

Sandhurst challenge by Anthony Hewson



It is a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead and find no-one there.

Franklin D Roosevelt, President of the USA 1933-1945

Masked in swathes of olive, brown and black paint, eyes wide and fixed, facial muscles tensed, Jason edged a sideways shuffle along the plank. The wood bowed with his weight, nine inches from the water, then eight, then suddenly four. Left arm held tight by one of the 10-man team, while the rest of them used their combined weight to offer a counterbalance to keep him out of the single-figure temperature water below, he reached tentatively over the edge. One thrown weighted rope missed its target, and the plank bearing his body moved alarmingly, his balance almost lost. The second weighted rope hooked the suspended target rope and he pulled it within reach. A huge cheer rang out, and he moved with increased speed and tangible relief back towards the shore and safety.

The riskiest part of the manoeuvre completed, the team realigned planks and bridged the air to reach the platform opposite. Two minutes later all 10 team members were across, dry and elated. Time for a cup of water as cold as the river they'd hovered so close to, and then on to another exercise.

Cadets are sent from all over the world to train at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) such is the reputation of its leadership training, so where better to hone leadership skills? Inspirational Development Group (IDG) is a development and training company that has set up a partnership



The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is world famous for developing a superior class of officer. In November, the officer training academy opened its doors to 20 delegates, including supervisors and managers from Kier, who were put through their paces as part of the new Front Line Managers course. All camouflaged up, Anthony Hewson reports on the two-day people management module.





with RMAS to deliver business leadership courses on site at the officer training academy. IDG's own facilitators on the course are ex-Sandhurst, and RMAS provides its own personnel to assist with courses.

A two-day pilot people management module, introduced by Kier learning and development manager Mel Lake, took place from Wednesday 1 November to Thursday 2 November. The previously separate Supervisor Development and New Manager Development programmes have been consolidated into one programme – Front Line Managers. The people management module had previously been a six-day session spent largely in the classroom.

In a marked departure from the usual training offered, this course, aimed at supervisors and first time management, meant a lot of time in the woods and training facilities of Sandhurst. Twenty delegates drawn from all over the Kier Group from various UK offices, complete strangers to one another, were thrown quickly into two teams to perform group tasks.



The four precepts of the course – plan, brief, delegate and motivate – were lessons introduced rapidly and with a distinctly dynamic and practical method. Each delegate was appointed leader of a team for a task, performed in between lengthy treks with loaded bergans. The challenges set out for the participants drew on those four precepts heavily. Time constraints meant fast and effective briefing, and planning was a necessity. Delegation proved important and as the numbing cold and sheer physical toll took effect motivation was more important than ever.

Not only were people given the chance to put their leadership skills to the test, but they had a genuine opportunity to learn from the examples set and mistakes made by their team-mates. Feedback from accomplished officers on their approaches to each task enabled the delegates to analyse their own performance, and the classroom discussions and debriefs consolidated and expanded upon the lessons learnt in the field.

One delegate had expressed severe doubts about another classroom-based course “where you drift off, don't get to know anyone else, and don't get anything out of it”, and it was only more detailed information on the course's content that persuaded him to attend. On day two, as we stood shovelling scoff while awaiting a briefing on the outskirts of the woods, he was all restless anticipation. “It's been great... it's been interesting and challenging.” But have you learnt anything? “God yes, there are such strong characters here I didn't think it could work, but we got to know each other quickly, and I think we're all learning from each other.”

I spent my afternoon largely with Bravo team, one member of which was Stacey Burton, a buyer from Kier Build. He was effusive with praise for the course, both on the day and when I spoke to him the following week. As we shuffled in the cold he told me he “felt richer for the experience”, a choice of words I felt spoke volumes about the value of the course. Speaking to him the next week he told me he was “a different person to the one who arrived on the course.”



Participants spoke about the importance of learning to delegate, something easily forgotten, and taking what the military calls a ‘condor moment’ – when one steps back and looks at the entire operation to get an oversight.

What's more, while the focus of this course was the development of people management skills and leadership, the side-effect of selfless teamwork was on constant display. As Stacey put it, “I've never felt anything like it for camaraderie.” Of course every team leader is also a team member, and the teams genuinely drew together. Some moments were undoubtedly gruelling, and as Natalie Jones, print room supervisor at Marriott, said: “The guys were fabulous. If we dropped behind at least one of them was always there to support and help us.”

Brendan Cannon, a managing surveyor at Kier Build felt the motivation was extremely strong, and that the teams made noticeable improvements throughout the course. “We proved in the earlier challenges that we didn't communicate well enough, but the improvement with each challenge just showed the value of decent planning and briefing.” Preliminary tasks had resulted in a free-for-all of thoughts and actions, but with each new task came improved communications and planning. Finally teams were being bisected to brainstorm separately, comparing plans, discussing merits and pitfalls and taking decisions in a free-flowing fashion.



Arduous and draining the course may have been, but the overwhelming majority of participants felt they had drawn a tremendous amount and, what's more, would be able to put that knowledge straight into practice.