
CHANGE AND ACTION LEARNING

The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage

Change is the only constant, the only certainty. In business, it is happening more rapidly today than ever before.

- “Business is now being conducted in a global village in which we are competing not just with our neighbours but with our peers all over the world” [Tom Peters]
- ‘Information at your fingertips’ transforms the nature of competition. 80% of what any firm does today can be done equally well by another. Added value comes from what you do with information not from owning it.
- Organisations change shape dramatically and repeatedly. Companies ‘down-size’, ‘right-size’, ‘out-source’. Monolithic corporations give way to networks, alliances, partnering deals. Product life-cycles get shorter.
- 30-year career paths are a thing of the past. If you don't agree, try to define the precise nature of your own firm in 2023. Now write job descriptions for the top 10 positions and define a neat, orderly career path to get today's new recruit into one of them. For many people the new reality is multiple careers, multiple jobs.

Change is a ‘dangerous opportunity’. Learning and change are closely linked. In the Information Age more than ever, organisations must learn faster than the rate of change in their environment if they are to survive.

Why then are training and R&D budgets the first to go when the chips are down?

Blockages to learning abound. Despite its fundamental importance, learning has an image problem.

- In many people's minds it conjures up pictures of classrooms, programmed teaching, and boring bookwork.
- In the competitive ‘can-do’ world in which we live, problem-solving is highly valued. Saying “I need to learn about this” may be seen as a sign of weakness. Willingness to learn is often missing.
- Time to learn seems impossible to find when the swamp is full of alligators. When organisations need to learn most quickly is, by definition, the time when managers can least readily be spared to go on courses.
- Traditional didactic training makes only a limited contribution to resolving real development needs.
- Directors and Managers often find it hard to identify the current state of *corporate* competence. They get little help to think about their ability to develop positive company approaches to change, communications, relationships, teams, risk taking, and customer focus. Long-term goals get lost in short-term pressures.

When everything is changing, there are no more right answers - only good, insightful questions

As an alternative to conventional training methods, more and more organisations are taking *action learning* initiatives to introduce innovative styles of managing which have their roots in the principles of adult learning:

<i>Principles of Adult Learning</i>	<i>What to do about it</i>
1. <i>adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy</i>	① <i>start by looking at what managers need in their work</i>
2. <i>adults' orientation to learning is based on real life situations not academic subject areas</i>	② <i>focus on tasks for which the manager is personally accountable</i>
3. <i>experience is the richest source for adults' learning</i>	③ <i>use analysis of experience as the core methodology</i>
4. <i>adults have a deep need to be self-directing</i>	④ <i>treat learning as a process of enquiry and exploration</i>
5. <i>individual differences among people increase with age</i>	⑤ <i>allow for differences in style, time, place & pace of learning</i>

At its simplest action learning can be defined as learning by doing

Action learning is about change. It is development via significant managerial tasks. It is opportunistic. It means:

- *Implementation*. It brings together individual and team development. Participants draw directly on work experience and apply what they learn to their own work.
- *Integration*. It helps participants tackle organisational problems, take small steps to test solutions, and learn by reviewing results.
- *Interaction*. It develops collaborative, supportive relationships among learners and respect for differences. It enables people to learn from their own and others' experience to meet their needs.
- *Iteration*. It is linked into real management processes. It provides time for learners to review their work and priorities and reassess how they do things in a constructive environment.

“The behaviours that define learning and the behaviours that define being productive are one and the same. Learning is not something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity; learning is at the heart of productive activity. To put it simply, learning is the new form of labour.”
[Shoshanna Zuboff]

Action learning is learning at work, put to work
