

How Professionals Avoid Learning

One of the greatest problems as cited by organizations is poor communication. People know it is critical to performing good work. Yet improving our communication skills seems to be such a daunting task that nobody ever does it, or so it seems according to employee and employer alike.

Why is it so difficult for leaders to share information or to learn a different approach to communicating? The answer is because learning is not a sequential step in a corporate theory or system that starts with motivation and ends with increased production.

Effective learning is a double loop process and not simply a function of how people feel but rather how they think. There are cognitive rules of reasoning that must be followed. Double loop learning is the skill of questioning personal assumptions and discovering different answers.

A roadblock in the pathway of learning is defensive reasoning, regardless of motivation or commitment. Like a computer virus that thwarts the results of a designer's code, defensive reasoning stops active learning.

The solution is teaching people how to reason about their behavior in a different way that breaks old habits and removes the obstacles of learning. A 15-year longitudinal study was conducted on management consultants. The consultants were chosen because they are highly educated and central to organizational change.

Almost all the consultants had MBAs from the top three or four U.S. business schools. They are highly committed to their work with a greater than 90 percent job satisfaction.

The hypothesis was that the consultants would be good at learning. The resulting data indicated very high scores on enthusiasm and commitment, but very low scores on learning. It was discovered that as long as the focus was on external factors the consultants were enthusiastic participants.

The moment the structure turned inward and reviewed the consultants' own performance, things went amiss. The longer the attention was inwardly focused the worse their performance became. Almost all reacted defensively and projected blame away to other factors such as the client.

In an attempt to mitigate the defensive posture of his team, one manager conducted a meeting at the conclusion of a project and used the first portion of the meeting to

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expose his own flaws and openly discuss improvements he could make. The team willingly made suggestions and corrected misunderstandings. All were enthusiastic and responsive in helping the manager learn.

This discussion last for three hours, at which time he asked the team if there were any errors in the project they might have made. The consultants restated their previous thoughts about the client and the manager's flaws, but could find only a single suggestion for themselves: "make fewer promises," implying that the team could not improve on their performance.

The professionals made attributions about the behavior of the client and their manager without objective or substantive evidence. They presented no evidence to back their claims or assumptions and when a lack of concrete evidence was pointed out, they repeated their earlier claims more vehemently.

The result was an unproductive meeting with parallel conversations. As long as the manager was the topic, the professionals were willing to express their candid observations, but when the tables were turned, they deflected the topic, projected blame to the manager or client, and could find nothing wrong with their behavior.

How many managers are expert at facilitating meetings that highlight the shortcomings of employees, but fail to grasp the importance of turning the assumption-questioning exercise inwardly. An honest intrapersonal discussion must take place before learning can exist.

When people are not internally honest, they live in a world of self-deception and atrophy their ability to learn from mistakes. Corporate management rarely discounts the need to improve the company's communication skills, but their intended learners never look at them in the mirror.