

Teaching Smart People to Learn

Teaching dumb people to learn has never been a challenge. Everybody knows that dumb people need to learn, they should learn, because, well, they're dumb. After they learn they won't be dumb anymore. They will be smart like us and when they are smart, they won't need to learn anymore.

Corporations, small to mid size companies, and family structures that are populated by smart people, or perhaps more accurately expressed, people who perceive they are smart, experience a learning block with education and success. There is an interesting phenomenon that occurs when a person arrives at a position of smartness. Some call it the tipping point of self-deception.

When I was in grade school I knew that the teachers were smarter than me. In high school, I started questioning that assumption as some of my teachers had unique ideas that didn't sync with my worldview. During my undergraduate years I felt like I was back in grade school. My book-learned professors were intimidating and could back up their positions with theory and page number from the textbook, which ironically in some cases was written by the professor.

Companies that aspire to succeed in the Knowledge Era must first resolve the recurring dilemma that success in the marketplace relies on the ability to learn; yet most people don't know how. More to the point is that fact that the higher the position or the education, the greater the learning deficiency.

Most companies are unaware of the problem. They misunderstand the meaning of learning and mistake it for problem solving, which is usually a temporary fix of a symptom with a disregard for the root cause.

Solving problems is important but if learning is to increase, managers and employees must look inward. There are two important aspects of this self-awareness. The first is with interpersonal relationships, how you get along with others.

The second is intrapersonal awareness and the source of learning. How you perceive yourself and whether you can be honest in that space or not? Another way of expressing this idea is having the ability to question your own assumptions.

Chris Argyris coined the terms single-loop and double-loop to explain the distinction. Single-loop learning is like the thermometer in your house that is set to 68 degrees. When the temperature drops below 68, the heater turns on. The

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thermostat never questions why. Our corporate environment continues to carry the Industrial Aged mindset of single loop learning as we condition employees to never ask why.

Assuming the thermostat could think and talk, it might ask you why 68 degrees? Is there a different temperature that would be more cost efficient or more comfortable for the family? That is double-loop thinking and learning.

Highly skilled professionals and educated academia are very proficient at single-loop learning. They have spent a lifetime acquiring more smarts and mastering one or more intellectual disciplines and applying those disciplines to solve problems. This fact explains why professionals and academics are so bad at double-loop learning.

They rarely fail and when they do, it's never their fault, there is always a reasonable explanation for the failure, and therefore, they never learn from the failure. Whenever their single-loop ideas go wrong, they become defensive, agitated, they screen out criticism, and point blame anywhere but inwardly.

In the very moment they need double-loop learning the most, they fail to question their assumptions and lose the opportunity to deepen their understanding and discover any root cause solutions. Instead they remain symptom-oriented and further atrophy their learning capacity.

This is called defensive reasoning and it blocks learning despite an individual's high commitment to the project or apparent willingness to learn. Teaching people how to learn is traditionally seen as a soft skill with no P&L implications.

Here are a few implications using a double-loop approach, employee turnover, absenteeism, trust for management, which impacts commitment, motivation and performance. The savings would be substantial and quantifiable and the periodic corporate overall that rarely succeeds would be avoided.