

Action Learning in practice: What it takes to make progress

- Presented by:
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Background

Aim of the project:

Improve the wellbeing of school leaders

Problem context:

Initiated by a group of school leaders facing high job demands, high stress, and burnout

Research and program design:

Used action research to design the program with the school leaders





What is the wellbeing problem for educators?

High levels of stress caused by:

- Work overload
- Interrupted work
- Conflict
- Work crises
- Compliance demands
- Juggling work and home
- Poor job design

Potentially resulting in:

- Sleep issues
- Fatigue
- Weight issues
- Increased risk of stroke and heart disease
- Turnover risk
- Ill health and leave taking
- Errors of judgement





Wellbeing – why is it important?

Physical health:

- Reduced cardiovascular disease
- Reduced risk of stroke
- Reduced sleep problems
- Increased longevity



Wellbeing at Work:

- Increased productivity
- Increased creativity
- Reduced burnout
- Increased confidence

Psychological health:

- Increased self-esteem
- Increased optimism
- Greater happiness
- Increased coping ability



Participants



40 groups of school leaders from across Australia:
583 of 1011 participants completed all voluntary
research components (57.7%)

- Female 70.2%
- Male 29.8%
- Age up to 39 9.9%
- Age 40 to 49 40.8%
- Age 50 to 59 41.7%
- Age 60 or more 7.4%



Theoretical framework – Job demands and resources

- JD-R is an occupational stress model that suggests that strain is a response to imbalance between demands on an individual and the resources they have to deal with those demands

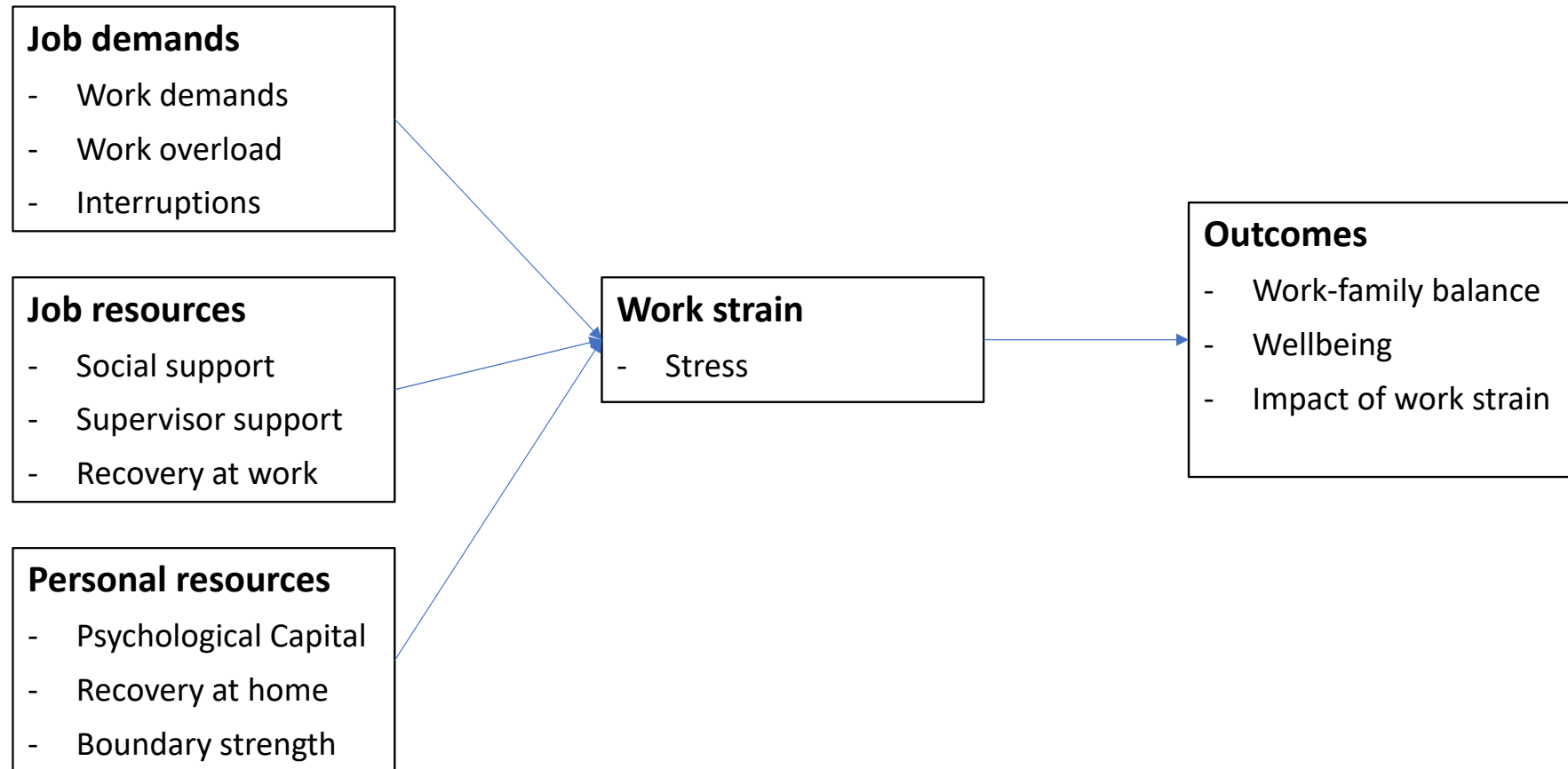
(Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

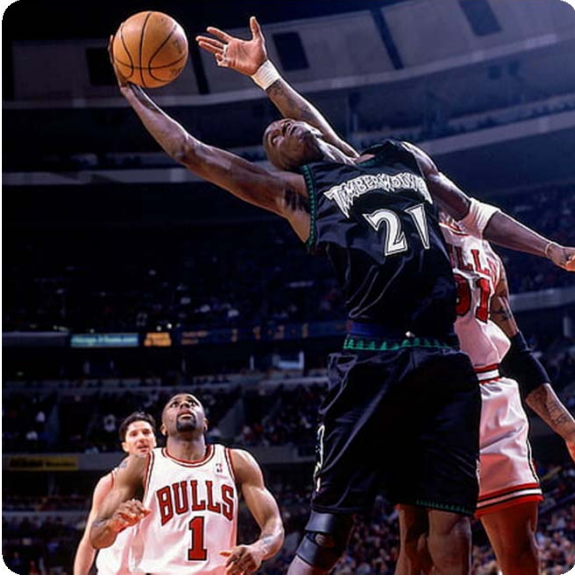
- Personal psychological resources possessed by individuals can be determinants in adaptation to work environments

(Xanthopoulou et al, 2007)



The job-demands resources model for the program





Personal resources

Psychological capital explains the personal psychological resources possessed by individuals that can enhance their responses to change:

- Self-efficacy (confidence)
- Hope
- Resilience
- Optimism

(Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Luthans et al, 2007)

School leaders already have high psychological capital, which is why they can survive in a stressful role context



Personal resources

Psychological flexibility includes a coping strategy that enables acceptance of situations and the ability to change perspectives that can enhance responses to change or crisis:

- Experiential Acceptance
- Cognitive defusion (letting thoughts come and go)
- Self-as-context
- Contact with the present moment
- Values
- Committed action

(Hayes et al, 2006; Kashdan et al, 2020)



Personal resources

Job crafting is an employee-initiated activity where employees seek to balance their job demands and resources (Tims & Bakker, 2010)

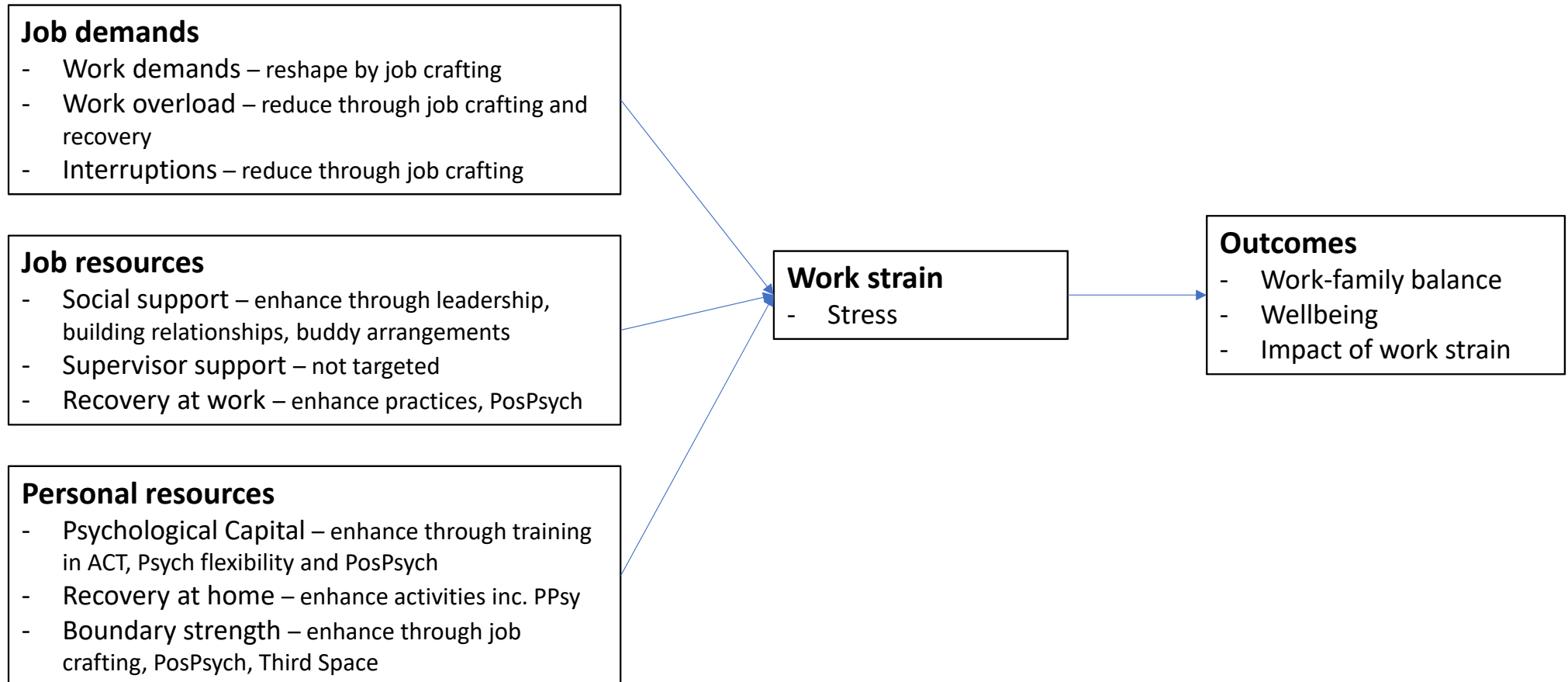
Four behaviours that can be used in job crafting:

1. Increasing structural resources such as peer and supervisor support
2. Increasing social resources such as building capability
3. Increasing challenging job demands
4. Decreasing hindering job demands

(Makikangas & Schaufeli, 2021; Tims et al, 2012)



Program elements impacting job demands and resources



The Action Learning Program

Four * 6-hour workshops over 12 months:

1. Making recovery a habit
2. Living above the chaos
3. Controlling the voices
4. Finding your true North

Reinforcement through:

- Feedback and reflection at workshops
- Follow-up videos and reminders
- Buddy system



The Workshop Process

Facilitated groups of between 20 and 34 people

Interview – understanding issues and context

Feedback

Discussing the problem

Content learning and discussion

Reflection on self

Discussion of ideas for change

Sharing of ideas

Individual action planning

Working with a buddy for weekly check-in



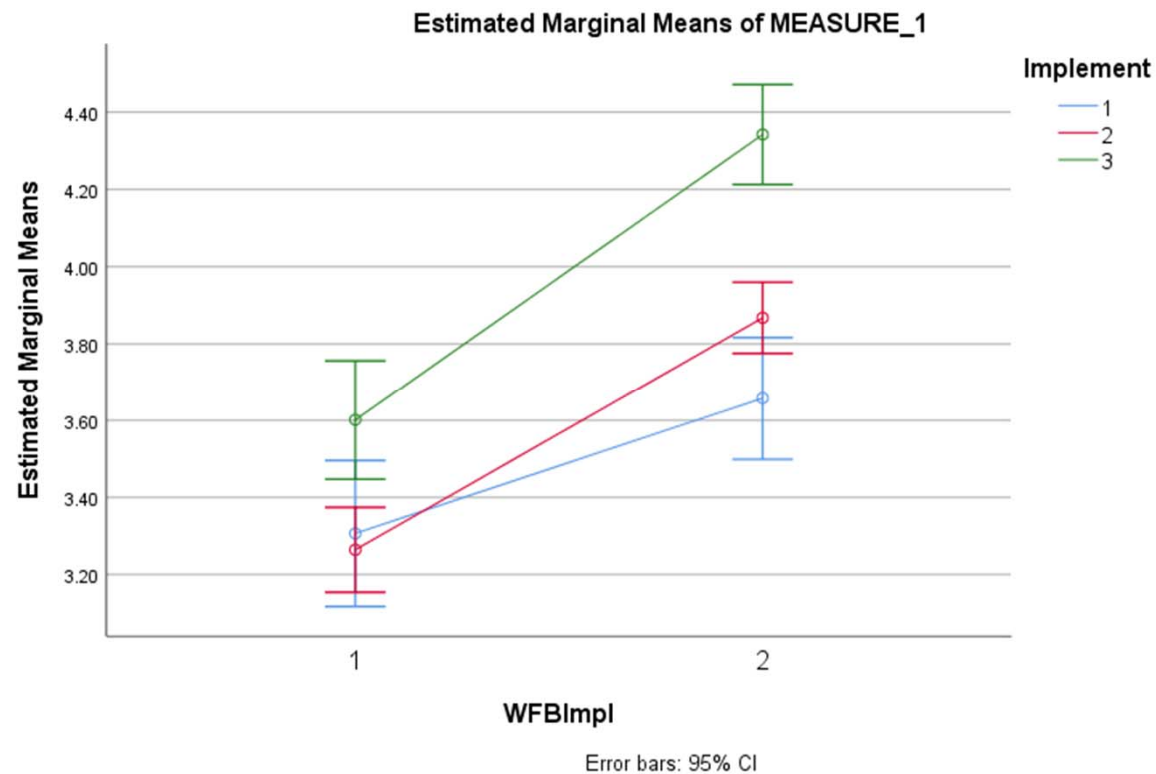
T-test results of 580 paired samples

Construct	Mean – T ₁	Mean – T ₂	Mean diff	t	Significance
Interruptions	51.97	34.34	-17.64	20.42	.000***
Work-family balance	3.42	3.96	0.54	-16.31	.000***
Boundary strength	1.84	2.70	0.86	-22.70	.000***
Recovery at work	2.15	2.72	0.57	-18.22	.000***
Recovery at home	3.05	3.46	0.41	-16.26	.000***
Work demand issues	3.52	3.10	-0.42	15.99	.000***
Wellbeing	3.73	4.05	0.32	-16.08	.000***
Stress	3.57	2.96	-0.62	16.57	.000***
Psychological capital	4.86	5.20	0.34	-15.17	.000***
Social support	3.98	4.21	0.22	-9.04	.000***
Supervisor support	3.72	3.79	0.07	-2.07	.039*
Work overload	3.76	3.21	-0.55	12.70	.000***
Impact of stress	2.49	2.23	-0.26	5.96	.000***

Implementation makes a difference

1. Scores from 12 implementation questions from the first 26 groups were categorized into:
 - 113 Higher implementers (27.6%)
 - 222 Moderate implementers (54.1%)
 - 75 Lower implementers (18.3%)
2. A two-way ANOVA was conducted of outcome and mediating measures based on implementations scores of participants.
3. Results show that there was a significant effect on several of these variables
4. Of note, all implementation categorized groups made improvement on all 12 targeted construct variables

Implementation differences for Work-family balance

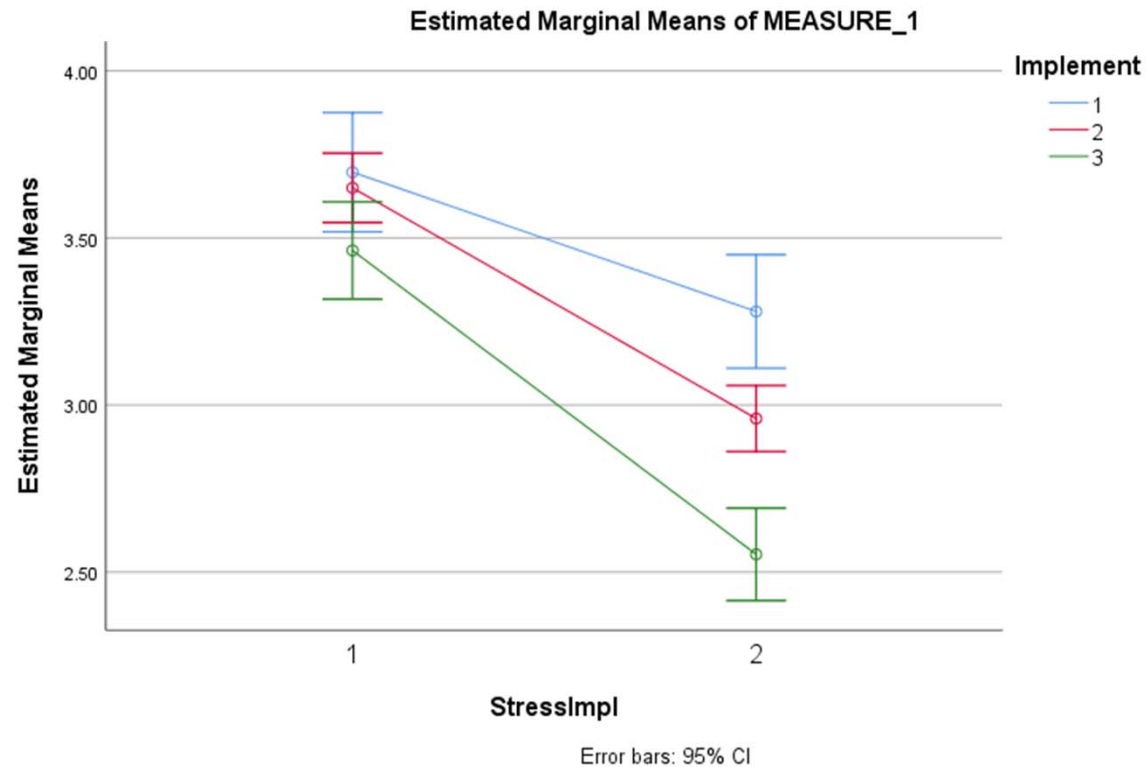


Green line = Higher implementation
Red line = Moderate implementation
Blue line = Lower implementation

Wilks' Lambda = .974, $F(2,407) = 5.381$, $p=.005$

The higher implementation group had a significantly better improvement in Work-family balance than the lower implementation group

Implementation differences for Stress

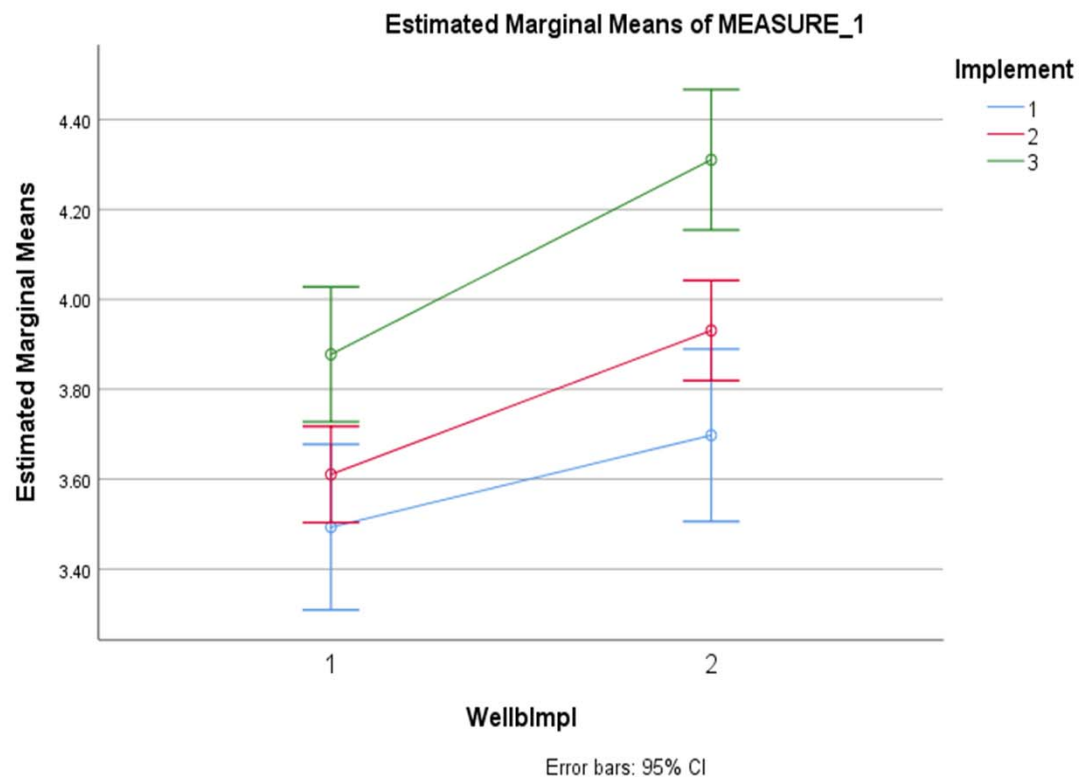


Green line = Higher implementation
Red line = Moderate implementation
Blue line = Lower implementation

Wilks' Lambda = .965, $F(2,407) = 7.460$, $p = .001$

The higher implementation group had a significantly better improvement in Stress than the lower implementation group

Implementation differences for Wellbeing



Green line = Higher implementation
Red line = Moderate implementation
Blue line = Lower implementation

Wilks' Lambda = .974, $F(2,407) = 5.416$, $p=.005$

The higher implementation group had a significantly better improvement in Wellbeing than the lower implementation group

Implications for action learning programs

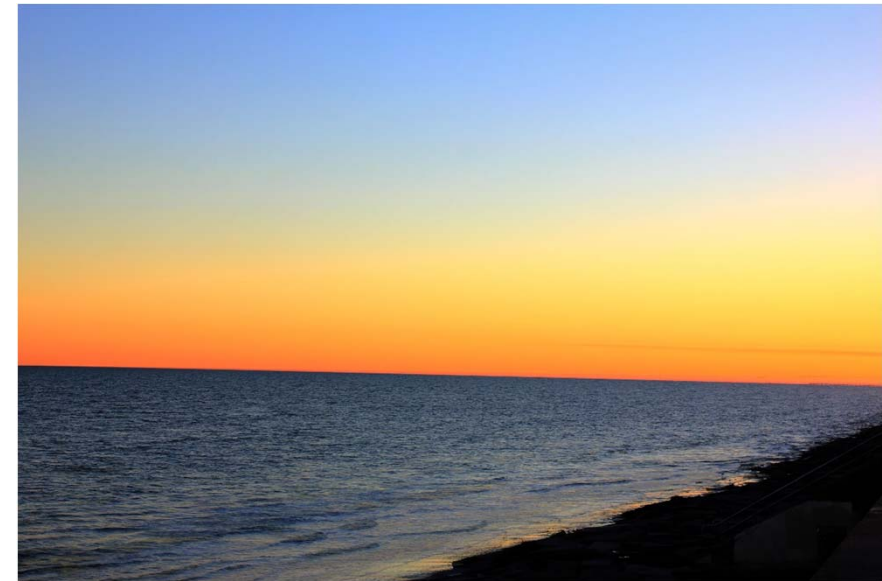


1. Design needs to be targeted to the context of the participants
2. Participants need to be committed to and involved in the design of the program
3. The program design needs to be highly integrated and multi-modal to be successful in complex problem situations
4. Participants should craft their own solutions based on their personal contexts
5. Reinforcement mechanisms should be designed into program procedures

A couple of qualitative comments...

The program was and remains life changing for me. I would not still be in this job if it were not for the program and I find it has provided me with a strong base for seeking further help in managing my capacity to stay in the role.

The program has been pivotal in helping me to recover from burnout and get back on track, enabling me to have the sense I am now better placed to achieve a double victory - feeling closer to achieving both at home and at work.



Discussion

- What are your experiences of implementing change using AR or AL processes?
 - How do you take context into account?
 - How do you involve participants in program design?
 - Do you have any follow-up processes in place once people leave the room?
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