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Learning about Managing the Business in the Hospitality Industry¹

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Abstract

This research examines the learning experiences of General Managers (GMs) in the hospitality industry, a sector much neglected in terms of research into management learning and human resource development. Our research focused on four large hospitality organizations (two hotels and two contract catering companies) and adopted an approach that integrates multiple data collection strategies in supporting our qualitative case studies. Data were collected by using document analysis plus detailed, qualitative interviews with 21 general managers, of whom seven were subsequently observed at work and observation notes generated. Data analysis revealed that the participants learned to manage the business primarily through experience, a process consisting of four key stages: *Being Challenged*, *Information Searching*, *Information Transformation*, and *Testing*. Reflective thinking plays a central role in their learning, taking the form of “actions” involving association, integration and validation, and of “products” involving content, process and context reflections. We argue that the way hospitality managers learn, while sharing the learning approaches taken by other professionals, differs in that these managers’ learning is more highly contextualized.

Key words: experiential learning, management learning and development, problem-solving, reflection.

Introduction

The development of managers is central to the development and success of a business and critical to the profitability and productivity of an industry. Indeed, it is reported that the deficiency of management skills is a factor causing the UK hospitality industry to lag behind international competitors (*National Employers Skills Survey 2004, 2005*). This skill deficiency continues to affect the performance of hospitality businesses (*Hospitality, tourism and sport sector: Sector Skills Assessment 2012, 2012*). Effective management development (MD) initiatives, however, will enable businesses to improve their managers' skills (Mabey & Ramirez, 2005). But if MD interventions are to be effective, they must comply with how professionals learn (Cullen & Turnbull, 2005). However, the way that managers learn to manage their businesses is far from clear, especially within the context of hospitality operations (Ladkin, 1999). In Lucas and Deery's (2004) review it is reported that there were only seven studies concerned with human resource management (HRM) in a hospitality setting in the reviewed mainstream HRM journals. They also point out that most of the research published in the leading UK-based and USA-based hospitality journals has tested generic human resource theories without producing new theories or useful insights that are hospitality specific.

There are similar gaps in terms of human resource development (HRD) in the hospitality industry. Studies concerned with examining the mechanisms of MD are one of the dominant themes in the research field of HRD (Watson, 2008). These studies focus on MD that is often

formal and planned by HR professionals. However, research shows that professionals learn through actions, through experience and through reflection in their daily professional practices (Cornell & Eskin, 2003; Kolb, 1984; Revans, 1998; Schön, 1991; Wilkie & Burns, 2003). Similarly, the way that managers in general learn is often informal and highly experiential (Gold, Thorpe & Mumford, 2010; Marsick, 2003). However, it is not clear whether hospitality managers also benefit from the experiential learning approach. Neither is there evidence in the literature suggesting that their learning process is different from other professionals.

The hospitality industry has certain features that create a distinctive context within which management learning occurs. The service-based industry, including hotels, contract foodservice, restaurants, pubs, bars, and nightclubs, is characterized by intangibility, inseparability and perishability (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall & Wanhill, 2008). These characteristics demand a management approach that is responsive and stays close to the production and delivery of both products and services (Bowen & Ford, 2004; Dann, 1991; Ritchie & Riley, 2004). As such, managers in the hospitality industry face a more complex work environment than their colleagues in manufacturing industries (Winata & Mia, 2005). The industry is dominated by medium and small-sized businesses, particularly in Europe (Brotherton, 2004). However, as a result of industry consolidation brought about by globalization and the power of branding, large organizations have emerged especially in the sectors of hotels and contract foodservice. It is these large players that can shape the industry.

A large hotel company can have over a thousand properties in many different countries. For example, the Hilton Hotels Corporation has a portfolio of 3900 hotels worldwide, within which there are 75 establishments in the UK and Ireland (“About Hilton Worldwide”, 2012). Big players in the contract foodservice sector include the Compass Group operating in approximately 50 countries (“About Us”, 2012) and Sodexo operating over 34,000 sites globally, of which 2,300 are in the UK (“Group Profile”, 2012). The large organizations have geographically scattered business units (BUs), which operate independently but under an organizational system that allows for coherent policies and a common strategy (Dann, 1991; Peng & Litteljohn, 1997). The operational and structural features of the industry add uniqueness to the process of management that gives contextual meaning to management learning and development (ML&D).

We argue that it is critical to understand the learning process of General Managers (GMs) of large hospitality organizations because they hold the key executive position (Ladkin, 1999). Standing between the senior management and the supervisory management, GMs are responsible for the operation and management of business units. Hence, they are involved in the actual production and delivery of hospitality products and services. At the same time, they are connected to the senior management that directs the development of the organization. The GMs have to carry out managerial functions in a way that is responsive to the needs of hospitality operations at the business unit level, and yet comply with corporate policies.

Because of their critical role in maintaining the smooth running of the business, it is important to understand how they learn to manage and thus how their learning can be facilitated.

Working environments and pressures vary between the sectors of hotels and contract foodservices. Hotels offer meals and drinks together with accommodation to customers in return for financial exchange. Hence, one of a hotel GM's responsibilities is to ensure that the hotel guests are satisfied with the products and services provided at the hotel, and to ensure that the service meets the brand standard as set by the organization. This is very much a business-to-consumer (B2C) operation. Being part of the non-commercial or institutional segment of the foodservice sector, contract catering providers offer their services to market segments such as business and industry, healthcare, education, the military and transportation. The operations are largely business-to-business (B2B) and are hidden from direct public scrutiny. Hence, one of a contract catering GM's work priorities is to deliver the service as required by the client and to meet the brand guidelines given by Headquarters. A GM of a contract catering operation cares about how end customers perceive their service (as a manager of a restaurant does), but is probably more concerned with maintaining a good relationship with the clients and meeting their expectations. These different working environments demand that GMs of hotels and contract foodservice companies prioritize their work activities in different ways. Therefore, it appears that the contextual nature of ML is best understood by viewing learning from a wider perspective than from a purely cognitive angle. We can gain this "wider

perspective” by paying attention to what they reflect on in their self-reported accounts of learning experiences, which can be related to their work activities, organizational issues, and influences from society. Such reflections may help us to understand the unique aspects of hospitality professionals’ learning. Thus, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap in relation to management learning in the hospitality industry. Based on limited previous research in this context, one purpose of this study is to examine how GMs in the hotel sector and the contract catering sector learn to manage a hospitality business, , while, at the same time, seeking to understand the unique aspects of professional learning in these two major sectors of the industry.

Review of Literature

Research on how professionals learn draws our attention to two important aspects of developing professional personnel. First is the importance of experience in learning (Kayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984). Second is the critical function of reflective thinking in professionals’ learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Schön, 1991). Each of these issues is discussed in more detail below.

Experiential Learning. Experiences are the basis of learning (Kolb, 1984). Discrete and unusual events can promote transformational learning, because the events force professionals to question their taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions and consequently reframe their understanding of the situation (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1991). Marsick and Watkins

(1990) also point out that when individuals face such unusual events in the workplace, their learned responses and habitual activities become ineffectual. Other authors, such as Costello (1996) and Cope (2003), argue that it is important to appreciate that professionals learn through facing significant learning events as well as learning constantly through more reutilized events. The most occurring learning pattern in the workplace is dominated by social learning opportunities that are identified by the participants in Govaerts and Baert's (2011) study as "just their way of working" (p. 552). This finding mirrors Stuart's (1984) concept of natural learning, which is achieved in the normal course of dealing with people, attending meetings and tackling problems. Indeed, informal learning occurs every day in a variety of contexts (Gold et al., 2010); that is, learning that is unstructured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time and support) and typically does not lead to certification (Skule, 2004), or through what Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley (2003, p. 314) refer to as "everyday embodied practices". It is learner determined and initiated, including the development of new practices (Malcolm et al, 2003). According to Cunningham and Hillier (2013) formal development represents only a small proportion of the ways in which managers learn, the more significant learning coming from challenging experiences (50 per cent) and learning through relationships (30 per cent) (Marsick, 1988). Although researchers recognize the importance of informal learning (Boud, 1999), there is a lack of clarity as to the types of informal learning activities and processes that are useful in workplace learning generally (Marsick, 1988).

Informal workplace learning brings with it opportunities for learning from experience.

Kolb (1984) speaks of the experiential learning cycle (e.g. concrete experience – reflective observation – abstract conceptualization – active experimentation), arguing that people learn by critically reflecting upon their experience. The sense-making of the current experience cannot be isolated from prior learning because previous experiences penetrate current learning experiences. Most business managers learn through the performance of their day-to-day managerial tasks (Burgoyne & Hodgson, 1983; Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; Enos, Kehrhahn & Bell, 2003; Gold et al., 2010). In learning from daily management practice, professionals draw on similar previously experienced situations. Schön (1991) discusses professionals drawing on their own practical experience whilst reflecting on what they are doing (e.g. reflection-in-action), which gives rise to experiments to find solutions through trialing (e.g. reflection-on-action). Arguing from an individual learning perspective, experiential learning theory advocates that experience is grasped or understood through the processes of apprehension and comprehension. These two processes essentially lend themselves to the discourse of reflective thinking. However, how reflection takes its course in those experiential learning processes is still unclear. Indeed, as Moon (1999) points out, the role of reflection in learning is yet to be explained explicitly. Hence, one of the aims of our study was to explore the applicability of Kolb's model to the experiences, learning and reflection of managers in the hospitality industry.

In the early development of experiential learning theory, experience is regarded as an individual phenomenon. Such an individualist perspective is challenged by Miettinen (2000) and Ramsey (2005) who argue that any human experience is a relational reality created by individuals who jointly experience the social, cultural and relational processes that make the experiencing meaningful. Indeed, learning cannot be viewed in isolation from the context in which it occurs. Gergen (2009) argues that when locating knowledge as a collection of “facts” people construct these facts, and thus before the facts are to be trusted, their construction process needs to be unpacked. Many studies have been conducted to unpack the process and identify various contextual factors that impact on workplace learning. For example, Cheetham and Chivers (2001) and Gold et al. (2006) report that managers interact with the people surrounding them to gain multiple perspectives of a situation, which encourages reflective learning and re-constructing of their understanding or interpretation of the situation (Marsick, 2003). Ellinger (2005) identifies learning-committed leadership and management as an organizational contextual factor influencing informal workplace learning. Jeon and Kim (2012) report that top management and leadership in human resource development (HRD), open communications, new tasks and task satisfaction positively influence the effectiveness of informal learning. Hence, it is critical to recognize, and appreciate, the important role of social processes in constructing an experience that permits learning within the context of an organizational setting.

Reflective Thinking in Learning. Reflection is extensively discussed as a critical element of human learning processes. It is defined as the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the ground that supports it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). It can be simply standing back from the situation and thinking about what has happened and why that has happened (Gadamer, 1976). For Mezirow (1991), reflection involves the critique of assumptions about the content and process of problem solving. Reflection has been traditionally viewed as a highly personal cognitive process. However, this individualistic cognitive perspective is challenged by many scholars who argue that social interactions in groups and in organizational debates shape individuals’ reflective thinking (Raelin, 2001, 2004; Tomozumi Nakamura & Yorks, 2011; Vince, 2002). Taking the debate on the social nature of reflection further, Reynolds (1998) critiques Mezirow’s notion of critical reflection and argues that critical reflection involves “an analysis of power and control and an examination of the taken-for-granted within which the task or problem is situated” (p. 189). Other scholars, such as Harman (2012), Raelin (2004), Ramsey (2005) and Vince (2010), also state that in the individual or collective reflective learning processes one needs to examine the social, cultural and political “taken-for-granted” that shape how we think about thinking.

We appreciate that reflection upon a given experience is a personal, mental process but it cannot be deemed independent of the surroundings that support the experience. In the absence

of this, one runs the danger of dismissing the underpinning factors, or assumptions, of a learning experience and, as a result, these are not available for critique in the process of reflective learning (Ramsey, 2005) and can cause managers to miss important cues about issues or opportunities for their organization (Dalziel, 2010). In this paper, critical reflection cannot be seen as being consistent with critical theory because we focus on individual learning. However, agreeing with Kayes (2002), we argue that self-analysis and self-questioning in reflective learning can offer the potential for the development of organizational and social change, as reflective thinking allows managers to free themselves from socially embedded assumptions, and, thus, identify and question the purposes and conflicts of the power and interests of different stakeholders. In this study critical reflection is regarded as a deeper form of reflection that not only appreciates the immediate experience but also acknowledges the social factors that underpin people's assumptions.

Reflective learning has been related to the level of learning. A low level of learning (e.g. Bateson's (1973) Learning I and Argyris and Schön's (1974) single-loop learning) is instrumental in nature and does not involve the questioning of the underlying values of the system or context. Bateson (1973) speaks of Learning II, which is a higher level of learning than Learning I, and introduces the notion of context in Learning II (Tosey, Visser & Saunders, 2012). Influenced by Bateson's thinking, Argyris and Schön (1974) propose double-loop learning and argue that double-loop learning has the capacity to fundamentally change

professionals' theories for action, and thereby create new assumptions and strategies for effective action. Their argument echoes the concept of reflexive learning, which suggests that "the learner develops a working theory about how the various realities that they engage with are socially constructed, in order that these realities might, in turn, be changed" (Cotter & Cullen, 2012, p. 229). Hence, the general agreement is that the capacity to challenge or reframe previously established "theories for action" (Argyris & Schön, 1974), or "meaning perspectives" (Mezirow, 1991), or "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Reynolds, 1998) sets higher-level forms of learning apart from lower-level learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Past Management Learning Research. As identified in previous reviews of HRD studies (Lucas & Deery, 2004; Watson, 2008), research into management learning (ML), which focuses on the learning processes of professional managers in the hospitality industry is badly neglected. The majority of related works focus on the materials and mechanisms of development initiatives or events with the aim of bringing about some form of change in an organization. For instance, Wilson, Murray and Black (2000) examine the role of management competencies in Northern Ireland's contract catering sector (e.g. the material of MD). Winch and Ingram (2002) and Hudspith and Ingram (2002) discuss the role of the action learning approach in generating more effective workplace learning in hospitality organizations (e.g. the mechanism of MD). Other examples include Adams (2001), Harper, Brown and Irvine (2005), Magnini (2009), and Teare and Monk (2002). Li, Lee and Law (2012) investigate the

relationship between the use of technology and knowledge acquired by managers in the UK hospitality and tourism industry. Their study reflects the increasing research interests in virtual HRD (Antes & Schuelke, 2011; Bennett & Bierema, 2010).

Tesone (2004) encourages HR practitioners to use a whole brain leadership learning model to develop hospitality managers' leadership skills even though, as she acknowledges, this model lacks the support of empirical research. Nicely, Palakurthi and Gooden (2011) examine four behaviors of hotel managers in relation to the managers' self-reported learning levels. They identify that the managers' perceived risk-taking and their attitudes toward learning are predictive variables of their learning levels, but in their study, "learning levels", as a key term, is different from those given in the mainstream ML literature. Such inconsistency only generates confusion.

Research Questions

The study was designed to examine the learning process of GMs in large hotel organizations (B2C) and contract foodservice providers (B2B). It endeavors to address three research questions: (1) What is the nature of the learning process of these GMs? (2) What is involved in their learning process? (3) How do different forms of reflection interact with the reflective thinking processes?

Research Design

In this study, the authors take the ontological and epistemological stances that underpin the research paradigms of constructivism and pragmatism. The focus of research interest here is what hospitality managers think about how they learn to manage their businesses. Such knowledge is not an objective reality to be discovered, but involves the personal interpretations of these managers e.g. what they think about “managing business” and the way they learn that knowledge. Some of these perceptions can be tacit and will require deep reflection through an interactive dialogue between the researcher and the respondent in order to bring them to the surface. The present research therefore requires construction through social interactions between the main investigator and the participants. Moreover, the knowledge about learning to manage business cannot be understood in isolation from the real business environment. The context in which hospitality managers work and learn is important to the inquiry because it influences what they do at work (Bowen & Ford, 2004; Dann, 1991; Ritchie & Riley, 2004), and in turn, shapes what they learn. Hence, the study also takes a pragmatic approach, being real-world practice oriented. We embrace Patton’s (2002) notion of pragmatism, which welcomes the use of different research methods to achieve situational responsiveness. In our study we use different methods (see Research Approach in the next section) in order to answer our research questions. The pragmatic approach in this study does not reflect the pragmatist position that grounds the action research approach (Greenwood & Levin, 2005). The two sets

of our ontological and epistemological choices share an equal importance in informing the methodological approach in this study.

Research Approach. A case study approach was used as the inquiry strategy for this study.

Case studies can prove invaluable in adding to understanding, extending experience and increasing conviction about a subject (Stake, 2000), typically by combining data collection methods from a wide variety of sources including archives, interviews, surveys and participant observation (Dooley, 2002). Following Yin's (2003) suggestion, the research employed a multiple embedded case approach, combining analysis at three levels: the macro organizational level, the micro business unit (BU) level and the individual manager level. Using four organizations (see Sampling next) and at least five BU managers per organization, the study sought to replicate the findings across multiple cases (organizations and individuals).

Sampling. A critical case sampling strategy was employed in the selection of four hospitality organizations and their GMs of business units for the study. According to Gray (2009), in critical case sampling, the selected case is deemed to be crucial to the phenomenon under investigation. Two hotel organizations (e.g. Company H and Company A) and two contract foodservice providers (e.g. Company C and Company S) were selected for the study (see Table 1). They are key players of the hospitality industry internationally as well as in the UK. As illustrated in Table 1, hotel companies H and A have over 70 and 187 BUs in the United Kingdom, respectively. Company C and Company S offer their services on 7000 and 2300

client sites, respectively, in the UK. Based on previous research (Li, Buhalis, Lockwood & Benzine, 2007), these four organizations have developed sophisticated MD provision for their managers. They are considered as industry pioneers in employing innovative HR practices to develop their managers; therefore, they are critical gateways in understanding ML&D in the hospitality industry. As such, an understanding of how their managers learn is critical in encouraging new thinking on how to develop existing and future hospitality managers more effectively and to the benefit of the industry.

**** PLEASE PLACE TABLE 1 HERE ****

Within these organizations, five BUs per organization were selected using a criterion sampling method (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009), which involved examining cases that met some predetermined criteria of importance. Literature suggests that the nature of a hospitality manager's work is shaped by the size of the business that they are responsible for (*Getting Ahead: Graduate Careers In Hospitality Management*, 2001). This research chose to study GMs of hotels that employed between 50 and 249 workers and GMs of contract foodservice BUs that employed more than 10 workers. The decision on the size of business unit was made based on the European Commission's definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (*Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 Concerning the Definition of Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises*, 2003). To facilitate accessibility for data collection, the selected BUs needed to be in London and the South East of England.

Each organization's Human Resource Director in the UK office nominated at least five GMs who work in the BUs that met the aforesaid criteria. As can be seen in Table 1, all participants have over 10 years of work experience as managers. It appears that overall the hotel GMs have higher educational attainments than their contract catering counterparts. There were eight female GMs and 13 male managers.

Data Collection. Data were collected by using three different methods - documentation, overt non-participant observation, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2007 and May 2008. The job descriptions for the GMs were obtained from the respective Human Resource Directors of the studied organizations. Seven observations of GM's work were conducted and observation notes were generated. Twenty one face-to-face, in-depth interviews (including the seven observees) were conducted and recorded. At the interviews, the managers were asked about the responsibilities of their current position to pin down the focus of their learning. The managers who had not been observed were prompted with this question: "If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing?" to gather the context of their workplace learning. To find out the nature of the learning process of the managers, the participants were presented with this question: "With regard to the responsibility of _____, how have you learned about it?" To explore what is involved in these learning processes, the following questions were presented to the managers:

1. Focusing on the responsibility of _____, what tasks are significant?

2. What are you doing now to increase your understanding of this area?

Probing questions were also used to learn about issues around the learning context. Each interview took on average 45 minutes to complete. At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked to provide their résumés.

Data Analysis. The Framework Analysis method (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003) was used to analyze the data. The first six case studies of individual participants (three hotel GMs and three catering GMs) were analyzed, and a number of sub-themes and key themes were identified. For example, the sub-themes “Generating new business”, “Handling people” and “Having to innovate” were described as the key theme “Being challenged”. To ensure that data had reached a point of saturation (Morse, 1994), a further two case studies (one hotel GM and one catering GM) were conducted and analyzed. While the key themes remained unchanged, a few new codes were created but they all linked to the identified key themes, which meant that we had reached an optimal point of categorization which could then be applied to the remaining 13 cases.

The whole research process involved repeated construction and re-construction of what ML in the hospitality settings is about. Through observations of the work of seven managers and conversations with them, the primary researcher was able to link management theories with management practice in the real business world and, thus, understand the contexts in which their learning took place. The interviews were conducted in a dialogical manner so that the

researcher and the managers could co-construct workplace managerial learning. By reflecting upon the observations, gathered documentation and conversations with the managers, and by gaining further theoretical insights into ML&D research, the authors began to de-code the story embedded in the data.

Trustworthiness. To ensure the credibility, dependability and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of the research, a number of actions were taken. First, a pilot study was performed prior to the main field study to make sure that the interview questions could be understood and that the answers to the questions were relevant to the interests of the research. Second, data triangulation (Flick, 2004) was employed by using multiple sources of evidence e.g. job descriptions, observations, résumés and interviews, so that appropriate operational measures for the identified themes and sub-themes could be established and converging lines of inquiry developed. Third, the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for checking to ensure their accuracy and credibility. Fourth, the procedure of framework analysis and a systematic case study protocol (Yin, 2003) were followed rigorously to avoid or minimize the occurrence of errors and bias that can jeopardize the dependability of the study. Last but not least, data were managed and analyzed using NVivo 7 to ensure confirmability. For each code, a definition was created and recorded in the computer program, so that the code could be referred to ensure the consistency of coding.

Findings

Data analysis revealed no substantial differences between the learning processes of hotel and foodservice GMs. Hence, the findings and discussion presented below represent a consolidated analysis of GMs in the hospitality industry, using these sectors as critical cases.

Research Question One: What is the nature of the learning process of the GMs?

The research discovers that the participants learn how to manage the business, predominantly, through their experience of managing. Manager G's words summarize the nature of learning to manage in the workplace: "I don't think I know everything. I don't. I'm learning every day. Most of the learning is from dealing with day-to-day business and experience." In a similar vein, Manager N states: "I guess a lot of the learning, 90% of the learning, I would have experienced in my career would have been... really a practicing type of approach where I would have been shown by somebody perhaps or would have been given objectives by somebody and to a large extent probably I found my own way to get there."

Research Question Two: What is involved in their learning process? In the process of experiential learning, four key stages emerged from the data, namely Being Challenged, Information Searching, Information Transformation and Testing. Table 2 illustrates how these themes and their sub-themes were derived from different data sources. Each stage is reported in detail in the following sections.

** PLEASE PLACE TABLE 2 HERE**

Stage One: Being Challenged. The GMs' learning often starts when they are put in a situation where they feel they are being challenged and this motivates them to learn. Manager H states: "There is a challenge that you need to solve. Those challenges make you need to learn something". As shown in Table 2, one of the challenges that all the GMs recognize is the need to generate profits for their companies (e.g. sub-theme "Generating new business"). Such challenge is often coupled with a change of situation where the GMs find that their current level of understanding can provide only a partial solution but that there is always something unknown or something that they do not fully understand. For example, Manager J expresses, "You end up dealing with different situations". Hence, the feeling of being challenged is associated with their managerial responsibility to meet business targets as well as their awareness of knowledge gaps. This feeling functions as an energizing power to initiate learning.

Stage Two: Information Searching. As a result of feeling a need to find out more, the managers use different channels to gather information that will enable them to find a solution to their perceived problem. One of these channels is approaching their colleagues and subordinates who are more experienced in dealing with similar situations (e.g. sub-theme "Asking questions" in Table 2). For example, Manager J explains: "They [the human resources team] talk you through [the] processes [of dealing with staff issues], so you then gain that understanding from them". In addition to approaching others, the GMs use other means to gather information. Hotel managers aim to sell as many rooms as possible at rates through

which the company will gain the highest sales revenue but at same time remaining competitive in a price sensitive market. To achieve business targets, some GMs use a combination of different technological applications, such as the company property management system and the websites of competitors in order to find both historical and up to date information to make decisions on hotel room rates.

Stage Three: Information Transformation. This is a stage whereby relevant information is internalized and becomes the tacit knowledge of the managers. When the GMs are exposed to information that is new and relevant to them, they try to, in their words, “understand it” through various means, named “Motivating people”, “Leading and influencing” and “Aligning company policy and reality” in Table 2. For instance, to understand the concept of “negative coaching”, Manager K reflects on how he manages the team at his hotel. “Of course we need to identify them [problems], but rather than just identify them on the spot like that”, he comments, “it is better to get the team themselves to say: ‘Yes. I do that wrong. Yes, we can improve that.’ ” ... “[and to] get them involved in converting the negative into a positive”. Hence, he associates the concept with his own environment and critically reflects on his way of leading and influencing people, looking for what is missing in his own approach. A similar approach is witnessed in Manager E’s experience of learning about creating a “win-win environment”. To understand this practice, he puts it in a context that he is familiar with so that he can explain it in a way that is meaningful to him. The explanation is derived from critical

reflective thinking upon his own way of influencing people. “It’s looking at how I manage my managers,” he questions, “do I have my managers compete against each other for favoritism?”

Stage Four: Testing. An outcome of information transformation is the formulation of a strategy, solution or new idea. The GMs sometimes test out their ideas by implementing the problem resolution in real operations. At this stage, there are alterations to the initial strategy, supported by close monitoring and evaluating any feedback. Monitoring progress can lead to alterations to the initial pricing strategy (e.g. sub-theme “Checking revenue”), for instance, which suggests some level of learning through “trial-and-error”. For example, Manager A says: “You don’t always get them right”... “you are buying and selling. It’s trading. It’s risk-taking”. They recognize that, when experimenting, new ideas can generate negative outcomes, and they prepare themselves mentally for the possible results. As Manager F expresses, “[the Early Departure Fee policy] could blow up in my face, but you don’t know unless you try it”.

Research Question Three: How do different forms of reflection interact with the reflective thinking processes? The study witnesses the critical role of reflective thinking in the experiential learning processes of all the participants, in particular at the stages of Information Transformation and Testing. Manager I often finds herself on a mission to assist junior GMs in other business units. Each time when she pays a visit to a site, she gathers all the information and compares it with what she already knows. She then questions why certain things are done differently in this particular unit and links the uniqueness of the unit to the

contract agreement, demographic characteristics of the area and local legislation. In doing so, Manager I starts to evaluate whether any practice that she has experience of would be suitable to this particular unit. She develops reasons why this practice would work in this situation but not others. Thus, there is a shift of reflection from associating new information with the known to integrating new knowing with tacit knowing to validating new thinking. Such shifts are also evident at the Testing stage. For example, Manager B tests his idea of fair room rates. During the trial, he monitors how the hotel rooms are selling and compares that information with his expectations and the historical financial data of the hotel to justify the viability of his decision.

More interestingly, there is clear evidence of reflecting on the contexts in which learning occurs in all interviewed managers' accounts. Two examples are provided below to illustrate this:

Manager F: "If you try to change the airline ticket, they'll charge you. So if your flight was for tomorrow and you are sure that you won't be able to do it." ... "it [the airline] will make you buy another ticket." ... "We have customers that booked for four nights, and they want to leave after three [nights]. We just say 'Thank you very much. Have a nice day!' Well, the actuality of what you have done is you have lost the potential revenue for that room. So we introduced a new policy two weeks ago."

Manager D: "I spoke to people again, looking through the Headquarter office to see what is available. I thought is there anything that we can do here?" ... "We went down to Bristol where

the Soil Association is. They have the most recognized brands in the UK regarding organic food.

We then came back to see our supply chain again. [We] looked at all [the] products from our suppliers who have associations with accreditation” ... “It went for about three to four months. It didn't marry unfortunately.” ... “Basically, it's just about finding enough ingredients in our supply chain from certain suppliers fitting into the 85-10-5 framework. It wasn't working.”

Discussion

Research Question One. The study found that GMs learn to manage by solving real business problems in their daily management operations. This is an informal process, individual in nature, experiential, and not linked to formal, accredited or structured learning programs. The managers' learning is sometimes accomplished by testing problem resolutions, which encourages further critical thinking and a type of learning that is described as “trial-and-error” by the managers. Reflecting back to the beginning of the inquiry, the authors appreciate the contributions of different learning theories and believe that these theories explain different aspects of human learning. Our point of view is consistent with Yang's (2003). As such, when we asked the participants about how they have learned to manage the business, we took an open approach to let their stories unfold. However, our findings once again affirm the significance of the experiential learning theory, reflective learning and informal workplace learning literature in explaining ML&D: how the hospitality managers learn to manage is

similar to the way that other professionals learn - the learning is based on experiences and is accompanied with critical thinking and action.

Research Question Two. Emerging from our empirical data, the participants' learning processes consist of four stages, which share some similarities with Kolb's (1984) stages while containing some differences. Being Challenged and Concrete Experience share the notion that experiences are the basis of learning, however the former highlights the professional managers' feelings that encourage their learning. Recognizing "not knowing" is a key cause of the feeling of being challenged. The participants realize that they do not always know the answer to the problem-situation because the circumstances have changed. This phenomenon recalls the concept of "disjuncture". "Disjuncture occurs whenever there is lack of accord between the external world experienced by human beings and their internal biographical interests or knowledge" (Jarvis, 1992, p. 83). In this study, disjuncture happens when the managers are given more demanding tasks, such as fulfilling a new role, being involved in a new project and maintaining business volumes in a changing environment.

Disjuncture makes learning possible, but it is also possible that learning may not occur if people choose not to take the learning opportunity i.e. if they are non-reflective (Jarvis, 1992). However, when the participants are aware of the existence of a gap between what they know and the new experience that requires more knowing, they have to take action to bridge the gap.

Due to their responsibilities for the survival and success of the business, the participants cannot afford “not learning”. Hence, they are in a constant learning mode.

In this mode, participants keep their minds open to their surroundings, looking for information. At the Information Searching stage the managers develop multiple perspectives of the situation that they are dealing with, which is consistent with Kolb’s concept of Reflective Observation. Pandza and Thorpe (2009) speak of “creative search” which denotes imaginative acts that will lead to productive opportunities in organizations. We found similar behaviors in this research. For instance, Manager B says, “Everybody is talking about recession but I still would like to push my rate up by £5”... “I get a feel for what generates the business in my area”. Following his intuition, or “gut feel” (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004), Manager B makes an “imaginative” decision, but it is inevitably directed by his past experience, or in his word “an educated guess”. This kind of imaginative tacit knowing enables the managers to act creatively and proactively to maximize the organization’s financial gains for the immediate future. Such proactivity is essential for competitive survival and in initiating novel knowledge progressions (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003).

Information Transformation is concerned with internalizing external knowledge, which is similar to Kolb’s “Abstract Conceptualization”. However, Kolb (1984) emphasizes creating new concepts so that observations can be integrated into theory, whereas in our research, we

found that reflective thinking plays a central role in the transformation of information into knowledge. We will return to the issues of reflective thinking later.

The core of Testing and Kolb's Active Experimentation is to try out the new ideas to find whether they would work. In our study, monitoring the progress of experimentation is an integral part of Testing. Testing encourages the managers to question what has worked, what has not and why and how to make it work next time. The participants' acts at the Testing stage mirror Schön's (1991) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Such reflective practice makes it possible to know why a particular situation should be dealt with in a specific way, which is regarded as a more sophisticated approach to learning a practical subject (Jarvis, 1992).

Testing in professional practice is more challenging than experimenting in a laboratory environment because there are hidden variables, unexpected results and the influences of the subjective assumptions of people (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Being in a position that links frontline staff and central management, the GMs try to get their teams to buy into their ideas so that the trial can progress smoothly and deliver the outcome that will please senior management. Hence, their managerial position and the powers associated with their roles in the hierarchical structure of management appear to be hidden variables in our study.

Research Question Three. In the present study, the participants reflect on their library of existing knowledge and experience to understand a confronted problem-situation or a new

piece of knowledge. In this process, the participants search for comparable experiences and known concepts, find similarities and differences between their prior learning and their action, which, to a large extent, echoes the notions of knowing through apprehension and knowing through comprehension (Kolb, 1984) and Boud's et al. (1985) elements of reflection.

The managers relate new data to what is already known, which indeed reflects Boud et al.'s (1985) "association". They then raise a series of questions, such as why certain things are done differently in this given context. Such reflective thinking echoes "integration", which Boud et al. (1985) define as seeking relationships among the data. The processes of association and integration enable the GMs to capture the face value of the situation or knowledge, which is probably what Kolb (1984) means by "knowing by apprehension".

Having taken the face value of what confronts them, the participants start to raise questions and be critical about the situation or knowledge. Recalling the case of Manager I, she continues the process of understanding why the unit has not performed well by evaluating any practice that she knows would be suitable for the unit. This evaluation exercise comes closest to the notion of "validation" (Boud et al., 1985) which involves determining the authenticity of ideas and the feelings that have resulted. By definition, knowing through comprehension is "an interpretive process transformed intentionally and extensionally by criticism" (Kolb, 1984, p.103). Thus, it can be said that the comprehension process is enabled through the shifts of reflection from association to integration to validation.

The key theme that we have identified from the research is that hospitality managers take the benefit of the experiential learning approach in their journey of learning to manage. The experiential learning process involves four stages, at each of which reflective thinking plays its role as means for sense-making. The role of reflective thinking in their experiential learning is demonstrated through the form of “actions” (e.g. association, integration, and validation) and of “products” (e.g. content, process, and context reflections), which will be discussed in detail in the following text.

The “products” of the managers’ reflections highlight the contextual nature of ML&D. Mezirow (1991) distinguishes the critical view of the content of an action (e.g. content reflection), from the process of an effort (e.g. process reflection), and from assumptions about the content or the process (e.g. premise reflection), but not reflection on context. In our study, the managers’ critical reflective thoughts cover what would be required should they pursue a course of action and the procedures that would be involved. More importantly, all interviewed managers reflect upon their own unique, immediate environments and analyze how practices in other industries or businesses or even other business units within their own corporation need to be customized to meet the business needs in their immediate contexts.

We argue that context reflection is a feature of hospitality managers’ learning and that this feature is associated with how businesses are operated in the industry. Hospitality organizations, in particular hotel groups and food contract providers, have distributed business units, which

target different segments and offer different products and service concepts. These units are the front line of hospitality business operations. As such, the unit managers stay close to the operation and manage their units somewhat independently, which is certainly the case for the GMs in this study. The operations, however, are under the same organizational system that demands a shared company vision, a common strategy and coherent policies. This practice is evident in contract catering Manager D's explanation of his effort to introduce organic food offerings in his business unit. Hotel Manager B applied higher room rates during a wine fair event, which was, however, after his gaining permission from head office. The GMs' ideas and solutions to problems have to comply with the policies and service standards set by their organizations.

Hence, on the one hand these managers have the autonomy to manage their business unit in a way that they think the business needs, but on the other hand, they are obliged to comply with the vision, strategy and policies of the corporation. We can call this "confined autonomy". Such confined autonomy gives rise to context reflection, which enables them to analyze the fitness for purpose of their proposed course of action at the business unit level with the organizational vision at the corporate level.

Context reflection is critical to the success of the course of action that managers may decide to take. It not only enables the integration through which relationships are identified, but also facilitates the validation of knowledge transfer because it permits evaluation of the feasibility

of the content and process of the effort that is reflected on. Such learning processes have direct impact on their businesses' competitiveness and profitability. Mezirow (1991) talks about perceptual and conceptual frameworks that form, limit, and distort how people think, believe, and feel. Context reflection enables the managers to analyze their business environment critically and question intensively whether their units would benefit from the business practices seen in other contexts and if so how to make them work. Such critical reflection essentially changes the framework of the managers' mind. For Fiol and Lyles (1985) and Cope (2003), this is higher-level learning: "the recognition of cross-situational significance, particularly the notions of transferability and applicability, which set higher level forms of learning apart" (Cope, 2003, p.433).

Limitations of the Study. This study has a number of limitations. First, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Its logic and power lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth (Saunders et al., 2002). Even though we have referred to the relevant literature to select companies to study carefully, we still run the risk of overlooking vital characteristics or being biased subconsciously in selecting the sample. Second, the study investigates learning experiences which consist of self-reports of participants' own experience as evidence. Individuals are rarely able to give a full explanation of their actions but merely accounts about what they did and why (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, the participants' ability to understand aspects of their own experience reflectively and to communicate what they discern

effectively will directly affect the quality of the data gathered. Third, due to limited prior evidence on ML in the hospitality industry, this research took an exploratory approach by examining a small group of hospitality managers' learning. Based on this in-depth study of information-rich cases, the authors are confident that the study has provided an insight into how hospitality managers learn, and that readers can experience our findings and draw their own conclusions (Stake, 2005).

Conclusion

This research has investigated in depth how GMs in business units of large hospitality organizations learn and has identified a process of "finding out" that consists of four key stages. Previous research has looked into how professionals learn, however, how general managers, who work in the hospitality industry, learn is under researched. The present research has addressed this gap and found hospitality managers learn through experiential, reflective and problem-solving modes, in the same way as other professionals. Our findings affirm the significance and usefulness of experiential learning theory and transformative learning theory in explaining workplace managerial learning. This is the first academic contribution of the study.

The research discovered a unique aspect of professional learning in the hospitality industry, in that context reflection forms a critical component of reflection in hospitality managers'

learning. It encourages critical reflections of content and process and enables a high level of learning. This is the second theoretical contribution of the study.

Previous research has argued that professionals learn through experience in the real context of professional practice and through reflection. However, the relationship between reflection and the learning process is not clearly explained. The empirical evidence found in this study suggests the interplay between the two concepts, where the learning processes of apprehension and comprehension are enabled by the reflection shifting from association to integration to validation. This finding has enhanced our understanding of how reflective thinking and the processes of sense-making feed into each other to enable learning. This is the third theoretical contribution of the study.

Implications for HRD Practice. These contributions have implications for management education and training. Management education programs often focus on managerial functions and activities that are presented by educators who are not actually involved in daily business management. Business students are taught what they are expected to do in their future career in management. However, in the real business world, professional managers are constantly engaged with activities to find problem resolution, through learning how to deal with the unexpected. Learning to manage and managing are constantly tangled together at work. Hence, it will not be a surprise that when students take on the role of a manager in a real business, they find management practice alien. Hence, we agree with Mintzberg's (2005) and

Antonacopoulou's (2010) call that business schools ought to find solutions to provide the contextual dimension that nurtures ML&D in the workplace. Many business schools, indeed, already employ work-based learning projects as part of management programs.

In the hospitality industry, many training consultants and HRD practitioners still hold a view that managers need to be developed by sending them on training courses in a systematic and structured manner. Such an approach was described as "sheep dipping" by one of the HR professionals in this study. Management training courses certainly have their merits, but it is important to recognize that much of a GM's learning is likely to take place within their normal work activities. Hence, businesses must develop initiatives and infrastructures to support and facilitate this kind of work-integrated experiential and problem-based learning.

**** PLEASE PLACE TABLE 3 HERE****

As outlined in Table 3, HRD practices can focus on developing the managers' skills to critically reflect on current business practices and their decisions at the stages of Being Challenged, Information Transformation and Testing. In our study, all the managers are under the pressure of optimizing profits while minimizing costs, which in some cases has constrained the managers from delivering ethical outcomes to their communities and society. More than just training and development, the role of HRD is now played out in the boundaries between communities and societies (Lee, 2010). Recognizing that current business practices are often driven by financial performance, which does not always lead to successful organizational and

societal outcomes (MacKenzie, Garavan & Carbery, 2012), the challenge for HRD practitioners in the hospitality industry is to develop industry professionals who think and act responsibly for customers, communities and societies.

At the Information Searching stage, open communication is critical. Key players in the hospitality industry often have geographically scattered business units. Hence, from a corporate point of view, it is challenging to support ML&D at the business unit level. We have learned the significance of context reflection in hospitality managers' learning. Hospitality corporations are therefore advised to introduce and implement policies and practices that encourage and enable open communications vertically and horizontally across the organization.

Future Research. We suggest two possible topics for future research. First, the literature suggests that managers at different levels of a managerial hierarchy have different work contents. Their work and their positions in the hierarchy create a different environment of workplace ML&D. Hence, it is worth investigating the learning of managers at the senior level and at the supervisory level. Second, one could take a comparative approach to examine to what degree the learning of managers in the hospitality industry is different from that of professionals in other industries in the service sector.

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 Table 1. The background information about the business units and the participants

	Business Unit	Participant Code All interviewed with some (observed)	Highest Educational Attainment	No. of Years in Current Position / No. of Years in Management	Expertise area(s) before Becoming a GM
Hotel Company A	“We are the most profitable hotel that [Company A] has and for [brand name] Hotels we are the most profitable hotel in the world, out of 400 something like that. It is location, location, location.” (interview transcript)	A (observed)	Diploma in Hospitality Management	3 / 13	Rooms division

	Business Unit	Participant Code All interviewed with some (observed)	Highest Educational Attainment	No. of Years in Current Position / No. of Years in Management	Expertise area(s) before Becoming a GM
	Newly opened, family friendly hotel in central London (observation note)	B (observed)	Diploma in Hospitality Management	5 / 14	Rooms division, Food & beverage
	A budget hotel near London Euston Railway Station. (observation note)	K	BA in Management	1 / 15	Rooms division, Food & beverage
	A top brand hotel in west London (observation note)	L	BA Hons. In Hotel Administration	1 / 25	Rooms division
	“A big hotel with 600 beds” (interview transcript) in central London (observation note)	T	BSc in Hotel & Catering Administration	3 / 24	Rooms division
Hotel Company H	A hotel located in one of the world’s busiest business districts (company brochure)	E	BA in Hotel Management	2 / 23	Operations
	The hotel is operated in a historical building in central London. (observation note)	F (observed)	BA in Politics	0.5 / 11	Business development
	A hotel located in central London. (observation note)	N	Marriott Leadership & Executive Education Programme	6 / 24	Business development, operations
	An airport hotel with a high priority of security.(interview conversation)	O	Postgraduate Diploma in Hotel Management	2 / 25	Business development

	Business Unit	Participant Code All interviewed with some (observed)	Highest Educational Attainment	No. of Years in Current Position / No. of Years in Management	Expertise area(s) before Becoming a GM
	“It’s basically three core businesses, the rooms which is 500 rooms, the banqueting which has meeting rooms, conference, private dining, turns over 16 million and we have a number of restaurants and bars that are in operation.” (interview transcript)	P	BA Hons. In Hotel Administration	5 / 30	Business development
Contract Catering C	Offering catering services for the client in central London (company brochure)	C (observed)	Diploma in Hotel & Restaurant Management	7 / 16	Events management
	Same as above	D (observed)	A Level	1 / 22	Chef
	“In the Arena we tend to focus on retail although we do have quite a lot hospitality functions as well, but our main source or our main income in the Arena is retail.” (interview transcript)	I	A Level	2 / 23	Food retail
	Offering hospitality service at a historical site in London (observation) “We’ve inherited a diary that was pretty weak.” ... “We came in as an on-site caterer and took contract.” ... “last year I’ve made redundant 13 people which is quite a lot considering... We are very close-knit team now and we all do	J (observed)	Diploma in Hotel & Restaurant Management	4 / 11	Logistic

	Business Unit	Participant Code All interviewed with some (observed)	Highest Educational Attainment	No. of Years in Current Position / No. of Years in Management	Expertise area(s) before Becoming a GM
	work particularly well together.” (interview transcript)				
	“The day to day running of the catering within the Royal Academy – that is the retail catering.” (interview transcript)	M (observed)	Diploma in Hotel & Restaurant Management	3 / 14	Operations
	Located near the Wembley Stadium, offering hospitality service (observation & interview)	U	HND in Hotel & Catering Management	6 / 23	Food & beverage
Contract Catering H	“We have got 25 meeting rooms and meeting rooms dedicated to the directors of Henderson. We don't cater externally, very rarely we do, but mostly it is for international clients, having guests from outside.” (interview transcript)	G	BSc Hotel & Restaurant Management	4 / 12	Restaurant
	“the City office of the largest International property company in the world” ... “Responsible for the catering requirements of over 700 people” ... “32 meeting rooms, which include 22, specifically designed director's dining rooms and a Funky Café bar, which services the whole building.” (CV)	H	Diploma in Hotel & Restaurant Management	3 / 12	Bakery
	“a busy 24/7 site contract catering site with two staff restaurants, deli bar, directors fine dining along with functions and hospitality services” ... “a team 26 including	Q	BA Education	2 / 13	Operations

	Business Unit	Participant Code All interviewed with some (observed)	Highest Educational Attainment	No. of Years in Current Position / No. of Years in Management	Expertise area(s) before Becoming a GM
	managers/chefs and front house of house staff” (CV)				
	“We are looking after the reception, the switch board, post room, hospitality, and beverage side. We didn’t manage the stationary for the client. We didn’t manage their archive for their client. We do have a partnership with the cleaners. We do manage their storage furniture. We are getting involved with chance of office relocations.” (interview transcript)	R	Diploma in Hotel & Restaurant Management	4 / 10	Food & beverage
	“the running of the hospitality suite, coffee bar, evening service and vending managing a team of 7.” (CV)	S	National Certificate for Personal Licence Holders	1.5 / 12	Food & beverage

Table 2. Emerging themes and data

Main themes	Data source	Examples
Being Challenged <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating new business • Handling people • Innovating 	Job descriptions	<p>“Through having a clear understanding and awareness of the available and potential markets for the Hotel, to manage the room reservations in such a way as to optimise the occupancy ratio and room rates for the Hotel.” (Hotel company A)</p> <p>“Regularly reviewing the products within the hotel and generate innovative and exciting new products, in order to differentiate from the competition.” (Hotel company H)</p> <p>“Ensure that every opportunity is taken to 'up sell' to our customers depending on the profile of event / show.” (Contract catering C)</p> <p>“to increase the Client and organisation revenue opportunities i.e., cash sales” (Contract catering S)</p>
	Observations	<p>11:40am Manager J runs to his office and come back with a brochure introducing the historical background of the venue and information pack introducing the services that the company offers and the prices. When Jane explains how her organisation is organising the event financially, Ian says to her whether they have considered getting sponsorship from beverage companies. Jane replies: " No, we haven't thought about this, a very good point". She then writes this down in her notebook.</p>
	Interviews	<p>“[the challenge] is constantly trying to generate business” (Manager J)</p> <p>“for this position” ... “I had to put everything in place. I took over a bit of a mess” ... “It's just something you have to do.” (Manager M)</p>

Main themes	Data source	Examples
		<p>Director of the company. All GMs within the brand give financial reports to the Chair individually over the phone. The most frequently said words by the managers are “budget”, “profit”, “sales”, “overhead control”, “target”, “break-even”, “forecast”, “payroll” and “bottom-line profit”. Finished at 10:25. (Manager M)</p> <p>“learn through questioning and listening to other people” ... “as an example when Roger raised finding the invoice for an event.” ... “I didn't know they had to reproduce what Roger was producing and sent it out to the client. That is when I said why don't we just scan it in, it would make them doing the work three times.” ... “So what we learned today through discussion and asking some questions, Graham came up with an answer.” (Manager C)</p> <p>“It is very much reading the broadsheet newspapers with all the retail sites.” (Manager D)</p> <p>“You would pick it [knowledge about the market of the host country] up through the handover you get first of all from your predecessor you are succeeding. And you get that through the marketing plan that is developed by the business, and your sales managers that work within the business. Outside that, you get it by experience of running the business.” (Manager P)</p> <p>“All the figures are there you just have to go out and find them, whatever you want is there, you can get information from the tills, you can get information from suppliers. You can get sort of studies commissioned. You've just got to make sure that you've actually got the correct figures that you need.” (Manager Q)</p> <p>“You have got to not be afraid of asking the people that are working for you: what they are looking at each day.</p>

Main themes	Data source	Examples
		<p>Number one they are normally very proud to tell you. Number two it's actually the more you learn as they're explaining, you'll also get to understand how much they understand." (Manager T)</p>
<p>Information Transformation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivating people • Leading and influencing • Aligning company policy and reality 	<p>Interviews</p>	<p>"Again, drawing on experience and thinking about what is it that I need to do and how I need to communicate with the people that I want to do certain things. How I can influence them. And in order to do this, well, I guess you need to understand what is it that motivates them or what is it that is going to make them be interested in a specific topic. I think one has certain ideas about how things need to be done and I think it's a balance of actually getting things done in the way... that's probably the area of how I want things done and how things need to be done because the company's given us guidelines, and hopefully they should be aligned. And then there needs to be an activity to align this thinking with the managers that eventually need to execute that." (Manager N)</p> <p>"you manage profitability through academics and also you then by managing a small department, by being targeted, by achieving targets yourself, understanding what you don't achieve if you fall short, what you've done as a result that's preventing you from doing that, what could you have done better." (Manager O)</p> <p>"It's very interesting in contract catering because the only asset of the company is their people, because we don't own anything. That tree belongs to the client. This table belongs to the client. Everything belongs to the client. The only thing that the Director's Table has is people. We have to look after all of our people. Director's Table looks after me very well and I've got to look after my employees very well" ... "We're only selling the service. That's what we are selling. So we</p>

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Main themes	Data source	Examples
		“Before my relationship [with the client] became better, the first thing I would do was to ensure that my customer was happy, and was to do, and then please my client afterwards. But, basically, it’s more and more important that you please your client and then you have to please your customers.” (Manager S)

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Table 3. Learning stages comparison

	Our stages of learning	Kolb's stages (1976 and 1984)
	<i>Being Challenged</i>	<i>Concrete Experience</i>
Similarity	Experiences are the basis of learning.	
Difference	“Feeling being challenged” is the core, triggering learning.	Concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection.
	<i>Information Searching</i>	<i>Reflective Observation</i>
Similarity	Gaining many perspectives of the situation.	
Difference	Through different channels, managers gather information that will help them find problem resolutions.	Reflecting on and observing new experiences from many perspectives.
	<i>Information Transformation</i>	<i>Abstract Conceptualization</i>
Similarity	Turning external knowledge into own.	
Difference	Knowledge internalisation is powered through reflective thinking.	Creating concepts that integrate the observations into theories.
	<i>Testing</i>	<i>Active Experimentation</i>
Similarities	New ideas are tested out.	
Differences	Testing is accompanied with continuous monitoring and critical reflective thinking.	Using the theories to make decisions and solve problems.

Table 4. Implications for HRD practices

Learning stages	Recommendations to facilitate learning
Being Challenged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Initiating projects at the business unit level, regional level and corporate level and encouraging managers to take the leadership of the projects. ● Encouraging managers to critically analyse current business practices and think about how to take the business forward.
Information Searching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Utilising technologies to establish information banks that can be shared across the organisation. ● Working with industry professional bodies to create industry-specific cases of best practices in business management and making them available to industry professionals. ● Utilising social networking technology applications to enable virtual exchange of experiences.
Information Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encouraging critical reflection through mentoring, peer group discussions and team meetings. ● Facilitating a high level of learning by encouraging managers to question the applicability of new ideas and practices seen in other businesses / industries within their immediate contexts.
Testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encouraging managers to try new ideas. ● Offering managers opportunities to share their experiences in testing new ideas / practices and encouraging collective critical reflection.