

A critical evaluation of the Greater Economic Success [GES] Group

**Dr. Richard Stakes: Reader in Higher Education,
University Centre Doncaster.**

INTRODUCTION

The Greater Economic Success [GES] group is based in North Lincolnshire. This group, which has been active for over five years acts as a local business-focused knowledge exchange group and sets out to strengthen the business community and economy of this unitary authority. Its function is described as “sharing and learning to improve business performance to enable companies to share best practice and create a culture of continuous learning” [publicity leaflet undated]. This strategy it is claimed, “Will develop both profitability and collective growth” [The Greater Economic Success Group, undated].

The GES is a partnership between four key elements within the local authority including local private businesses, the economic development team from the local authority, a local post-compulsory education and training provider and a university. Within the United Kingdom [UK] this is an unusual alliance, which has recently been described as an example of outstanding practice in college/industrial links [OFSTED 2007] as well as an example of good practice as a result of the levels of retention and ‘returnability’ of local firms to the college. In this context the GES can be regarded as helping to meet the local needs set out

in the national policy on lifelong learning by having an impact on both the employability and social empowerment of people, as well as helping to ensure that local businesses have the skilled workforce to remain competitive and successful [Humber HE/FE Consortium 1998, HEFCE 2003].

This evaluation of the GES serves two purposes. Firstly, it will consider the reasons for the continuing success of the group over the past five years. Secondly, it will investigate what the partnership would recommend as the key elements to be vital [the key do's and don'ts] if such a group was to be set up elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY

A number of considerations had to be taken into account in order to collect data effectively. Firstly, it was important that the approach adopted should be sufficiently flexible to capture the representative views of the full range of the membership of all of the four partners involved. Further, data had to be collected in a relatively short period of time. The cost of the operation had to be considered. As a result, a series of focus groups [cf. Denscombe, 2007] were conducted with each of the partnership groups. These focus groups, which were kept deliberately small with no more than six members in each met the requirements set out by Denscombe [op cit] with the focus of the session facilitated by the researcher in order to gauge the views, feelings and

experiences of each group. As a result, five focus groups were held over a period of four weeks. One was conducted with staff based at the college, another with representatives from the local authority two with local businesspeople involved in the work of the GES and a fourth with staff involved with the development of the GES from the local university. In addition, the coordinator of the group, who had been instrumental in the initiation and development of the GES group, was interviewed to gain background information on its philosophy and development.

Each of these focus groups was conducted around the same framework of questions on each occasion focusing on the twofold enquiry. Firstly, the reasons behind why the GES had been successful and secondly what advice might be useful to groups setting up elsewhere.

RESULTS

Background Information

North Lincolnshire is a unitary authority of one hundred and fifty-three thousand people [Census Returns, 2001] based on one large centre of population [Scunthorpe] and a number of small town and villages spread over a largely rural area. Although the economy of the area was traditionally based on agriculture and the making of iron and steel, the numbers employed in these industries has declined in recent years and the economy in the area has become increasingly

diversified, resulting in the need to train and retrain the workforce for a range of different employment opportunities.

Over the past five years, the Kingsway Centre, a wholly owned subsidiary of the local college of further education, has been the central platform for these activities. At this centre, a small number of staff has developed a range of activities with a dual focused approach closely relating industrial practice with both workplace organisational and personal management strategies. The purpose of the GES is not only to help to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding of both local employers and employees but also to create a platform where ideas can be mutually exchanged within the spirit of business communality.

The interview with the college-based coordinator of the group explained the GES group had developed out of a model of practice between a local authority, a local community college and local business observed in the United States, where this model had acted as an important driver for the regeneration of the local economy as well as aiding the development of a local regeneration profile. The coordinator also explained the origins of the GES

“Were set in the values of the North Lincolnshire Strategic Partnership [NLSP] in seeking to strengthen the local voice to support local industries”.

He described the overall philosophy of the group as:

“Working together and sharing ideas towards developing the new economy locally through a business solutions and ‘knowledge exchange’ approach”.

In his view:

“The GES is about how you create an environment where you can share strategic thoughts and a more knowledge-based economy. It’s about creating a ‘knowledge exchange’...within a concept of continuous business improvement”. [which] was dynamic and based on the perspective of what does the individual business need”.

This initiative, which has three stated objectives: pursuing higher education programmes on business objectives, evaluating the potential for new business opportunities and exploring consultancy services for new technological developments and research. Interviewee 1 argued this development had led to new forms of learning for participants. Further, he argued, this initiative has not only brought business leaders together with academics but also provided a formal programme of study for individuals building up to a 60 credit undergraduate professional award. Interviewee 1 also indicated the GES helps to support the delivery of the NLSP community strategy towards developing the quality of life for all who live in the area.

The coordinator indicated a significant model of learning used within the GES was the ‘double loop’ model of Act-Reflect- Learn- Adapt described variously by Lewin [1951] Kolb [1984] and Gibbs [1988] which was used extensively in the education and training development process used by the group. In the words of the coordinator, this model had “helped to embed learning within the GES in a number of ways”. Examples which he provided where this had worked well included developing best practice in managing change, enhancing customer service and project management.

It was explained during this interview that the GES forum is managed by a small steering group comprising representatives from all four areas of interest. This steering group met regularly both informally as well as formally. The formal meetings, which took place every two to three months, heard presentations from individual members of the group or visited sites of members, considered the future programme and initiatives in an open and frank approach. Subsequently, these formal meetings had led to the development of shared experience among members away from the formal meetings. This approach the interviewee claimed had led to:

“New ways of working and thinking about working across a range of companies, as well as closer liaison between members of the companies involved [and] the development of “a multi-layered relationship based on economic, social and educational needs” [which in his view] “was a key to driving the whole process”.

The purpose of the group was described as:

”Making businesses ‘think smarter’ through the application of LEAN techniques [Womak 1989] giving members the opportunity to make improvements to their own business as a result of professional liaison and personal contact with those working in other local businesses. There are some forty companies currently associated with the GES ranging from internationally based businesses to smaller locally based concerns,”

The interviewee also explained the educational and training initiative has seen the development of fourteen ‘bite size’ formal modules of study validated by the local university and accessible to individual members of the group.

The Kingsway Centre Staff Focus Group

The Kingsway Centre who worked extensively as part of the GES considered the GES continued to be successful. A number of reasons were provided to support this claim including the support that they had give to the project including funding staff time to forge networks, service the management committee structure of GES and providing rooms for the meetings as well as their enthusiasm and drive in supporting the vision. Although this focus group acknowledged the role Kingsway Centre, as part of North Lindsey College of FE was to support public education in the locality the group saw the Kingsway Centre as a business venture.

This focus group felt this philosophy was important not only from the commercial point of view but that it also that it set the tone for the GES. A member of the group summed up this point by stating “if it does not make good business sense to us it will not make good business sense to the GES”, adding “Why would they [the GES] sit around to discuss issues with each other if it did not make good business sense to them”. The prevalent view was that the Kingsway Centre was not there to primarily to market courses or act as a consultancy group to local businesses; rather it was about innovation and entrepreneurialship. The concept of entrepreneurialism was described by this group as “looking for and creating opportunities to meet the demands of their client base.” However, some in this group regarded the aims of the GES in more altruistic terms including “helping to

serve the local community” and “working with others in the local community”. However, the group stated on more than on occasion during the session that they were not doing this to sell educational and training products was beneficial in developing networks with local business,

This group also emphasised strongly the importance of developing trust between the partners in the GES. Although a longstanding feature of their networks with local employers over many years, the group indicated the success of the GES had led this to reach new heights during its five year lifespan, not only in the relationship between the college and employers but also between the employers and the local authority. A member of the group described this important feature as “a uniqueness of the GES where there is a business-to-business engagement with a considerable degree of trust and honesty between the partners”. Another member supporting this point stated: “these companies are open with each other. This comes out in the exchanges made between them and the solutions that are arrived at from identified problems which have been jointly discussed.”

A further factor helping to demonstrate the success of the GES was the mutuality of its interests, expressed by one member as “everybody gains’ not only all of the partners collectively but also individually”. Examples of where this had occurred included all three groups having a better understanding of each others role in developing and regenerating the local economy and the role adopted by some experienced managers coaching less experienced ones in other companies.

For one member of the focus group mutuality was an increasingly common activity within the group and was a “win/win situation” with “people talking to each other [...] people feeling relaxed with each other in an environment of mutual co-operation”.

This group recognised that key components of success were set around the people involved in the GES along with their passion and commitment. The group made a number of comments about this. One member for example remarked “It’s about people, –personalities have a lot to do with it and that is not easily replicable anywhere”. Another spoke similarly saying, “The key is the ability to engage with people” However, this feeling was best summed up by the following comment:

“Yes, the model can be taken anywhere but it’s got to be driven by certain personalities. It is all about personality and bringing people together-it’s about engaging with people. Without that you can’t use your knowledge.”

The need for passion was also regarded as important by many in this group and a vital feature of any successful group. One member set this passion in terms of ‘the passion for the vision’. However, the group also agreed commitment and passion was not enough if they were not apparent in across all the sectors in the relationship.

The Business Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held with representatives from local business who worked closely with the GES. One of these focus groups was composed of members of the GES steering group, while the other group was formed from a convenience sample [cf. Cohen et al 2007] of business people currently closely associated with the work of the GES.

These focus groups felt the GES had been a success. The reasons given included its longevity with one member pointing out “the fact that it is still going after five years is a testament to its success”. Both of these groups also indicated the personalities involved had been an important consideration in the success of the group. This view was summed up by one member who said, “It [The GES] will only work with certain people in key roles”.

Both of these groups also mentioned the importance of the quality and commitment of the staff based at the Kingsway Centre, who one member said “wanted it to succeed”. The fact that the Kingsway Centre was a good facility for meetings was also mentioned, as was the willingness of the centre to provide administrative support for the group. A member summed up the views of many when he said:

“Without certain individuals in the GES there would not be the drive to succeed. Yes, there have been time when we might have said forget it but we’ve always felt it was important –that drive to make it succeed”.

The business based focus groups felt the GES had largely succeeded for pragmatic and practical reasons, mentioning its level of honesty, transparency and openness. They spoke of “a transparency of relationships” between members of the group and “an organisation that had no hidden agendas”. These were factors they considered, had led to other contributory aspects of the success of the GES including its networking role, the value of communications which took place between the membership and the quality of both its formal and informal education programmes.

The relatively direct access to the other partners and the developing level of trust and confidence between them was also mentioned as a benefit. The groups felt they were able to talk with the local authority directly through the GES forum. Similarly to the college based focus group, these groups also regarded the mutual cooperation between the college and local industry as an important feature. These were links which they felt had strengthened as a result of the inception of the GES. They indicated a growth in the level of trust between them as well as a greater focus on the educational and training needs of local business. With this point in mind, one member stated, “Increasingly you know what you’ve got there and you know what they will deliver.”

These focus groups also reported the GES provided an opportunity for each to learn from other members for the greater economic good of the area. One member summed up the general feeling on this by stating:

“The GES is about sharing best practice to develop business and encourage economic development by providing local knowledge about labour resources and training availability, as well as updates about environmental and health and safety issues.”

A further strength identified by these groups was the dynamic and ever evolving nature of the GES. The small membership of its steering group was seen as a particular advantage, where decisions to do things could be taken quickly.

Both of these focus groups also felt a particular strength of the GES was its flexibility in allowing companies to opt in and out at will. In a wider discussion on this issue both of the groups indicated there was no pressure to attend each meeting or to sign up long term to something they may not want or need was valued. Some of those who had use the opt in /opt out mechanism were particularly strongly in favour of this strategy as, at times, it had given them opportunities to think about strategies proposed to their company, or to catch up with their own thinking before opting in again.

The Local Authority Focus Group

The local authority focus group also confirmed the GES was a success, examples of this included bringing people together, upskilling the local workforce, bringing in inward investment to the area and its pro-business drive which helped to sell the area. Similarly to the other focus groups, the role of the Kingsway Centre was regarded as important by this group because of its administrative role in the GES and its perception of what it could do for local business development. Again similarly to other focus groups, the number of strong individuals who created the GES was regarded as a key factor, as was the level of commitment by the key players involved in the GES allowing it to “get on with the business of what its members wanted it to do. As with the other focus groups, the small management group within the GES was also regarded as a helpful feature.

This focus group saw the GES as “a partnership of equals, where the agenda never gets high-jacked by one partner”. With this in mind its membership pointed out:

“Although each of the members had their own agenda the overriding drive was to gain business success in the area. [and] “As a result these agendas seemed to be largely complementary. These factors had helped the GES to work well, as it had helped it to find a natural agenda rather than an artificial one which had been bolted on”.

It was regarded as an agenda with:

“Shared aims and shared ambitions in moving business forward and kept the group going”. The group reported the GES to be “a dynamic environment, which is constantly rethinking its role and purpose and where it should go next and

where there was a common feeling among many of these players of wanting to do well for the area”.

The GES was also reported to be an example of “inter-co-operation in a more competitive world, which had created a communal feel, which had allowed the group to collectively bat above each others organisations weight”. It was felt these features provided a level of honesty of the group where “people were not precious” and “where true learning takes place”.

The slow and steady approach the GES had taken to its work, moving relatively slowly so that people were all going in the same direction was also reported to be one of its strengths. This approach was felt to be “pragmatic” with one member stating, “When things don’t work people stop doing it”, also commenting, “The group has taken on board the view if it’s not doing the business, then stop doing it”. As pointed out in other focus groups this pragmatism helped businesses to work within a flexible framework, which for example, allowed them to join, fall away and rejoin at appropriate times in an atmosphere of no recrimination from other members when this happened. Rather, it was reported “the attitude was: ‘Nice to see you again’... ‘How is the business doing?’ rather than ‘Where have you been?’” This approach led to what was described as “a positive culture” [and] “a relaxed organisational base, where there were no moral pressures to attend every meeting”.

This focus group also commented on the role of private business in the GES. It was noted that those involved in the GES came from the private sector and as a result, the GES was “private sector driven and decisive in what it felt needed to be done”. The GES had not become “bogged down with public sector agendas”. Similarly, the composition of the group at its outset was regarded as important. The major businesses involved in setting up the GES had not been in direct competition with each other and as a result there had been what was described as “a willingness to open its doors to the business of others”.

The University Focus Group

Staff from the university indicated the GES had been not only a successful venture but was also “unique in both what it was trying to do and the way it went about it”. However, as the GES was working largely with ‘soft’, interpersonal skills the level of success achieved was difficult to measure. This group pointed out this uniqueness was in part about the personalities involved in developing the GES as well as the flexible nature of the University Foundation Award in Continuous Business Practice, which had been developed in conjunction with the Kingsway Centre staff. The university, they indicated, had been supportive of the venture as part of their role in developing lifelong learning within the region. One member of this focus group identified their role as being directly linked to supporting the work of the Kingsway Centre in a number of ways, including not

only the validation awards to learners but also through attendance at meetings as well as moral support through membership of the GES steering group.

As with the response received from other focus groups, the role played by certain personalities involved in the development of the GES was seen as a major reason for its successful development. The university group recognized the vital role played by committed members from each of the agencies involved in GES “to drive across all the areas”. As with the other focus groups, they also emphasized the drive and commitment of one member of staff from the Kingsway Centre, which was seen as being particularly important through the life of the GES. This contribution was analysed by one member of this focus group as being about their “unswerving enthusiasm and commitment, drive and skill...at ‘opening doors’”, while the other participant spoke of “their ability to liaise closely with local business”. This group also considered the business and training focus, with the lesser initial emphasis on formal education and qualifications as an essential strategy. This more ‘subtle’ approach, with the Kingsway Centre acting as a facilitator had been an important strategy in drawing some business people into formal education at a time when they felt more confident about their abilities and strengths.

This focus group also felt the ten and twenty credits ‘bite size’ modules in the university foundation award as important. That these modules could be taken individually and built up over time was also regarded as important for the success

of the formal education package within the GES. Further, this group also considered the generic learning outcomes and the flexible assessment arrangements of these modules as important factors in helping to individualize the learning of participants to their own or their own company's needs.

The level of trust and mutual support between members of the GES was also cited as a key feature of its success. One member of the group who had been involved with the group since its inception spoke of his observation of sense of professional trust between the members, while the other acknowledged the positive attitude shown to returning members who had not attended recent meetings.

Although one member of this focus group indicated they felt the GES had clear and achievable aims, another felt these aims were not always consistently visible, resulting in the group at times losing its overall sense of purpose. This member also felt there was a potential problem in the developing closeness within and a latent 'club philosophy' in the GES and to the danger of its becoming a "meeting of mates" and "merely a talking shop". With this in mind, this group also felt there was a need for the GES to continue to "think out of the box" and to be "prepared to take risks". This group also identified that the leadership within the GES was under an increased vulnerability when key members left. This, it was noted, had been a natural occurrence throughout the life of the GES which,

up to this point, it had been collectively strong enough to deal with and overcome.

It was these factors that led one member of this group to present the GES as operating as a model on a two dimensional axis, which acknowledges its dynamism that over its lifetime ensures it constantly re-invents itself to meet the changing needs of its membership. The lateral axis of this model indicates the activities of the group over time. It is along this axis that the developments over time take place and which can be viewed not as a straight line of activity but rather as a series of waves and troughs. The vertical axis focuses on the range of experiences of members throughout the lifetime of the group.

This member also identified three domains through which he felt the GES had passed in its lifetime. Initially, there was the *introductory layer* during which the membership made initial contacts and laid the foundations for further professional exchanges through a range of surface level activities. Although this is a somewhat superficial level this layer is vital in encouraging the interchange of ideas among the membership as well as producing a deepening sense of trust among them.

The second stage was the *educational and training layer*, where the more increasingly meaningful activities within the group began, alongside those activities described at stage 1. At the outset, these activities might be only at an

informal level between members of the group through exchanges of ideas between individuals or coaching of less experienced members by more experienced ones. At some point on this level, however the more formal learning provided both by staff the Kingsway Centre and eventually, for some members, access to the programme of study validated by the university would kick in.

The third *mutual trust* layer occurred when stages 1 and 2 meld to produce a cohesive working group across all of the three areas in the relationship. This level is identified by the degree of mutual trust and understanding within the group, where it is working together freely for both the individual and common benefit. This member of the group felt the GES was currently operating at the third layer, with all the benefits and drawbacks this brings.

A fourth layer of operation was also identified described as the *knowledge transfer level*. This stage is characterised by all the above activities occurring within the wider understanding of the mutual benefit of knowledge transfer. At this stage, an effort will be made to both broaden the group's activities and also actively recruit membership across a wide range of local businesses. It was this fourth level, this focus group felt the GES had to prepare for next.

Advice to others

When asked about the advice the members of the GES would provide for those thinking of starting a similar group elsewhere the key points which were made were largely consistent across all of the focus groups.

All of the groups indicated the model of practice developed by the GES could be replicated rather than cloned elsewhere. It was felt although the broad scaffolding of the GES may be passed on the specificity and nature of any other similar organisation would depend on an number of variables. These included the enthusiasm and commitment of the individual members, as well as the quality of their inter-relationships. Particularly emphasis was placed by all of the focus groups on the personality involved and their role in to driving the group, as well as their ability to read and understand each others points of view. All of the focus groups also identified the need to progress at a pace where most, if not all, of the membership could move ahead together. The resilience of the group members to the difficulties they would encounter was also regarded as an important factor. Further, all of the groups indicated such a development would be neither an easy nor straightforward task.

All of the focus groups emphasised the point that new groups should not expect results either easily or quickly, as this might take a number of years. A number of reasons were provided for this caution including the range of different

personalities which would be involved in a different location and may affect the ways another group might gel. With this in mind, one member of the group felt in any burgeoning group some form of prior understanding of the work undertaken by the GES and its successes and pitfalls was needed, stating “You cannot just sit a group of people down in a room and expect them to get on with it”. All of the focus groups emphasised the need for people would need a lot of help to know what they were taking on, particularly in managing communication links.

While agreeing that there was “no magic” to what they had done the groups indicated the importance of the initial discussions with companies towards gaining both clarity of purpose and an understanding of their individual working cultures. Although this was a time consuming and lengthy process the group felt this strategy provided them with the opportunity to elicit the needs of individual business rather than this being imposed on them. Another group member, supporting this point, spoke of the amount of hard work that had been undertaken by the GES in this area. Any new group would also have a range of political hurdles to overcome in its development and the combination of appropriate personalities and personal commitment was also felt to be vital to overcome these hurdles .As one member put it, “comprehensive teamwork will be necessary” .

The focus groups indicated the education and training sector in the relationship could best serve as the facilitator for the rest of the group, helping to combine opportunities for both strategical thinking and real-time shop-floor management

issues. Such a relationship, it was felt, was complementary, allowing, as one member said, “the hooks to be put into companies at all sorts of different levels to make them think both strategically and practically.” He also argued, “This is an integral part of what we [the GES] do. It is not a bolt on, allowing both hard and soft skills and knowledge to be examined to bring about cultural change in businesses.” The focus groups also indicated the education and training sector in the partnership must be flexible, subtle and not press too hard for things to happen.

The focus groups indicated other groups should be aware of two completely different factors; the ‘demand led’ focus based on a company’s need and the ‘supply led’ focus, providing the opportunity for formal, award-led learning. The focus groups were aware of the potential tensions between these factors, with one contributor indicating this relationship had to be developed carefully. He, among others, indicated a way of undertaking this successfully was through the use of tailor-made programmes to meet the individual needs of each company, thus taking into account not only the needs of the company but also the personal development of individuals and its formal recognition through the credit accumulation [CAT points] process. In this way the local economy would benefit as a result of the development of a better trained and more flexible workforce.

New starters were advised that their mission needed to be identified and set out early in the life of the group with a focus on economic functions and the training

and development of members. New groups were also advised to avoid what was described by some members as 'industrial tourism' [visits to their work to observe practice] being the norm for their group. As one member said, 'industrial tourism has its place but its only one minor aspect of what we are about really". It was also felt to be important that new groups did not get into a particular routine where a small number of businesses repeatedly hosted meetings or events. Rather the group should spread this activity amongst its membership.

Great emphasis was placed on the importance of working together and talking to each other. It was suggested conflicts of interest need to be resolved quickly and where this is a problem the withdrawal of companies if only temporary should be accepted. It was also pointed out that although there needs to be a core steering group everyone should feel they are involved with a role to play. Newer groups should be aware that different phases of development will occur throughout a lifespan of any group and from time to time be lulls in activities can be expected as regeneration and reflection occurs.

Both of the business groups also pointed out that from their perspective there was little no benefit personally to them as individuals and that they undertook this work largely in their own time the trade off was that in the next ten to fifteen years their business will be resourced with a better educated workforce.

In summary, the focus groups presented five pieces of specific advice.

- The leadership must not come solely through the public sector agenda as this omits the interests of private business;
- The steering group needs to be small in order to make decision making easier. A small steering group would also help to develop a positive camaraderie and support.
- Other groups should get together people with similar aims and ambitions. It should also make sure those who wished to lead it have the enthusiasm and drive and really want to do so.
- There should be the conscious awareness of a degree of “drift” at times as the organisation constantly reinvented itself. Its nature is ‘stop/go, which some might find disconcerting”. However, this was also regarded as one of the strengths of the organisation.
- The group also felt there was considerable importance in ensuring the continuance of champions for the group from each of the sectors involved.
- A continuing dialogue between those involved in the GES and any new group to provide support and a platform to exchange ideas would be useful. This approach, it was argued, would help to keep its sense of direction and momentum

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the data which has been collected in this evaluation of the GES. Firstly, there was common agreement by all of the four agencies involved that the GES has been successful throughout its lifespan. This can be accounted for by the four closely inter-related themes which were identified by the participants. These include the role of the Kingsway Centre as administrator to the group, calling meetings, providing a venue and providing administrative support and in actively sustaining the venture. The level of commitment by a number of key individuals in each of the agencies in supporting and enhancing the GES has also been a key factor in this success. In turn, these developments have led to close working relationships of the partners within the cluster. It is a combination of these features that has led to the development of deep mutual trust and understanding within the partnership.

Further, these four features have been aided by a degree of commonality in the overall agenda of the group. This, along with the enthusiasm and commitment shown by participants to the success of the group, has led co-operation and innovation between individuals and companies, which has, in turn, helped to boost the output of some participants and aided the development of the local economy.

The pragmatic approach taken by the GES to its work was also noted in some of the focus groups. This pragmatism was demonstrated in a number of ways including the 'slow and steady' approach noted by some in the focus groups, as well as the fact that the GES is regarded as flexible with clearly identifiable aims. The fact that the management group is also relatively small was also seen as an advantage by many, particularly those from the business community.

Developments have taken place within what can be described as a co-operative learning domain, characterized by a hierarchical model. And where transition between the stages occurs when critical incidents or 'boundary objectives' common to the group allow this to occur. The first stage of this model is characterized by an initial surface level 'meeting and greeting' stage. The second stage is characterized by the development of trust between partners. The third stage is a stage characterized by mutual support. The final stage is one where a deep a mutual understanding between participants occurs.

The successes of the GES can be evidenced by a number of its achievements. Firstly, this unlikely partnership of the local authority, local business and education and training providers, in its loose coupled organizational form, has been sustained and developed through all of the stages of the domain described above over a period of five years. In this time the commitment of its participants has effectively developing a close working relationship within this group, which has allowed the development of better knowledge management within the group,

as well as the greater availability of award-bearing and non-award bearing, work-based learning opportunities in the area. Further, this mutually beneficial environment has helped to open up a professional dialogue where participants have the opportunity to influence local economic and social developments.

In order to continue to be successful some participants felt the GES had to continue to be willing to take risks to ensure its ongoing health and dynamism describing the need to ensure that the tacit knowledge held within the group does not become an increasing part of the developing unconsciousness of the membership, making it more difficult for new members to become integrated into the group. These are important messages not only for the future health of the GES but also for others considering initiating similar groups elsewhere.

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