

6. Developing a Framework

6.1 'Agenda for Action' and subsequent follow-up work by the WMC set the starting point for this study, and by referring back to para. 1.2.6 we have a basis for developing a potential specification and framework for a possible self-diagnostic tool for management and leadership development needs. We consider each element in more detail below, therefore – reviewing the evidence we gathered through desk research, key informant and SME interviews, and also suggesting a number of areas not addressed by this initial list.

6.2 **a) *based on the new occupational standards for managers***

SMEs are not aware of concepts like occupational standards, but it **does** seem appropriate to follow this structure: no alternative is likely to offer this level of rigour and take-up, and consistency with other aspects of development programmes (e.g. accreditation) may emerge as attractive in due course – if only for a minority.

6.3 It is important to remember that covering all aspects of the new standards will probably not be appropriate. A number of interviewees stressed the likelihood that most SME owners/ managers would probably seek development in a small number of areas only (e.g. meeting customers' needs, financial management) in the light of particular personal or business needs, rather than anything 'comprehensive'.

6.4 Language within the standards (e.g. *"Ensure compliance with values, ethical and legal frameworks"*) is *"not always SME-friendly"* (business adviser). This should not present problems, however: correctly designed programmes ought to be able to present tasks and materials which are comprehensible and relevant.

6.5 **b) *of immediate interest to managers who give little thought to personal development***

Widely accepted, and crucial to the success of any self-diagnostic tool. The challenge will be to **deliver** against this requirement, particularly bearing in mind the wide range of preferences, backgrounds and abilities in the target group for the tool.

6.6 We tended to assume that the tool would be free-standing, but several interviewees pointed out the opportunities for business support agencies both to promote the tool to potential users effectively, but also to use it to augment and support other programmes: in practice, we see this 'mediated' approach to using the tool bringing a range of benefits in appropriate circumstances.

6.7 There is also likely to be a strong case for using an initial self-diagnostic tool as part of a two-stage process, with the second stage looking in much more depth at the issues pointed to by the self-diagnostic instrument itself (see g)).

6.8 **c) *designed for use by hard-pressed, time-poor SME managers***

Same points as for b) apply.

6.9 **d) *attractive, stimulating and user-friendly***

Same points as for b) apply.

6.10 **e) *available on-line***

Widely supported, but only if paper-based options were available too: many of the target audience do not have access to on-line systems, or may lack the confidence to use them.

6.11 **f) *relevant to SME needs***

Widely accepted, but with a number of implications. First (as in a)), opportunities for concentrating only on a small number of high-priority development needs may have to be built-in at an early stage.

6.12 This may point to the need for a two-stage process (see g) below). An overall 'health check' will probably be of interest to organisations and individuals alike. In most cases, however, moving fairly quickly to high priority areas for development will be important to many (often likely to lie within 'lead business operations' and 'working with people' categories, according to both our key informants and SME interviewees).

6.13 Secondly, however, the tool would need to have sensitivity to the business environment owners/ managers work within. This points to the need for “*minimal big-company jargon, assumptions of lots of back-up*”, but also a recognition that business development needs may drive what is done at least as much as managers’ personal needs.

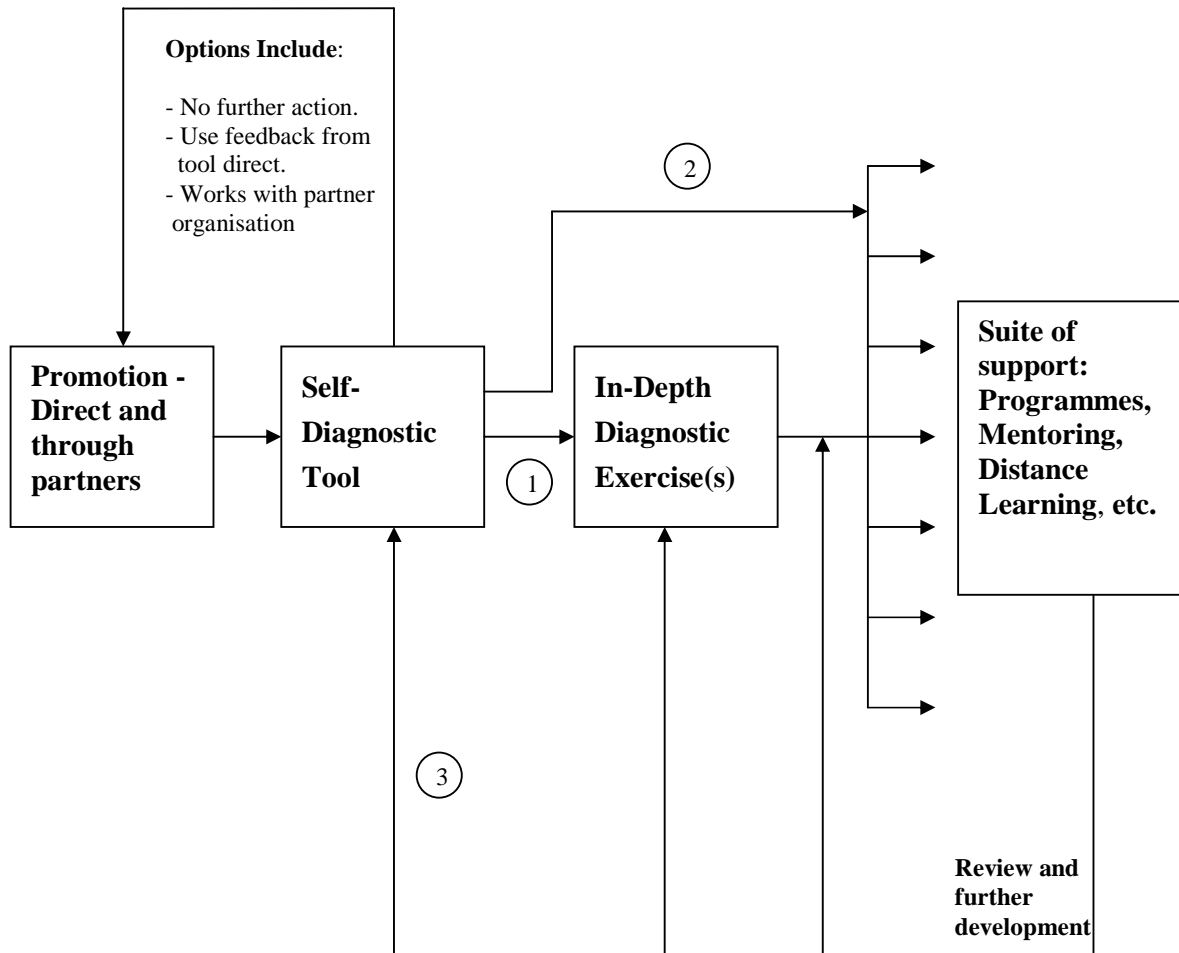
6.14 **g) *able to be completed (in part at least) in no more than 20 minutes***

Patterns of busy managers having strictly limited time to spare were certainly confirmed by this project but two problems could arise if this requirement were met, but with no clear ‘follow-on’ exercises. First, some managers within SMEs would be concerned about ‘once-over-lightly’ exercises. Despite frequent stereotypes, many SME owners and managers do have high levels of qualifications and management development experience. Whilst potentially interested in further development (‘informed’ managers would probably take up a self-diagnostic tool more quickly than others if one were available) they would soon become disillusioned with anything they saw as ‘superficial’ or ‘unsophisticated’.

6.15 The second point centres on how reliable a very quick instrument might be – other approaches (e.g. those used by HE institutions prior to programmes, through MAP) take up to 2 days to provide development plans and profiles.

6.16 The answer to both these points may well come through the development of a two-stage approach. Although an effective self-diagnostic tool could certainly be free-standing, it might best emerge as something to attract a manager’s initial interest, giving a pointer/ screen for further diagnostic work - to ensure development action is targeted at individuals’ precise strengths and weaknesses within their working environment. Figure 3 summarises a potential model for these kinds of interrelationships.

Figure 3: How a Self-Diagnostic Tool for Assessing Management / Leadership Skills Might Link into Other Sources of Support



- ① Use of tool as an introduction to more in-depth diagnostic work
- ② Use of tool leads to specific development activity / activities
- ③ Identifying 'distance travelled'

6.17 **h) identify strengths as well as weaknesses**

Widely supported: a number of SME and key informant interviewees were clear that *“managers need to know what they’re good at too; they have no basis for comparison; they think they’re managing some things badly and they’re not.”* As well as the obvious point about targeting development actions on the areas where they are most needed, confirmation of strengths will almost certainly boost many managers’ confidence and readiness to take on challenges elsewhere.

6.18 **i) point to development needs**

Widely supported: it is clear that the tool *“must point to opportunities for taking practical actions”*. Issues about covering business as well as personal development needs, and (probably) pointing to more detailed diagnostic approaches to identify development needs with greater precision have been made already.

6.19 It will also, however, be important for those taking up a possible diagnostic tool to be confident that if particular needs are identified, they will be able to address them in convenient, flexible, cost-effective ways. This may well include targeted programmes, seminars, training and so on, but it may just as easily point to reading, seeking feedback, mentoring opportunities with others in a similar position, and personal practice and reflection.

6.20 The key points about developing a high quality management/ leadership development ‘infrastructure’ certainly bear repeating, along with the ‘virtuous circle’ where *“Customers understand the concept and benefits of developing themselves as managers and leaders, and are able to articulate their demands, to ensure that the supply-side actively meets their needs.”*¹

6.21 **j) available, at no cost, to anyone who wishes to use it.”**

Probably inescapable, at least to launch the tool and gain interest. For the ‘right’ tool, however, cost would be less of an issue. One SME owner was clear: *“Free and useless is a waste of time; a fair price if it’s good isn’t a problem”*.

¹ ‘Pressing the Right Buttons’ p.10.

- 6.22 These considerations led up to a draft specification for a self-diagnostic tool to help managers identify management and leadership development needs given in Figure 4. The draft specification was then subjected to critical review and development through discussions with ELWa and the WMC, and a series of focus groups with SME owners and managers.

Figure 4: Draft Specification for Self Diagnostic Tool

(Note: elements in italics represent changes to the initial specification given in para. 1.2.6.)

The tool should:

- be based on the new occupational standards for managers
- *cover all potentially relevant competencies, but 'home in on' high priority areas rapidly*
- be of immediate interest to managers who give little thought to personal development
- *link into other business support activities where appropriate*
- be designed for use by hard-pressed, time-poor SME managers
- be attractive, stimulating and user-friendly
- be available in *paper-based and on-line* formats
- be relevant to SME needs – *both the needs of owner managers themselves, and needs of the business*
- be able to be completed (in part at least) in no more than 20 minutes
- *lead on to more in-depth diagnostic techniques where appropriate*
- identify strengths as well as weaknesses
- point to development needs
- link into a range of high-quality, flexible development activities
- be available, at no cost, to anyone who wishes to use it (*high-quality follow-on programmes ought normally to be charged for, however*).