

FOREWORD

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LESSONS OF LEARNING

No one doubts that learning matters. Scholars have shown that leaders who are learning-agile are more responsive to changing conditions and likely to accomplish their goals. Organizations that have learning capability, or the ability to generate and generalize ideas with impact, also are more competitive. While these headlines are catching and appealing, it is important to go beneath them and figure out not only what is happening but why. Learning about learning requires more rigorous thought and analysis. When we know why something happens, we are more likely to be able to replicate it and it becomes a pattern rather than an isolated event.

This excellent anthology by leading thinkers in organizations offers thoughtful insights on lessons about learning. They probe deeper into learning processes so that these processes can be understood, mapped, and replicated. The lessons from these essays will help managers manage change and leaders learn. A number of lessons jumped out at me as I read and re-read these essays:

- Learning matters and affects performance. Ramsey shows that the assumptions of learning are not separate from work but an intricate part of doing work and doing it better. Learning affects performance because all performance can be improved through learning. Singer and Edmondson show that learning, particularly in health care settings, has costs, but the benefits far outweigh the costs. When individuals, teams, and organizations embrace change and learn from failure, learning becomes an organizational capability that sustains high performance.

- Learning depends on social and technical software. Brown and Gray not only capture the history of learning but show that the future of learning will be embedded in a social network. Connectivity and choice flowing from new technologies will allow us to participate and learn with each other in new and remarkable ways.
- Learning is a social phenomenon that occurs among individuals.
- Learning requires knowledge management. Wheatley and Rogers show that in the information age, knowledge is pervasive. They articulate 7 principles that are foundational to knowledge management.
- Learning requires leadership commitment. Darling and Flanigan make the strong case that learning cannot be delegated or relegated to staff functions. They identify skills leaders must have to learn from action and to take action from learning. They also propose practices like After Action Review and Emergent Learning Maps that enable leaders to become learners.
- Learning must be woven into an organization's performance management system. Kleiner uses the cute phrase "doggie treats" to capture the analytics that ensure that learning becomes part of a performance map. He raises the challenges of measuring abstractions like learning and of making learning real to the organization.
- Learning affects strategy by making explicit controversial choices. Karnani does an outstanding job highlighting the importance of duality. Duality means that there are always choices, particularly around strategies an organization may take. With a learning mindset, executives are more willing to make these choices explicit. Doing so leads to debate, conversation, and more informed decisions. Without a learning mindset, strategy may end up as vacuous vision and value statements of the obvious.
- Learning means getting insights from outside the box. Blyde builds a strong case for the effective use of consultants who have the capacity to bring new ideas, or learning, into an organization. He lays out guidelines for finding and using consultants who can partner you in the learning journey. Consultants who foster learning engage in dialogue, participate in a learning journey, and bring in new ideas from outside.
- Learning pushes teams to do more than perform. Kayes shows that task teams focused on performance are not sufficient for overall team effectiveness. Teams

must also have the capacity to explore new alternatives. Team performance without learning will not be sufficient for long term success. He also shows what teams should do to foster learning.

- Learning requires new ways to measure outcomes. Ramsey, Tootell, and Mason show that learning may not fall neatly into pre-packaged outcome factors. To measure learning requires focusing on the means and examining behavioral gaps that learning can begin to close.
- Learning requires commitment to expertise. Jarvis shows that expertise is an important element in sustained learning. He also shows the process required to become an expert or someone who has unique knowledge and insight. These people are critical to the learning process.
- Learning can be undermined through bad management. Needham describes bullying in the workplace, where the manager as bully removes incentives and the desire to learn from employees as targets. Bullying may be explicit or implicit, but in either case they undermine and destroy a commitment to learning.
- Learning requires consistency more than perfectionism. Ramsey and Ramsey point out that those of us with perfectionist tendencies avoid learning in the quest to be perfect. We will need to be able to examine the World View that Shapes our efforts at work.
- Learning may apply at a societal level. Kumar shows how the principles of learning have helped shape the Singapore economy. Some of the remarkable successes of this country's economy may be explained by the learning processes that have been put in place.

So what do these lessons of learning mean?

First, learning affects performance at the individual, team, and organizational level. Individuals learn through curiosity and experimentation; teams learn by encouraging diversity of ideas and input; organizations learn by disciplines for continuous improvement and experimentation. When learning occurs, good things happen. Individuals have a more robust life and are more committed to work. Teams are more productive. And organizations more competitive.

Second, learning is a capability that can and should be embedded into an organization. An organization's capability refers to what it does well and what it

is known for. As organizations capture, practice, and master learning disciplines, they become known for their capacity to learn. Organizations with a learning reputation will have intangible value for investors resulting in higher stock prices and becoming a preferred place to work for future employees.

Third, learning means to generate and generalize ideas with impact. As we struggle to make sense of learning, we realize that it requires some form of generalizing new ideas. These ideas may come from experiences, experimentation, continuous improvement, benchmarking, or other means, but learning begins with generating a new idea. But, learning cannot be maintained until that idea crosses a boundary. If a person has an idea, but it stays with that person, learning has not occurred. The boundary may be time as one person's (or organization's) experiences transfer to the next person or organization; it may be space as ideas move from one geographic region to another, or it may be business as ideas cross functional or business boundaries. In any case, the ability to generalize an idea is as important as the ability to generate the idea. Most large organizations are more enamored with the generation than generalization of ideas, which limits the capacity to learn.

Finally, learning is everyone's responsibility. It is not enough to say that someone else should learn. Each person is accountable to oneself and through that personal accountability should take responsibility for learning. This requires making choices, seeing consequences, and taking corrective action so that each cycle of behavior is better than the last.

As these and other lessons of learning move from principles to practices, the disciplines of learning become less of a fad and event and more of a pattern and an ongoing experience. They are assimilated into how people and organizations work to produce improved products and services.

This volume is a good push along the learning journey.

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