

LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE: RETHINKING THE DANCE

PHIL RAMSEY

Chapter

1

INTRODUCTION

This book is about a dance¹; one that is currently going wrong in organisations around the world. It is about a dance that has been following the same pattern for so long that we are struggling to establish better ways of going about it. We could call it the ‘Learning — Performing’ Dance.

This chapter sets the scene for the contributions that follow. It aims to explain the nature of the dance and its importance to organisations today. It sets the issue within a cultural frame, suggesting that many organisations have established a way of acting that they no longer think about but which fundamentally shapes how they behave and the results they achieve.

This cultural frame emphasises the challenge people face when they try to implement concepts advocated in the book: while concepts and techniques may have a strong appeal, perhaps seeming to be just what your organisation needs, they will often run counter to the culture of your organisation, generating resistance that may surprise you. This is not meant to dissuade you from implementing ideas that appeal; rather, it is meant to prepare you for the challenge.

To establish the frame, we can start by considering the nature of ‘Learning’ and ‘Performing’, the values that keep appearing throughout this book. We take the view that these are more than *actions*. They are *values* which are fundamental

¹ In their book *Building Cross Cultural Competence*, Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars use the term ‘corybantic’ to describe the way peoples’ values may dance between two ends of a continuum.

to the successful operation of organisations, key dimensions around which organisational cultures form.

Consider what this means.

DILEMMAS — THE FOUNDATION OF THE DANCE

Every year — sometimes several times during a year — an argument breaks out all over New Zealand. The cause? The naming of players selected to play for the All Blacks, New Zealand's national Rugby Football team. The nature of the argument is always the same: should the selectors choose the best player in each position, or should they select players with the potential to be the best at some point in the future?

While the argument is always heated, it becomes white-hot when an outstanding player — past his best but still clearly better than others who play in his position — nears the end of his career. The intensity of the argument reflects the love New Zealanders have of rugby and for the All Blacks. It matters to them that their team wins and keeps winning. And tradition is involved: playing for the All Blacks is one of the greatest achievements to which a New Zealander can aspire. For many, it rankles to see people selected when they have not yet proved they deserve the honour.

The job of the selectors is difficult. They know the traditions and honour associated with the All Blacks better than most. They have had to prove themselves in order to become selectors. What's more, their jobs hang on the success of the team. But they are also deeply aware of the need to develop players for the future. Retirement and injury are part of the game. And playing a test match — a game between international teams — is of far greater intensity than any other match; it is difficult for a new player to adjust quickly to the new demand. Each selection, therefore, presents the selector with a dilemma of whether to give greater weight to the need for performance, or to the need for learning.

'Performance' refers to meeting the demands that are placed upon you. It involves using whatever resources or capacity you have available to achieve required results. For a sports team, the demands are very clear: the desired result

of each game is to win. For teams like the All Blacks and to their supporters, failure is devastating.

‘Learning’ is a very different way of acting. Rather than using existing capacity, learning involves building that capacity so that it can be used at some point in the future. Learning also involves a very different view of failure: the only way to avoid failure is to stick to what you know you can achieve, avoiding anything new. Therefore, failure is a sign that you are challenging yourself — that you are, in fact, learning — with the added bonus that it can be diagnostic, clarifying where improvements need to be made.

Why do we call the choice between performance and learning a dilemma? The word *dilemma* literally means “two propositions”. If you are given the choice between (1) performing now, or (2) learning for the future, you are confronted with two attractive propositions. Rather than having to choose, many people would prefer to do both.

Experts on culture Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars have developed what they term ‘Dilemma Theory’² to explain how culture forms and influences behaviour. As the name suggests, they believe dilemmas are the key to understanding culture and values; dilemmas give us a means of understanding what shapes differences between communities and how differences can be reconciled. Dilemma Theory is our basis for saying that Performing and Learning are more than actions; potentially they are values that can help define the character of a community.

To understand what this means, imagine you are facing a dilemma. You have the choice of two ways of acting, but feel you must select one. The situation requires that you make a choice, so you do. If the choice brings the result you want, what will you do the next time the dilemma arises? Likely, you will choose the same option. And if you repeatedly make the same choice, after a time you will become ‘skilled’, selecting your preferred option without conscious thought.

Anything done often enough becomes a skill: something you can perform without thinking. You probably cannot recall the conscious effort involved in learning to tie shoelaces or read even simple words. Yet over time these become actions that can be performed while you direct your attention elsewhere. In the

² See their book *Building Cross-Cultural Competence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

same way, responding to a dilemma may initially take effort, but once a preference is established, it can seem like there is no choice involved. One of the propositions stands out as obviously more attractive than the other.

Both individuals and groups form unconscious preferences in this way. When presented with dilemmas, and repeatedly choosing one proposition ahead of the other, they establish their preference as a 'value': a choice that does not have to be justified because it has become "the way we do things around here."³ The culture of a community can be understood as a pattern of values that distinguishes it from other communities. In other words, a culture is the collection of different ways a community deals with dilemmas.

Dilemmas, then, help us to understand the process by which culture forms. If you have travelled, you have no doubt experienced the result of this process. When arriving in a new community, you will notice the differences, the things local people do that distinguish them from your home community. The difference you notice — whatever that difference might be — is the result of a dilemma. Both communities faced the same dilemma regarding how things ought to be done. The local community formed a preference for one proposition and your home community formed a preference for the other. And because these preferences were formed in the distant past, people in both communities take their own actions for granted. The actions are 'values' in that they are chosen as an unconscious preference. For people in each community, choosing the other proposition would feel uncomfortable, even wrong.

DANCE STEPS OF CULTURES

While a dilemma may seem like a very limited, 'either/or' choice, people — both individuals and as communities — find dynamic ways of responding to the two propositions. Imagine a continuum running between the two propositions of a dilemma. A person's response to the dilemma is like a dance they establish in moving back and forth between the propositions. Some people will dance back and forth along the whole length of the continuum while others will limit themselves to one end while watching others dance at the opposite end.

³ Marvin Bower used this phrase to define what is meant by the term 'culture'.

A number of principles and processes shape how people dance along dilemma continua.

Firstly, the two ends of the continuum are *complementary*. The reason we experience a choice as a dilemma is because both propositions are attractive. In choosing one proposition, we neglect the other and miss out on the benefits it may provide. The longer we neglect a value, the more we need it, even if it seems to be opposite to our established values.

Despite this complementarity, people struggle to move smoothly back and forth along the continuum. Difficulties can arise when we encounter people who, when faced with the same dilemma, have formed a preference for the proposition we unconsciously neglect. It might seem absurd to us that a person chooses to do the opposite of what to us is 'obviously' the best way. Further, we find it easy to see the problems they experience by neglecting what we value, but may not make the link between our own problems and the values we are neglecting. Seeing someone who prefers the alternative proposition of a dilemma can make us more determined that the proposition we value is best.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson coined the term *schismogenesis* to refer to the way complementary values can become split apart when people with opposite ways of acting encounter one another. In reaction to what they see each other doing, each party confines itself to its preferred end of the continuum. When the process of schismogenesis is in operation, people become determined to stick to what they value rather than responding to what the situation really demands.

The nature of values also gives rise to what learning expert Chris Argyris refers to as 'skilled incompetence'. This is where people have formed an unconscious preference for a way of acting that gets them into trouble. The power of our unconsciously held preferences — our values — is so strong we can recognise a problem created by our preference for one proposition on a continuum, espouse a shift to the proposition at the opposite end, yet continue acting in line with the proposition we say we want to move away from. For this reason, there is often a significant gap between the values people espouse and those that they live by.

Finally, people find ways to *reconcile* dilemmas; ways of acting that honour both the propositions. Reconciliation allows people to view the continuum as something other than an 'either/or' choice. They have the option of dancing along

its full length. When a dilemma is reconciled, people from communities with opposing values can even learn to dance together.

DANCING TOWARD PERFORMANCE

There is a growing concern that organisations are dysfunctional in the way they dance on the Learning — Performing continuum. The dance floor seems dramatically tilted toward Performing.

People are, of course, aware of the need for learning in their organisations. Many executives have espoused the need for their organisations to become ‘learning organisations’. Plenty of managers speak of the need for people to become tolerant of failure. Yet, reconciling the dilemma involves much more than espousing a shift to a value that has been neglected. Despite what executives are saying, organisations continue to over-emphasise performance to the neglect of learning. No doubt you have seen evidence of this in organisations you come into contact with.

One way the value of performing is evident is the way people unconsciously react to efforts that emphasise learning. In organisations around the world, people report that learning consistently comes a distant second behind performing. Often, learning is viewed as a luxury the organisation cannot afford when times get tough. Yet when times are good, people may be too busy for learning activities. Further, people are required to justify learning efforts with proof that these will generate increased levels of performance.

Another source of evidence can be derived from people’s emotional experience of organisational life. Researcher Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has established that our experience of life depends on the interplay of the challenges we face and our capacity to meet those challenges. When our capacity exceeds the level of challenge we may initially feel “in control”, but this gives way to boredom if the demands on us become too low. When we are faced with challenges that exceed our capacity we might initially feel aroused, but as the level of challenge rises, we become stressed and anxious. Eventually our capacity can become ‘burned out’.

In organisational systems everywhere, people report an epidemic of stress. People report feeling over-extended and exhausted, unable to meet the challenges

that confront them. In many places, being stressed has become so commonplace people treat it as unavoidable, even healthy. In reality, it is symptomatic of a dysfunctional dance where performing to new levels of challenge is consistently given priority over building capacity through learning. Organisations are not growing capacity at the same rate as they are raising the level of challenge.

ASSUMPTIONS

The tilted dance floor is also evident in the assumptions people make regarding learning, performing and work. These are deeply held beliefs that shape people's actions, even though they might find it hard to articulate just what the beliefs are. You might find that some of the assumptions expressed below reflect the way you think about work and shape the decisions you make.

“Learning isn't work”: When people talk about learning, the expressions they use often indicate they think of learning and work as separate. If you are taking time to reflect on an event or to discuss work issues with a colleague, you may find yourself thinking “I should stop this and get back to work.” Participants on a training course may think that when the course finishes, they will go “back to work”. In these instances, learning is thought of as something other than work; the term ‘work’ is set aside as one that only applies to performing. Ironically, people express this view even though they find learning exhausting. The mental effort involved in learning shows that it is not only work, it is *hard* work.

Of course, the consequence of thinking that learning is something separate from work is that learning becomes an activity that must always be justified. Like a guest in the house, it is not part of the family; there is no natural home for learning in the workplace. And, like a guest that members of the family appreciate yet find exhausting, people are happy when learning leaves and the workplace can return to normal.

“We learn in order to perform”: Western nations in particular have a strong cultural preference for analytical processes. One way this expresses itself is in the desire to differentiate between means and ends. It seems natural to think of events as a series of means leading to various ends. Yet, while it is happening, life is not

so easily divided up. We are constantly doing ‘means’ and experiencing the ‘ends’ of our own and others’ actions. On top of that, our understanding of systems thinking has highlighted the ‘circularity of causality’. Means lead to ends which cause us to pursue other means to new ends and so on. In any complex system, it is meaningless to say that one part of a cycle comes before another.

Despite this, many people are determined that learning is a means to improved performance. Further, they feel that performance is the only ‘end’ that can justify an investment in learning.

Timothy Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Work*, has pointed out that the result of learning is increased capacity. This may lead to improved performance or it may not. It may also produce a rich variety of other beneficial results. Learning may simply result in people experiencing work as more enjoyable and less stressful as their capacity comes into line with the challenges they face.

Of course, learning and performing are cyclical: performing highlights the need for learning just as learning can create the capacity for new levels of performance. So, it is also possible to work off the assumption that the purpose of performance is to stimulate learning: that performing is the ‘means’ and learning is the ‘end’.

Even though the assumption that learning must lead to performance is arbitrary, the impact of the assumption is powerful. Because increased capacity is intangible, measuring the direct result of learning can be difficult. Executives feel that they are being reasonable when they insist that there must be a tangible, measurable outcome to investments in learning, and this should be performance. Delays or complex links between learning and performing can give the impression that learning investments have achieved nothing. Consequently, in many organisations, the assumption acts to block investment in learning.

“We can’t afford to fail”: You may have heard people say that in their organisation, “failure isn’t an option”. Many people treat failure as unacceptable; as something that diminishes a person. No one wants to be known as a “failure”.

Yet failing is a necessary part of learning. Chris Argyris goes so far as to define learning as the detection and correction of error. The implication of this definition is that people who cannot detect errors cannot learn. Happily, detecting effort, mistakes and failure should not be too hard for anyone because it is characteristic of all human endeavours, despite the levels of performance we might aim to achieve.

Why do people react so badly to failure, when it is so common? As mentioned above, some people think that their work is so important they must not fail. For others, they feel they cannot afford to be seen to fail by customers, competitors or other stakeholders. Some find failure damaging to their ego, undermining their sense of identity. Whatever the reason, people expressing the need to avoid failure are clearly placing a high value on performing, and limiting their dance along the Performing — Learning continuum.

How do organisations deal with the mismatch between (1) the assumption that failure is unacceptable and (2) the fact that failure is a normal part of human activity which happens constantly? Sadly, in many organisations, the mismatch gives rise to a culture of blame. People try to disguise their own mistakes by either hiding them or blaming others. Some people limit their activity to areas they feel they are certain to succeed. Others distort measures to hide failure and give the impression that success is being achieved. But these efforts make error harder to detect, and the process of learning is squeezed out of organisational life.

The challenge for organisations is to encourage a healthy view of failure, allowing learning to flourish. Doing so can provide a context in which people can build capacity and thus generate the levels of performance to which they aspire.

“Management is all about measurement and results”: Managers are naturally interested in generating results through other people, and ensuring that the results they get are valuable to their organisation. How can this best be done?

For many, the answer lies in becoming skilled in the use of measures. Many assume that a professional manager does not require a deep understanding of the work of the organisation. Rather, they need to be able to use measures to specify for people what results are required, and then to reward people according to the level of their achievement. Measures are the levers through which performance is generated.

There is growing unease in many organisations about the use of measures as the basis of management. Many people are aware of how measures produce undesirable behaviour. For those assuming management is fundamentally about measurement, undesirable behaviour simply indicates that current measures need to be adjusted. “If only we can get the scorecard balanced, we will get the performance we need.”

Thomas Johnson has written extensively on the flaws in thinking we can manage by results. He contends that this assumption encourages managers to form mistaken views of their level of control, and to believe they can arbitrarily alter the way their organisations work. Managers might believe they can, simply by declaring it as a target and measuring whether it is achieved, reduce costs by 5%.

Johnson shares the view of systems thinkers like Russell Ackoff, that any system is perfectly designed to produce the results it is producing. Changing those results requires an understanding of the process by which they are produced and the careful re-design of that process. In other words, to get the performance we want, we must do more than 'command and control' performance from people. We need to learn how to create an organisational system where the desired results are the natural consequence of how people work. Learning in this way is inextricably linked to achieving the performance we want.

The assumption that management is about achieving performance without this learning is an example of schismogenesis: the splitting apart of what should be deeply interconnected. What is the consequence of this split? Managers may become better and better at achieving results that are easily expressed through measures and which can be achieved by people willing to comply with the 'command and control' approach to management.

"Learning will take care of itself": Learning is a naturally occurring process because humans are natural learners. We find ways to adapt to the situations we encounter. And over time we get better at the jobs we do. It might seem that this would lead to it finding a natural home in organisations. Unfortunately, the 'naturalness' of learning often has the opposite effect. Given the challenges that learning presents, managers can find that, by doing nothing, the situation seems to take care of itself.

People are self-organising. They do not require everything to be done for them. People seek help with the challenges that confront them, naturally form developmental relationships in which they can discuss issues that puzzle them, experiment with alternative ways of meeting challenges and ponder the results of their actions. In other words, people learn for themselves.

Of course, what people choose to learn may not be what an organisation needs or desires. In particular, people are social learners, naturally learning lessons that help them become part of a community they find attractive. At times, this can

mean learning what it takes to join a community within an organisation that is undermining the organisation's interests.

Further, people pay attention to what they value; people are ready to learn in those areas already supported by the organisation's culture. But, as we saw earlier, some values within an organisation may be over-emphasised and others neglected. Allowing learning to take care of itself will lead to more effort in the areas already receiving too much emphasis and further neglect of what is really needed.

This 'success to the successful' situation has contributed to the current interest in organisational learning. Without guidance, people naturally attend to *individual* learning: that which helps them get better at their particular jobs. While we might hope that people will also use their natural capacity for learning to find ways to collaborate with one another, it does not happen. Organisations have to make an effort to ensure that such learning happens.

"I'm paid to know the answers": A final assumption is that people in work are meant to know the answers. Often, people feel that the further they have progressed in an organisation or the more they are paid relative to others, the more responsibility they have to know what you are doing. The problem with this thinking is that the need to appear to be an expert prevents people from admitting what it is they do not know.

Politicised organisational environments particularly make it important for people to act as experts. It may not feel safe to be tentative about your views or open to the thinking of others. All of this creates an environment in which learning will not flourish.

The problem with 'knowing the answers' is that it assumes there is a right answer to know. In some fields, there are right answers. In particular, right answers are possible where people are dealing with simple, non-living systems. Many of the organisational challenges we face are not like this. They involve living systems: individuals and communities who care about what the answer is, having differing values they think should be represented in any answer, feel strongly about how they should be treated in the process of establishing an answer, and will play crucial roles in implementing whatever is decided upon.

A situation like this is complex in a variety of ways. In his book *Solving Tough Problems*, Adam Kahane talks of three types of complexity: dynamic, social and

generative. Dynamic complexity is characteristic of highly interconnected systems, where a change to one variable will affect other parts of the system that may be distant from the change in both distance and time. Social complexity exists when a situation involves a diverse group of people who need to work together in order to produce desired results. And generative complexity exists when the issues faced are new, where past solutions do not help because innovative solutions need to be generated.

Situations involving these layers of complexity are increasingly common. Consequently, issues where there is a right answer to be known are increasingly rare. Organisations face situations which demand that people learn how to handle issues about which they are not experts. People pretending to be experts do not help.

COMMITTING TO A BETTER DANCE

The assumptions described above are challenging because they are so commonplace. You will encounter them in organisations throughout the world. And wherever you do they will be affecting the way people engage in the Performing — Learning dance. Typically the dance will be distorted and people will be suffering as a result.

Why is it good to be aware of these assumptions as you start a book like this? They are not presented to dissuade you from reading or to stop you from experimenting with the ideas you encounter. The purpose is to help you understand the challenge that you and your organisation face.

Promoting learning might appear to be simple. It might seem ludicrous that anyone should object if you were to advocate for greater learning. And yet they do. In fact, many people find that the more they advocate learning, the more resistance they encounter. While this is perplexing, it is understandable when you consider that learning is a *value*. When people act in ways that encourage learning they are, perhaps unwittingly, advocating a shift in values: a culture change. Advocating learning is like suggesting to a group of people that they change the character or identity of their community. It involves addressing values and assumptions that help people define who they are.

Nevertheless, we urge you not to be daunted. Learning *is* needed in organisations. Our hope is that this book will help you take up the challenge.