

The case for learning at work

Who drives change?

The nature of work has evolved rapidly in recent years with organizational de-layering, self-managed teams, guru-driven change (such as business process re-engineering) and IT-enabled home-based working (among others). These changes all point to the creation of leaner, more flexible organizations. The aim here is to identify ways in which organizations can learn from change and assist the people they employ to learn at work.

In his 1998 book 'futurewise: six faces of global change' Patrick Dixon predicts that 'either we take hold of the future or the future will take hold of us'. Commenting on the pace of change, and the turbulence it creates for organizations, Dixon wonders whether management gurus are partially to blame:

Every week there are more books on management. Each one often contradicts what has gone before, struggling to find a fresh view...Expert, confident managers will continue as before to dismiss management fads in favour of their own intuition and intelligence, working out their own solutions, adapting and borrowing as they go from a wide variety of sources. However the speed of change will guarantee an almost permanent supply of semi-neurotic managers who are constantly on the lookout for some new, comprehensive solution to their day-to-day problems. (Dixon, 1998 p.4)

Many writers say that innovation is the best way to secure success. But what types of change can an organization realistically handle? Even with talented people, leading edge technology, strong product portfolios and finances, managers rarely consider their organization's capabilities as carefully as they think about individual capabilities.

Change affects the skill set that people need to work effectively. Yet the challenge of learning at work is well within the grasp of any organization. A core activity of work is to make sense of what is perceived, so that appropriate action can be taken. Yet a common criticism of training is that it fails to *transfer learning*. In turn, this helps to perpetuate a *non-learning culture*.

Can we really learn while we are in the middle of change?

"The only way to cope with a changing world is to keep learning..." (Dixon, 1998 p.31)

Some writers argue that the key to successful change is to create a sense of 'dynamic stability' so that major change initiatives are interspersed with carefully paced periods of incremental, organic change. This can be assisted by following some practical steps: (1) Stop 'fire fighting'; (2) embed organizational learning; (3) aim to really learn from change events; (4) re-inforce the benefits of learning from change and (5) by focusing on the desired outcomes.

Step 1: Stop 'fire fighting'

Constant, reactive change or 'fire fighting' undermines any serious efforts to learn from change. It is most likely to occur when:

- There is insufficient time to solve all the problems.
- Solutions are incomplete and patched, rather than solved.
- Problems recur and cascade. Incomplete solutions cause old problems to re-emerge or create new problems, sometimes elsewhere in the organization.
- Urgency supersedes importance. Ongoing problem-solving efforts and long-range activities, such as developing new processes, are repeatedly interrupted or deferred because fires must be extinguished.
- Many problems become crises. Problems smoulder until they flare up, often just before a deadline. Then they require major efforts to solve.
- Performance drops. So many problems are solved inadequately and opportunities forgone that overall performance declines steeply.

Step 2: Consider: What benefits might be derived from embedded, organizational learning?

Organizational learning is multilevel: individual, group, and organizational. This means that learning must be valued, championed and practiced by senior managers and if it is to stick it must be active (rather than passive) starting with questions (e.g. Why is this a problem?) directing the quest for deeper level enduring solutions rather than the easier, though ultimately less helpful quick fix.

Step 3: Consider: How do we learn from change?

If the reflective work at step 2 is to take root and influence the ways in which people think and act, then senior managers must grapple with and begin to model a work culture that encourages and respects openness, collaboration and interdependence. Easy to say but difficult to do unless the executive team really shapes the work and learning culture and actively promotes a desire to learn from change. At least five requirements need to be met before this can happen: (1) continuous and open access between individuals and groups, (2) free, reliable communication, where (3) interdependence is the foundation of cohesiveness, (4) trust, risk-taking, and helping each other is prevalent, so that (5) conflict is identified and managed. The key point here is the (latent) potential of individual learners to share their experiences among their own work groups, so that organizational benefits can begin to flow from shared (though still informal) insights.

Step 4: Lay the foundations for learning from change

It has been argued that contemporary organizations should strive to: (1) work, plan and think more creatively, (2) build from its knowledge about its products and processes (rather than re-inventing the wheel), (3) engage with its workforce at a deeper level, via concerted and cooperative action with internalized long-range commitment, and (4) embed learning as a way of responding to and understanding the challenges of complexity (markets, products, and the organization itself).

Step 5: Focus on desired outcomes

What might happen if change is coupled with structured learning? First, individual employees will be more engaged and second, they are more likely to take more seriously their own personal learning and career development. Learning from change can only benefit the enterprise as a whole if individuals take learning seriously and are recognized for their efforts. This is unlikely to happen unless individual employees feel: (1) that they can state their views openly, (2) their separate, creative contributions can be integrated into a holistic corporate effort, (3) that active learning is valued, and (5) that the new knowledge and insight that is generated by learning from change will be embedded and used to deliver benefits for all.

Next steps

Many writers describe the role and influence of leaders on the formation of organizational values. Perhaps the three main channels of influence are:

- (1) *Time* - devoted to daily tasks in meeting short-term schedules, often takes precedence over dealing with important long-term issues. Allocated manager time is thus a clear signal as to where the priorities lie.
- (2) *Attention* - has a similar effect to management time allocation. Managers who consistently pay attention to certain aspects of their work, send clear messages about its relative importance.
- (3) *Reward and recognition* - via bonuses, letters of appreciation, promotion, attractive assignments, allocation of resources, etc. Positive reinforcement increases the probability that the same behaviour will be repeated, and negative reinforcement acts in the opposite direction. Managers who value and reward learning activities, reward people who contribute to organizational learning, use aspects of learning as part of the process of evaluating employees, and make learning activity a criterion for promotion, reinforce the behaviours required to maintain organizational learning.

For organizational leaders, the implications are:

- (1) *Ensure that learning is a key agenda item* as reflected by the time, attention, and the reward and recognition channels of influence.
- (2) *Build the structural foundations* needed to turn individual learning into organizational learning via debriefing, learning teams, improvement teams.
- (3) *Create cultural and psychological conditions that will ensure that learning is effective.* This means establishing trust so that learning is both honestly felt and spoken, meaningful and relevant.

Using action learning to facilitate change

As a starting point, it is helpful to view the organization as a community of people. Next, overlay the individual agendas of the people who work in this community and in the context of change, the 'mindset' largely determines the extent to which collaborative learning flourishes or not. In fact, many writers argue that the mindset issue is best addressed by continually building on the knowledge base of the organization so as to prevent homeostasis - a steady state - from setting in. This can be done by fostering a climate of learning.

A company espousing this philosophy has come to be called a learning organization. This sounds fine in practice, but the learning organization concept has largely failed to ignite. Practical difficulties arise because of the sheer complexity of the concept, closed mindsets, and because there are comparatively few self-motivated natural learners. So what can the organization do to learn from change? In our view, the best starting point is to 'flipchart' the opportunities for learning that exist inside the organization and use these to establish your own brand learning agenda. If real challenges can be used as starting points for learning and then captured as outcomes from collaborative working, the effort involved will have been justified. In fact, the organization will have created the most relevant, applied and productive way of developing its employees at work.

Will this make a difference?

It is clear that the pace and complexity of organizational change *is* problematic, though what we have sought to show here is that it also yields a significant opportunity to learn from change. It is our contention that this cannot be readily achieved from outside and that in fact, the organization itself provides the best live action case for learning. By exploring and capturing the issues that really matter, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for learning that connects individuals to each other (for shared learning) and individuals and small groups to the challenges that confront them at work. If the outputs from individual and collective work can also be recognized and certified, then most people will readily respond to the opportunities to learn from change.

References

Dixon, P. *Futurewise: Six Faces of Global Change*, Harper Collins, London, 1998.

Key points: 1 The case for learning at work

- There are numerous forces driving the creation of leaner, more flexible organizations. These changes have radically affected the skill set that people need to work effectively and a common criticism of training is that it fails to transfer learning.
- Organizational learning is multilevel: individual, group, and organizational. Constant, reactive change or 'fire fighting' undermines any serious efforts to learn from change.
- The organization itself provides the best live action case for learning. By exploring and capturing the issues that really matter, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for learning that connects individuals to each other (for shared learning) and individuals and small groups to the challenges that confront them at work.
- Learning from change can only benefit the enterprise as a whole if individuals take learning seriously and are recognized for their efforts. This is unlikely to happen unless individual employees feel: (1) that they can state their view openly, (2) their separate, creative contributions can be integrated into a holistic corporate effort, (3) that active learning is valued and (4) that any new knowledge and insight that is generated by learning from change will be embedded and used to deliver benefits for all.
- Actions: (i) Ensure that learning is a key agenda item as reflected by time, attention, and the reward and recognition channels of influence; (ii) Build the structural foundations needed to turn individual learning into organizational learning via debriefing, learning teams and improvement teams; (iii) Create the cultural and psychological conditions that will ensure that learning is effective. This means establishing trust so that learning is both honestly felt and spoken, meaningful and relevant.