

From the outside looking in

Origins

My first point of contact with FEEK¹ happened by chance. Out of the blue. And ... for someone interested in learning from my own experiences ... a great piece of luck. At the time, I was working as vice principal of one of the largest London operations for adult learning, in the largest London borough.

My secretary came in with a fax. "This yours," she asked? "It was in the fax machine."

A faint typed fax from Hungary. I was in charge in charge of European projects so she had made a good guess. Hungary? Nothing to do with us, I thought. We had no contacts in Hungary. From Pecs? Never heard of the place!

I read it. An invitation from some university I'd never heard of ... to address an international conference. Might be interesting, though. This was 1990. Hungary was just emerging from behind the Iron Curtain. The university department for Adult Learning was interested to know how things worked in other parts of Europe.

Why not, my boss answered? All expenses paid. Nothing to lose.

If only we'd both known ... Lots to gain!

First point of contact. Pure luck. Out of the blue.

Technologies

I'll describe that invitation ... first impressions matter! The invitation was well written, perfect English, nothing to give any negative impression. What did raise a smile ... it was obviously written on a manual typewriter. One that had not seen a service in years. The ribbon looked overused, the type faint. And every letter "o" became a hole. The unserved key cut a hole in the paper.

For an organisation like ours... already completely computerised in 1990 ... we could remember those days. But twenty years previously! First impressions. But how quickly things were to change in FEEK!

Learn. Adapt. Apply

I'm sure that nothing I said to that conference had any effect in turning the emerging post-Communist world of adult learning in Hungary upside down. But something about the way our organisation in London operated did touch a nerve. I must have mentioned in conversation that we got only 20% of our budget from our local London borough. The other 80% was earned on the open market. We ran adult learning as a business. For managers of Hungarian adult learning institutes facing a post-control economy... where you couldn't put your hand out and hope the state filled it with cash ... our success as an educational entrepreneur rang a bell. Thinking there could be something useful in this ...

I was invited back the next year to run a training course for principals of adult learning institutions. Interested to know how financially they could manage to survive. A practical course, How did we in London make that happen?

¹ In this article, I have taken the liberty of always using the terminology FEEK. In my time, the name of the organisation changed three times. What's in a name!

That was 27 years ago, 27 happy years of close collaboration with FEEK. Many years spent observing and struggling not to walk around with my mouth wide open. Gaping wide in amazement at what happened in FEEK from those early days.

I have since learned that a number of points from that week's course for Hungarian education managers did take root. Ideas of organisational development were expertly put to good use. One particularly eye-catching example ...

During the course there was some brief theoretical explanation about the nature and practice of marketing. Not a regularly used phenomenon in a control economy, so practices in marketing were largely unfamiliar to the course participants in all but name. But marketing did promise concepts useful in understanding your public and planning where opportunities for your organisational development can be found.

The *Boston Consulting group's* product portfolio matrix is designed to help with long-term strategic planning, to help a business consider growth opportunities by reviewing its portfolio of products to decide where to invest, to discontinue or develop products.

Introducing the well known BCG matrix, I explained the idea of the "cash-cow". The product that is so successful, it brings in so much income that it subsidises much else. And usefully the cash-cow funds the organisation with a breathing space ... time in which to go off searching for the next cash-cow.

It took only a few years for me to realise that FEEK's management had taken that concept to heart. It had found its "cash cow" ... one with the potential size of a cow elephant. It had identified the need nationally for a new role in Hungarian business, the Human Resource Development manager. It designed a course. It offered a degree. Before I could hardly blink, every year thousands of students were graduating with a FEEK degree in HRD. And the money came rolling in...

I was experiencing with my own eyes the genius of FEEK. That ability to see an opportunity. To search out a solution ... sifting through relevant sources here and there (remember, this is before Google made research child's play! When research was really painstaking hard work). LEARNING. ADAPTING. (Nothing surprising in that part of the formula, eh?) BUT ... Unless you manage to work a miracle ... Until you go hell-for-leather ... twist it inside out. APPLYING. Using everything in the book to make it fit. Use every contact in your phone book to sell the idea. Sweat blood to make it work. Work your socks off till the formula fits. Till ... IT WORKS = MAKE MONEY OUT OF IT.

We all know the theory of Innovation. EVERYONE knows what to do. We've all talked the talk BUT ... How many have walked the walk? How few have MADE it work! New companies investing in Hungary needed HRD. Companies were desperate for it. They kept sponsoring managers to get this degree. And in FEEK the money kept rolling in ...

Educational entrepreneur - par excellence

Who was teaching whom, I was beginning to wonder? Who was the master at making money out of innovations in higher education? I remember standing back in sheer amazement at the scope this new venture. The breadth of the vision that drove forward this development. Giving organisations what they desperately needed: a body of qualified specialists in HRD that matched practices normal in the Western world. A skills base taken for granted by the multi-national companies investing in the new Hungary. But one that hadn't existed before its appearance as FEEK's cash-cow. FEEK leadership had identified a hungry lion in the market-place. One with cash in its claws. And the money came rolling in. Boom-time!

I was astonished at the speed of development. And astounded at the audacity of the implementation the entrepreneurship I was observing was amazing in its mode of experimentation. True, some of the ways of working would never have been allowed in the UK. Some of the practices I observed might have led to disciplinary action. Possibly, some would have been a sackable offence! But there was something about the American Wild West in those early days of post-Communist Hungary. A feeling that “Anything goes!”. And in FEEK, the evolving ways of working were exploited to the n^{th} degree. If “Anything goes ...”, the question was, What's holding you back? Brave. Tricky Entrepreneurial. And it worked!

This spirit of innovation and drive was making money. Internationally many enterprising university departments have succeeded with exciting innovations. Many, many more have never got as far as the starting line. FEEK'S entrepreneurial drive was turning in a fine profit. Earned on the open market. Development in FEEK progressed at reduced costs to the public purse. Funded from its own earnings. What was there not to praise? And that benefit was turned to improved learning opportunities for its students.

When was I going to stop walking around with my mouth open in amazement? I remember to this day the sense of astonishment the first time I walked into the refurbished premises of the new faculty. From those first years I had been returning every year to teach students for 1-2 weeks. The head of department had made it clear I was no visiting lecturer, I was to regard myself as being a fully fledged member of staff. I belonged. In FEEK I was at home.

Experience my astonishment, then, when I returned “home” after a year and saw this state-of-the-art centre of learning-excellence. Conceived on a large courageous scale. Imaginatively designed. Artistically decorated facilities. What first took my breath away were the opportunities for students to access what we were then still calling the “information super-highway”. At a time before most people had any access to the world wide web, in the main corridor in FEEK banks of computers stood free for students to use. COME AND SURF!

In London my organisation had gained a positive reputation for bringing this new technology to the most excluded groups of the local population. But our achievements were nothing on this scale. The financial resources just weren't available.

But in FEEK, years before the children of the wealthiest parents would find one PC in father's study, students could freely surf the web. They could develop familiarity with software essential for employability years before students in other faculties would glimpse the chance.

Readily available. Just log-in Access a world class resource that, in those days, some famous universities in the world would still have eyed with envy. Free. Freely available. In the main corridor, not locked away behind security doors. Not anxious about theft and abuse.

And that is not to mention the fully equipped IT workshops where FEEK students could enrol for expert training – enhancing their employability. Giving FEEK students that extra edge in the race for finding themselves the best jobs. At the time that was an opportunity that few non-IT students even got a look-in. This was IT seen as a resource essential for everyday life, a skill that added to efficiency at work. It was a concept way ahead of its time. Ready access to a resource that some full-time IT students would have drooled to get their hands on back then.

And where had that resource come from? FEEK'S cash-cow had been well milked. And management had had the vision to see the value of putting those profits in the eager hands

of their students. Enhancing their studies and employability with facilities that, in those days, were second to none.

Remember that first point of contact I had? Remember that faint printed fax? How far had FEEK come? From that ancient typewriter that punched a hole in the paper when you pressed an “o”? Go from that technology. Move to the state-of-the-art IT facilities available free of charge, freely accessible to FEEK students. Achieve that leap. In just 10-12 years. Many educational managers could dream that? How many have managed that? How many could? Achieve that investment. Inspired by that vision? Funding the dream out of their own resources? With money they earned on the open market – not lobbying political friends for a freebie from the public purse.

Many have dreamed. Very few have achieved. Stand back and admire. The genius of FEEK.

Tributes

Working a major transformation like the organisational developments in FEEK takes effort and time. Achieving a miracle takes a little longer. And the right people. Skilled, motivated, inspired. To grow an initiative of such proportions ... that HRD degree franchised to numerous institutions throughout the country ... resourcing out-sourced classes to ensure equitable quality ... coordinating quality standards across this complex network of providers ... quality assuring the qualification ... Accomplishing all of that ... no way could this be achieved by anything less than a multi-teamed enterprise. Success hung on the efforts of numerous colleagues.

But one cannot ignore the inspiring leadership of Koltai Dénes in making this happen. Hungary was lucky to have a figure of such outstanding entrepreneurial leadership. This incredible phenomenon in the development in adult learning was blessed with a leadership of exceptional drive capacity. It is rare in the ivory towers of academia to grow a towering figure with that business mind, the strategic insights ... that capacity to identify what the Hungarian economy desperately needed as it arose from a control economy into the “Wild West” of an early market-economy. And squeezing every drop of opportunity out of the emerging times. Without the support of colleagues, the miracle could not have been implemented. Without the foresight, vision and drive of Koltai Denes, it would not have left the starting line.

Personally I count myself lucky. I first came into contact with FEEK to add to the department's body of knowledge. I observed through subsequent years, open mouthed, what was being achieved. Lucky me – the informed outsider ... standing on the sidelines marvelling at the phenomenon growing under my nose. It has been a privilege.