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Iconic, not incremental – the history of a leap forward

MAS Intimates is a Sri Lankan company which makes lingerie for M&S. Penny Walker looks at the people skills which enabled it to build its iconic eco-factory, and which are now being used to tell the story

When M&S challenged their suppliers to create a model 'green' factory, MAS didn't pussyfoot around with incremental improvements. Instead, they responded with proposals for a new build project which aimed to be, in their words, iconic.

Iconic vision

MAS Intimates' senior team wanted to give the company a marketing edge, especially as Sri Lanka is facing stronger competition on price from manufacturers based in China. They recognised the potential for market differentiation, and the usefulness of being recognised as a pioneer. Small steps might take them to the head of the field for a short while, but building a global name as a leading-edge company would help to keep that position for much longer. There is no guarantee of future custom from M&S – but a strong independent environmental reputation will help cement the relationship.

MAS's team found locally-based

technical experts who met with them to brainstorm how to respond to M&S's challenge. The enthusiasm and energy in those conversations led to them proposing something cutting-edge and inspirational, which would raise the profile of the company, its sector and home country. M&S liked the proposals, and helped by sharing expertise and contributing to the consultancy costs.

Underlying values

The team developed a set of values to form the project's foundations:

- respect for other life forms and the existing ecology;
 - respect for the cultural, physical and commercial context; and
 - respect for the users of the factory.
- These values show up in the way that the factory is surrounded by biodiversity – including a green roof, lake and (in a break with usual practice), being built on two floors to minimise land-take. The site is said to 'return to nature' at night.

Not just green...

An understanding of local preferences for a relatively warm working environment means that fuel-hungry conventional air conditioning has been dispensed with. Workers are looked after through natural ventilation, evaporative cooling, and the presence of windows which look out over the site and can be opened.

Grid-sourced renewable electricity is supplemented by on-site photovoltaics, which will supply around 10 per cent of the energy needs. The factory itself uses 40 per cent less energy than similar-sized traditional sites.

Cement-stabilised soil has been used for construction, because of its low embodied energy. Rainwater harvesting, water efficiency, recycling and anaerobic digestion also help reduce the environmental impact.

Flexible internal space means that manufacturing itself can also be 'lean' and accommodate changes in lines and production needs.

Courage and cooperation

It took vision and courage to pioneer the cutting-edge eco-factory. No-one in the team had ever been involved in a construction project quite so daring before. There was nothing to copy – the team had to invent it for themselves. They did so within the year, so that M&S could meet their ‘Plan A’ commitments.

In order to ‘make it up’, the team had to throw themselves into learning together as they went along. The degree of collaboration and cooperation has been remarked on by the construction contractors as something very positive and unusual. The designers and architects were pleasantly surprised to find that MAS meant what it said about its commitment to making a really green building, and relished the free hand they were given which enabled them to be very innovative and to adjust to the challenges provided by the site and the local context.

Adapting designs and still sticking to construction schedules can be a nightmare, but the good working relationships and enthusiasm for the project helped to keep

people happy even while there was change and uncertainty. When the team realised that there was a conflict between the heavier green roof (needing pillars to support it) and the need for flexible internal space, this was resolved through discussion and team work and a satisfying compromise was reached.

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Sharing the learning

MAS is keen to be a pioneer, and that means sharing the learning from the project, rather than jealously guarding the knowledge that it has built up. So keen is the company to help others follow, it has been working with researcher Dr Gill Coleman from the

University of Bath, to produce a ‘learning history’ about how the eco-factory came about. The people most closely involved, from MAS and its consultants, have been collaborating to reflect on how they did it, and to tell the story in all its detail and complexity.

The MAS learning history is being developed at the moment, and is just one of many which can be found via the Low Carbon Works website, which brings together stories from carbon-reduction initiatives in businesses and local authorities. Low Carbon Works uses action research to help people accelerate change towards a low-carbon society. One of the hosts of the project is the University of Bath, which has a well-established Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice.

Many people working on the leading edge of organisational change for sustainable development see action research as vital, because we are – inevitably – making it up as we go along. As we ‘make the path by walking’, we need to understand what it is that we are doing which is making the difference between stagnation and progress. Action research and learning histories are ways of spotting and communicating this vital insight. ■

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*More about MAS and the eco-factory at www.iema.net/env/75/1
More low-carbon learning histories at www.lowcarbonworks.org.uk
Dr Gill Coleman can be found at CARPP www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/*

Action research and learning histories

Action research is an approach which values learning as we go along, through making time to reflect on what action has been taken and the impact it has had – often in a group of people playing a similar role, or in a project team. Group members will question and challenge each other, as well as helping address issues and solve problems. A variety of techniques and exercises may be used, to help people see their work in a new light,

opening up the choices they have about what to do next.

A learning history is a ‘jointly told tale’, drawing on the perspectives of as many of the people involved as possible. It often combines aspects of journalism, oral history, ethnography and theatre, as well as action research. It will be more ‘messy’ than a case study, as it accepts the unfinished and ambiguous, as well as the clear and definitive.

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