CONTINUOUS LEARNING: ORGANISATIONS' SURVIVAL CORE

✧ BUILD ON THE PAST
  Monica Chetal Sharma

✧ NOT A SILOED EXERCISE
  Ed Muzio

✧ A MANDATE FOR LEARNING
  Pallavi Rao Chaturvedi

✧ A CREATIVE PURSUIT
  Dr Debi S Saini
Not a siloed exercise

When a firm’s focus changes from protection and persuasion to collaboration and education, learning becomes an integral part of employees’ daily work.

ED MUZIO IS AUTHOR OF ITERATE: RUN A FAST, FLEXIBLE, FOCUSED MANAGEMENT TEAM
We have discovered, after all these years of getting smarter, that we need to keep getting smarter—that if a group is to succeed at doing something complicated and important, it needs to not only do the thing well, but also get better as it goes; that if we are not individually and collectively scurrying to raise the bar on our own knowledge and capability, then, although we believe we are making headway, the movement we perceive is actually the scenery passing us by.

One part Holy Grail, one part competitive necessity, the learning organisation is described as a workplace culture that pursues its goals iteratively, constantly discovering what is new and adjusting to what is different every step of the way. Information becomes paramount in decision-making and the quest for accurate facts and realistic thinking reign supreme. When management adopts this mentality, actively seeking out and responding to new information, even when it is disruptive to existing plans—especially when it is disruptive to existing plans—learning goes from side project to main thrust, and ‘knowledge as power’ starts enabling the organisation to own its market.

But how, as a leader or manager, can you make this happen in your organisation? Whether you supervise a handful of people or oversee a worldwide enterprise, three straightforward tips will help you install a culture of learning in your team’s DNA—and into the DNA of any teams reporting to it.

**Exemplify, encourage, and enable (the fee to play)**

You have to begin with the obvious role model; the sharpening of your own blade, making learning a clear expectation, and allowing time and money for development.

Begin here because the platitudes really are true. You are a role model; if you do not take the time to develop yourself, no amount of hollow preaching about learning will prevent the dragging of your team down from the top. Your expectations matter; if you do not set clear expectations that your people will grow themselves, they probably will not—at least not in the way your future organisation demands. And learning takes time and money; if you burden your team’s every waking moment and every working dollar with the tactical and the immediate, they will have nothing left over with which to improve themselves.
True, yes, but the platitudes are not nearly enough. ‘Exemplify, encourage, enable’ is catchy, accurate, and perfect for delivery by a motivational speaker—in a turtleneck and blazer, of course—telling the virtues of companies who hand out development opportunities like beanbag chairs or free kombucha. But such simplicity limits development to something people do when they are not doing work.

Think about it. How much time and money can you honestly afford to take away from your organisation’s work for development? One percent? Two percent? Even a mind-blowing 10% would not be continuous learning—and would not be enough. Depending on your industry, your individual contributors have trained full-time, for days, weeks or years to reach basic competence. Frontline managers oversee 5 to 50 such highly developed workers; middle managers must keep pace with trends and technologies impacting whole sections of the organisation; and executives require a realistic picture of the whole, ever-evolving market space. A handful of hours stolen each year to read books or attend conferences? That is nothing more than triage—an attempt to slow the rate at which everyone is falling behind. Continuous learning requires your team to develop while they are working.

If exemplify, encourage, enable is the cost to get in the game, what do you do once you are there?

**Define the individual’s success as that of the team’s**

Clearly and directly instruct managers to collaborate on their supervisor’s output commitments, instead of just delivering their own. Imagine three peer managers whose boss is responsible for creating and selling a specific product or service. Maybe peer 1 owns R&D, peer 2 owns production or delivery, and peer 3 owns sales and marketing. Traditional leaders assign individual goals to each person and leave it at that. In iterative management, the boss makes it known that the group’s overall output—delivery and revenue of the product or service line—is what matters. If the development person has a surplus, and the production person has a shortage, it is not only the boss’s job to notice and rebalance resources—it is the team’s job to bring that recommendation. They all own the same output.

To make this happen, the boss simply needs to make and keep a simple promise to the team: “I will not consider any of you successful unless we are all successful.” This may fly in the face of what people are used to, but it quickly inspires strong interest from each of the peers in how their own work impacts others, and the whole. And all that interest leads to learning, as all the peers suddenly find themselves needing to know more about how they are helping or hurting that big picture.

**Mandate lateral development between peers**

Remind managers that they cannot succeed without learning in depth about their peers’ work. Since they are all working toward the same

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goals, they can only make good recommendations if they understand their teammates’ work in addition to their own. In our three-person management team, this would mean peer 1 learning more about production and sales and marketing, peer 2 learning more about R&D and sales and marketing, and peer 3 learning more about R&D and production. That is how they all become better collaborators and advisors, and that is part of the job.

This requires but a simple instruction from the boss: “Start having one-on-one meetings with each other, learn as much as possible about each others’ work, and do not ever stop.” Remind resistant managers this will make them a better advisor to the boss today and position them for advancement tomorrow. In a real learning organisation, the ‘bench’ for any given management position is not just a short list on HR’s hard drive—it is everyone who reports to that person, with everyone developing every day.

Let data, not politics, drive decisions

Ensure decisions are based on information, not opinion or influence. If peer 2 wants to request more resources from the team, that is possible anytime, but only with a clear, data-driven forecast of how the request will benefit the whole team’s output (not just his or her own). When the best way for team members to get what they need is through data rather than politics, the entire focus of the group shifts from influencing to informing and learning is a natural outcome.

Making this happen requires a commitment from the boss: “To focus team meetings on understanding and take his or her agreement off the table.” As long as peers are trying to convince the boss to come around to their way of thinking, then spin, hyperbole, and ‘messaging’ take the place of learning and real information. But when the boss says, “You teach me and I’ll learn,” the focus changes from selling to teaching, and the meeting shifts from political ceremony to learning forum.

All this may be challenging to do, but it is not terribly difficult to understand—when managers change their focus from protection to collaboration, and when groups change their process from persuasion to education, the act of learning morphs from an isolated activity to an integral part of the daily work. That is a learning organisation, and that is how the nimblest companies stay ahead of their competition—whether or not they are handing out beanbag chairs and kombucha.