

Develop and grow or die ?

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It has been estimated that our global knowledge will double in the next 12 years. More specifically, few occupational groups are experiencing the expansion of their knowledge base at the rate that characterises the HR community. This development is fuelled by the growing recognition of the importance of peoples' commitment and contribution to organisational performance, and conversely by the impact of work and organisational experiences on people's lives and the well being of the wider community. Universities, consulting firms and government agencies are accelerating their investigations and research spend in HR related areas. The good news is that these developments are long overdue and signify a shift in the focus of senior managers and leaders, policy makers, academics and consultants. The potential bad news is that complacent practitioners can become obsolescent if not obsolete faster than ever before. In turn, this can undermine their credibility and effectiveness at a time when we are presented with more opportunities to contribute than ever before.

What is to be done?

To meet this challenge we must address at least three issues. When do people learn most effectively? What learning opportunities can be created to ensure that practitioners keep current and have access to the best knowledge and skill development experiences? And what changes need to be made in our organisations to create a context that enables and reinforces learning and development as an integral part of work, rather than an add on that we do in our idle evenings, quiet weekends or an occasional development program?

Let's remind ourselves of when people learn best. Historically we've considered tertiary education as the primary foundation of occupational preparation. Yet increasingly the expansion of our knowledge is reducing the half life of our under and post graduate degrees. Research clearly indicates that learning and development can be accelerated at career transitions: from specialist to generalist, from operational to strategic, from HR generalist to line manager, from line manager to HR leader. Such transitions can create receptiveness and pliability as people are more aware that career changes demand higher level or qualitatively different skills and contributions. Similarly the challenges of taking on a greenfield site, managing a crisis, a turnaround or a merger or acquisition create demands and opportunities that facilitate development for the willing: those whom Carol Dweck would describe as characterised by a growth mindset. The implication is that by focusing development around

transitions and discontinuities we can provide both the imperative and the opportunity to grow. Timing can be everything.

Which brings us to the second consideration: how can interventions be created and resourced to provide cost and time effective learning? Historically we have over relied on formal programs despite evidence of their limited role and effectiveness. Notwithstanding this caveat, formal programs can represent a rite of passage which can enable people to redefine their occupational identity: I was an engineer when I was on this program; I am now becoming a manager and a leader. Formal programs, despite their expense and disruptive impact on work and personal life, provide opportunities to develop networks with new colleagues, and the chance for individuals to benchmark themselves and their potential against their peers. If designed and delivered appropriately they can enable participants to transfer knowledge, develop skills, enhance motivation and encourage participants to develop new perspectives across organisations, industries and cultures. Furthermore, they can be encouraged to reflect on their career aspirations and development in the neutral zone provided by offsite experiences. In sum, programs can offer unique inputs, create discontinuities and a stimulus for growth.

Recent developments in practice are at last recognising the potentially powerful contributions of role models, mentors, sponsors and coaches. These allow more appropriate customisation of learning to individual needs, particularly when matched to job and project assignments that create a demand for moving beyond our current knowledge and skill base and comfort zone.

Another realisation is that increasingly managers and leaders need to accept responsibility for their own development and continued relevance. Perhaps the most overlooked yet most effective learning processes are reflexivity and mindfulness. Too often we confuse busyness with progress at the expense of making time to reflect on our experiences and our impact. Such reflection can enable us to identify opportunities to be more effective and opportunities to use our experiences as a basis for learning as we work. In turn, mindfulness, being aware of our thoughts and emotions, being cognisant of how we interpret situations and information and respond can shed light on ways to grow on the job. These are both activities over which we have control and require no organisational resources other than time out.

An emergent and associated realisation is that for too long we have been focused on individual development; organisational psychologists have a lot to answer for on this account. Increasingly, organisational performance and sustainability are contingent upon collective behaviour manifested in, for example, team development and cultural alignment. In sum, practitioners will still always learn best by doing. For too long we have intellectualised the content and associated processes of developing our managers and leaders.

Finally, we must recognise the old adage: behaviour is a function of the individual and their situation. Without shaping our work context, our reward and recognition systems, the design of our work and the development of our teams, the benefits of any program undertaken by an individual can be quickly extinguished by a failure to reinforce the learning and skill development or contribution.

So let's end where we began. We are experiencing a rapid acceleration in the creation of our knowledge base and better insight in to the competency and capability demands of high performing organisations. A failure to recognise that learning and development are an integral part of what is work has in the past led us to assume that these activities are something that we do outside normal hours or something that we do episodically on a program. Such attitudes will be costly if not fatal as we cope with accelerating changes in our marketplace and in our body of knowledge. Thus we must challenge ourselves and our organisations to create a discontinuity in our thinking and practices that reflect the accelerating speed of knowledge creation.