

Merck for Talent: a training and prevention experience

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Abstract

The project Merck for Talent is born from the desire to finalize the route taken earlier by the winners of the project “La scienza narrata”, following them on their path of life after having identified and rewarded talent and monitor their experience and allowing the winners to continue sharing experience.

So the project was organized with two work phases. The first part has seen the organization of a training event dedicated to life-long learning, while in a second phase of the project, the young people were placed in an experiential path at the journalistic writing where they could actively experience the management and dissemination content related to the competition.

Finally they were activated of focus-groups for comparison between the participants and the activation of shared reflections.

KEY WORDS: focus-group, prevention, sharing of emotions, training.

Introduction

The Merck for Talent project was motivated by the need and desire to follow through on the process undergone by the young winners of the competition “La scienza narrata”, by guiding them in their growth and development after having identified and rewarded their talent. “La scienza narrata” is a creative writing project aimed at spreading and promoting greater

awareness of science among young people, by bringing them closer to science and encouraging them to see science and literature as two aspects of one integrated system of knowledge. To do so, young people are asked to write a piece of their choice on science and literature. All the writing pieces are then collected in each year of the competition into a single book.

Starting from the assumption that the integration of different branches of knowledge enriches the individual as a whole, we believe that enrichment can best be expressed in groups, in interpersonal relationships and in the development of social and human skills.

In assessing the outcomes of the “La scienza narrata” project, the participants were asked to express their thoughts on how the awareness of science is promoted. Their responses mostly underscored the following aspects:

- need for experimentation, through workshops and conventions
- possibility of making science more accessible to young people
- comparison between different fields/branches of knowledge
- popularising research
- exchange with others
- use of technologies.

The adolescents repeatedly supported the idea and possibility of continuing the project as a life-long learning opportunity, in which they would be involved in a continuing exchange with participants in the initiative. Expectations primarily revolved around “doing” something new, being stimulated, sharing experiences and emotions, experimenting and having fun with others. The other is a necessary figure for growth and development. The workshop, as a group experience, gives the young participants a “place” where they can feel, recognise and experience emotions. Recognising emotions and learning to share them is a fundamental step in the development of individuals over their lifetimes.

Helping people learn the language of feelings and encouraging them to listen to and share the emotional state of others is also necessary for dealing with awkward situations.

If people are in tune with their emotions, not only do they develop cultural skills, but also fundamental emotional abilities. By learning to engage emotions, their capacity to understand reality increases and their social and interpersonal skills grow.

Relationships are able to shape our experience as a whole, as well as our biological functions, and can even have a specific effect on us. This also ties in with the concept of social intelligence developed by Goleman (1).

The concept of social intelligence shifts the perspective from the individual to the relationship with the other and entails a number of key concepts, such as empathy and the capacity to consider the other person.

“Helping people learn means putting them in a position that is proper to humans as humans, which belongs to the original purpose of humans. What is proper to humans, for example, is the fact of being capable of language, of being open to the world and other humans, and therefore capable of interacting and communicating with others, including affections, which is a pathic dimension, that is, of experience and feeling, an original dimension that gives origin to the cognitive - this is an original purpose of humans [...]” (2).

We considered the possibility of following through on the initiative and continuing to support the adolescents through the “Merck for Talent” programme, thereby supporting the expression of talent in new generations.

The young winners over the years of the “La scienza narrata” competition were contacted and invited to participate in an innovative project, which saw new openings for their future... through the questions:

- What happened after participating in “La scienza narrata”?
- What educational choices did the adolescents make after finishing high school and after participating in the competition?
- How can their talent be nurtured and enhanced?
- What capabilities and skills should be supported?

Merck for Talent was conceived specifically for the need to continue and monitor the experience of the talented winners and consisted of two parts. The first part involved the organisation of life-long learning events, consisting of educational days on the theory and experience of talent.

The adolescents took part in two educational days, organised with the assistance of professional trainers, which explored both “technical” issues specifically related to writing (to continue the experience begun with “La scienza narrata”) and “general” issues, aimed at steering and developing skills (central issues in the area of life-long learning).

The second part of the project consisted of a work experience programme for the adolescents at the editorial office of the website www.scienzanarrata.it, where they could gain first-hand experience, with the support of Merck and HF Convention, of the management and publication of content connected with the “La scienza narrata” competition.

An excellent channel to give value to their ideas and stimulate their capacity for thought and creativity: at the website office, the winners were directly involved in managing blog and social media updates, becoming special advisors and mentors for new students signing up for the competition.

The experience allowed them to develop their technical capacities, as well as other skills, such as interacting with others, developing effective communication, empathic listening and more.

Their direct participation at the website office was also of value for the website itself, because together with the young “apprentices” new initiatives were developed for participants involving:

- the breaking down of communication barriers between students and the organisation, raising the propensity for interaction on blogs and social media
- an increase in the volume of content produced, raising the visibility of the initiative;
- the possibility of “geographically” monitoring all events and lectures connected with the competition
- the collection of contributions/stories produced in previous years of the competition to raise their visibility.

Materials and methods

The creation of a platform

To help achieve the objectives stated above, a new web platform was developed, representing the technological and structural evolution of the previous website, with new institutional pages and sections on lecturers and competition information introduced, along with a multi-user blog run by young reporters and a section introducing the entire editorial team.

The website was accessible by editorial staff to upload draft articles; however, publication was constantly managed and monitored by HF Convention, under the supervision and approval of Merck and a distinguished tutor. Publications on social media profiles were also managed according to an editorial plan created by the adolescents together with the coordinators and Merck. The adolescents were invited to share the content on their own social media profiles and to interact with the profile to raise its visibility.

The project involved the students not only in editorial activities, but also in lectures on “La scienza narrata” as special correspondents. The point of view of the young reporters, conveyed through images, photos, questions and interviews, helped produce stronger communication messages, able to generate more engagement from the other students.

Assessment and focus groups

At the end of the project, as described above, the participants were asked to reflect and think about the experience and express their thoughts.

Focus groups were created (a method widely used also in company training) and the adolescents were guided in discussing the themes of the project and above all in sharing their experiences.

Focus groups, conceived by Merton et al. (3) during World War II and then used in the decades that followed, are a method of qualitative research for gathering information that is widely used in the social sciences, based on grounded theory.

The technique involves an unstructured method of interviewing groups, and can be used, for instance, to understand the effectiveness of a certain initiative.

Focus groups involve precise rules for their prepara-

tion, organisation and management.

Participants may vary in number between six and ten, depending on the complexity and the delicateness of the issues addressed, and are chosen along similar demographic, cultural and social lines.

Interviews last, on average, between an hour and an hour and a half, and are conducted by a moderator, who in turn is supported by an observer. The moderator, or conductor, establishes the general lines of the interview, identifying a central focus for discussion and organising aspects of the discussion from both a content and interpersonal point of view. It is the moderator who introduces the focus to the participants and guides and supports them in the discussion.

The supporting role of the observer is to prepare the context and the group itself and provide feedback (from another perspective) to the moderator both during and after the session.

The focus groups conducted for the project involved the participation of eight adolescents and lasted one and a half hours. They were an occasion to value the outdoor experiences in and on social media, but also a moment of supervision and reflection for the staff on the outcomes achieved.

Discussion

With regard to the experience, the participants stated they were happy to have taken part in the project they were involved in.

Some 70% of the participants stressed the innovative character of the project. They thought the experience had ended with the awarding of the “La scienza narrata” prize and stated they were very happy and pleased with Merck’s idea to follow through on the experience. For the participants, Merck for Talent was an opportunity for the coaching and development of new skills, both general and vocational. For some of them, developing talent meant trying their hand in the world of writing and gaining practical experience.

Another added value of the project, according to the participants, was that it enabled a small group to be formed of people who had shared an experience and created important bonds of relationship.

Below are some of the remarks of the participants.

“The project was wonderful and exciting, it let me work and measure myself with others, bringing out my strengths, but also my fragile points, and measuring myself with others was truly helpful.”

“The opportunity to experience editorial work allowed me to develop a more ‘journalistic’ writing style through the opportunity of writing for La scienza narrata blog. The project stimulated me considerably in the search and analysis of news tied to the world of science, without stopping at a superficial level of understanding.”

“Through meeting and interacting with people of talent, through the curiosity to know new scenarios and worlds and through reading.”

The need expressed by the adolescents through the experience was to experiment, create something new and integrated, get to know their peers and measure up to them by sharing capacities, skills and emotions. A climate of “emotional resonance” was developed through the programme.

“Most of our interactions with the environment and our own emotional behaviour depend on the capacity to perceive and understand others’ emotions [...]. The adaptive advantages offered by forms of emotional resonance are clear. Not only do they enable individual organisms to face threats (or opportunities) effectively, but they make the establishment and consolidation of initial interindividual ties possible” (4).

In recent years, neurophysiologists have highlighted the role of these interpersonal aspects. In particular, they have found that when an interpersonal relationship of mutual trust, sharing and acknowledgement is created, there is an increase in the activation of the parietal lobes.

The production of chemical mediators in this area contributes to building or even recovering specific synaptic nerve connections that can promote constructive, adaptive and developmental change (5).

Being able to trust others is especially fundamental in situations of difficulty. By allowing the adolescents to try experiences first-hand and supporting their talent, the project also enabled them to trust others and in doing so to grow.

Projects like these are used with adolescents (and should be employed more) because they foster paths for growth and the prevention of risk. The organisation promoting the project was itself seen by the adolescents as an institution “closer” to their needs, one that was “more professional” and more active in the social sphere.

Many of the participants, at the end of the project, stated that they felt closer to science and had been able to improve their scientific knowledge and that they perceived Merck to be very helpful. They felt supported and guided and saw that their talent was acknowledged.

Some of them said they would be more than happy to continue with the project, also with a view to sharing their ideas and feedback with the promoting organisation.

One girl concluded, “I would like to thank Merck because the project opened my eyes and my mind!”

After listening to the participants, the staff held a series of meetings to assess and reflect on their own work, with a view to improving and exchanging views between the different professional figures involved. These outcomes enable the project to be steered in different directions, or rather, based on the outcomes and feedback of the participants, to be redesigned for its future improvement for the participants of tomorrow and for the greater active involvement of the pharmaceuticals company in the project.

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