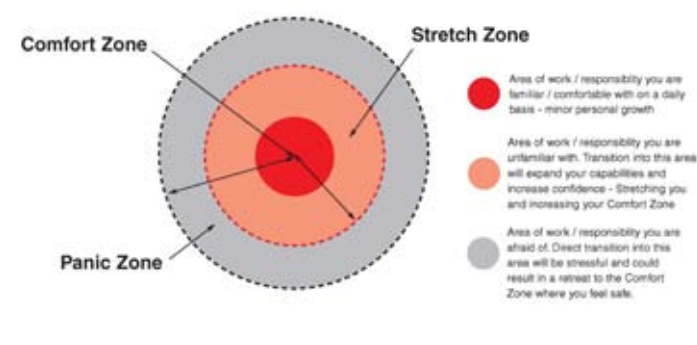

Fig. 2 AUA professional behaviours

The behaviours became more meaningful when we were given the full framework showing examples of how they might be manifested, e.g. for the 'finding innovative solutions' behaviour an example was 'recognising the need for the less than perfect solution at times in order to achieve objectives'. It was a useful framework as it provided a focus for our development.

There were several away days over the six months; they covered areas such as influencing, emotional intelligence, listening skills and suggestions as to how to 'reframe' a working relationship or situation to make it more effective. This training encouraged a reflective approach, developed our skills and helped with both the project and our everyday roles.

Challenges and learning outcomes

We faced several challenges during the project, including working on different sites 16 miles apart. This meant we had to coordinate our time together in advance and ensure that we were focused and productive when we did meet. It was also a factor in encouraging us to use a blog tool within our virtual learning environment (VLE) to record our reflections on the project and to store relevant materials and resources that we could both access. The importance of good, timely reflection was emphasised during our away days. Using a blog for this purpose enabled us to identify areas of improvement and also areas where we wished to develop further. Although time for reflection was given during the away days, having a tool to facilitate reflection on our daily roles was very valuable. The importance of reflection is something we will both take away from the project.
Another major challenge was the timing of the project. Starting in July, we had to work around summer

Fig. 1 Comfort, stretch and panic zones

AUA structure
In the opening weeks of the project we were invited to an away day. This gave us the opportunity to get to know one another and also introduced us to the 'professional behaviours' that would be used to identify our strengths and areas for development.

vacations, the September rush and additional pressures such as the introduction of a new VLE. We realised early on that the scale of the project was ambitious, and although we were allocated specific time to work on it, its scope was such that we were constantly falling behind and having to re-plan. There was a large amount of information to be collected and analysed. Due to the nature of this research, including supplier visits, surveys, pilots and testing, it was easy to feel overwhelmed at times. We also had to develop the skill of balancing our day jobs with our commitment to the project. This ultimately led us to negotiate an extension to the download element, and we learned the importance of realistic planning and negotiation techniques. It also highlighted that it is not always possible to cover everything in the level of detail you would like and you need to do a task to the best of your ability given the time you have.

As part of our development, we attended an internal course on project management which outlined some useful approaches to undertaking a project. This directly influenced how we moved forward with our own project and gave us practical tips. We also had the opportunity to attend conferences in Glasgow and Manchester, where we learned about trials of PDA in other institutions and had the chance to network, share good practice and raise our awareness of developments in the sector. Attending the conferences with the project in mind gave us a focus and we found them enjoyable, informative and productive.

We each had strengths which we were able to use and share with each other during the project. We both feel it has enabled us to learn a great deal about the service area our project partner works in. We have also developed relationships with each other's teams which will be beneficial in the long-term. Carol had the opportunity to work with the Information Resources team for the first time and has improved her knowledge of this area, which will inform her job in the future.

We found that having time away from our desks was vital to enable us to work on the project without interruption. Having the away days off-site was also beneficial as they helped us to focus.

Seeking support
We drew upon the knowledge of a range of other members of staff during the project. The Information Resources Manager, E-Resources Manager and our line managers all supported our journey through the project by regular coaching meetings and reviews to help guide and track our progress. Their input and guidance was very valuable – sometimes even if it was just to let us know that we were on the right track.

We came to know our project peers better. Having the workshops focused our interaction with those we may only see infrequently. Doing the AUA exercises at the workshops created an environment that was open, honest and enlightening and which we feel helped us to work in a more complementary fashion.

Reflection on progress
The away days and the project itself have given us new opportunities to develop and the skills and awareness to perform to a higher standard in our current and future roles.

The project has enabled us to understand that there is often no 'perfect' solution or one correct answer. We were required to use our judgement and our developing confidence to present what we thought was the best solution for our institution. We have realised the importance of reflection and the benefits of staff development; we have gained a greater awareness of our own professional behaviours and values, and the ability to manage time around a demanding day-to-day workload. Although the CPD project has been challenging, we would recommend its implementation to other institutions as we found it to be a worthwhile and enriching experience.

Concluding thoughts

The pilot group of ten staff have almost completed their service-wide projects and a second cohort of ten is waiting in the wings. Although the AUA funded project is not yet officially concluded, there is consensus from all who have participated – senior managers as well as scale 6 staff – that it has been a worthwhile experience. It has also ensured that a number of important service-wide projects have been brought to fruition.

We have found that working to develop professional behaviours results in a very different experience from working with more traditional skill-based competency frameworks. In particular, it requires and encourages two key behaviours: the ability to give and receive feedback effectively, and to undertake a much deeper level of reflection on personal performance and behaviour.

An unexpected bonus is that using the CPD framework has also promoted managers' reflection and learning. Managers have undertaken similar development work in order to model good practice across the spectrum of AUA professional behaviours, which in turn illustrates what is expected by the participants, further grounding the project in the reality of day-to-day working practices. This also illustrates the flexibility of

the framework, as interpreting the nine behaviour groups in a senior management context has proved to be as relevant as its application to more junior grade roles. We have also found that the framework offers flexibility when meeting the needs of different professional groups within a converged service, as it is not tied to specific professional identity or skill set.

We aim to embed the AUA CPD framework fully within the institutional performance review framework in order to give a much more joined-up approach to individual CPD activities, workforce development and dynamic service needs.

NOTE

AUA Professional Development Framework accessed from: http://www.aua.ac.uk/cpd-1-Continuing-Professional-Development-Framework.html