

AQA Curriculum UK

AQA – Future Search facilitated in London, UK by Michael Donnelly and Adrienne Rosen

After having tried the formal and traditional change with small scale interventions in specific areas the change management team understood that they needed something much more inclusive and wide ranging to bring wider context and a greater number of people into the process. AQA turned to Future Search in an attempt to break through to a new conversation and a different approach. AQA, an independent charity and non-profit business is the UK's largest exams organisation – creating millions of exams and syllabi most commonly sat by 16 and 18 year olds: GCSE's and A-levels.

As in many sectors the exams and curriculum scene, once tranquil and predictable has become fast paced, prone to rapid shifts, largely outside of the organisation's control. New entrants to the market with aggressive business models, along with sweeping policy changes from Government are two key drivers of change.

This can lead to a strategy of reaction. Reaction is ok for short-term events but when it becomes a seemingly ever present condition for business then impacts begin to accumulate – staff morale, productivity, profitability all begin to suffer. Costs can spiral, building up capacity in places where suddenly it is no longer needed.

AQA is renowned for its dedication to quality and for being the exam body that covers practically every topic that is taught, even the niche subjects. It grew from an academic tradition – the old universities entrance system, and through a series of mergers of regional organisations built itself to be the largest curriculum organisation in the UK, preparing and marking exams and courses for 1.5 million students each year.

The ethos of the organisation is one of quality and social impact: it continues to produce many exams that are expensive to create and mark, and which will never be financially viable, because in their ethos this is the right thing to do.

AQA found itself in the new world of having a reasonably stable product set (albeit with on-going innovations) but with aggressive competition and a volatile political agenda. Successive Ministers for Education seek to place their ideological stamp on the whole sector by proposing and testing big changes – such as scrapping coursework as part of the assessment, or franchising out exams and curricula to a range of bidders, or transforming the whole exam system to fit more with the European model of baccalaureate where more subjects are taught but to less stringent standards.

Getting a handle on the current situation and reframing what the organisation was doing to prepare for the inevitable but unpredictable changes meant it needed to bring the whole organisation together, along with external voices to prepare a novel approach.

It was essential for AQA as a charity to not lose sight of its origins and founding ethos, and therefore a journey back to rediscover and reaffirm what was essential seemed really important from its history and to preserve that identity while working out what was happening in the world around them today and how they were being affected by it, what their role was in causing it, and what they need to be doing better. The CEO remained open to the idea of undertaking a broad engagement to honour these commitments and was supported by the senior management team, each of who claimed their stake in the process and ensured their staff attended the workshop. A critical part of the success was their willingness to hand over the planning to a planning group that itself reflected the organisation (a cross slice of functions and seniority).

Once all these conversations were out in the open, some of the difficult issues were available. This included questions of restructuring, cost savings, portfolio rationalising and how to build better relationships with partners.

The biggest surprise to the organisers of the Future Search was how open and honest all the participants could be, once they understood that they all shared the same system, and were all working towards a common goal. They discovered what that goal was together and aligned their ambitions, their knowledge, their aspirations and their values to support it.

They also found within their own team the capacity to take the work forward and to begin to see it deployed in day to day operations. Future Search for some is not so much the gleaming new strategy and action plan as a discovery of relationships and common cause that works with dynamics of the organisation – less outputs, more outcomes. Very importantly this way of working creates a whiteboard of possibility – the conditions being in place for people to see what is and what could be and to know that they have a role in taking it there – when they are able ready and willing.

One year after the Future Search a follow up conversation was held to reflect on change. AQA reflected how the process allowed them to host conversations about change that had not been possible before. Structural change processes continued around the organisation including retrenchment but in the midst of that a goal had emerged that the organisation was able to focus on as the loing game.

Working groups had been established as an implementation mechanism. Some of these facilitated effective cross-organisational working.

The senior management team reflected that the greatest difference they had experienced was a transition to a more conversational way of working. After the Future Search they found themselves able to have natural face-to-face interactions that previously had been wrapped up in hierarchical formality, indicating that the greatest cultural change is the one that creates the relationships that enable the common goal to be realised.