

# A DEEP, LEARNING DESIRE

THE MAIN REASON FEW ORGANISATIONS, HOWEVER MIGHTY, HAVE A LIFESPAN IN EXCESS OF 50 YEARS IS THAT THEY FAIL TO ADEQUATELY RESPOND TO CHANGES IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT. LIKE THOSE CARTOON CHARACTERS, WHOSE LEGS KEEP RUNNING WHEN THERE IS NO LONGER GROUND BENEATH THEIR FEET.

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*The collective intelligence of a high-performing team is greater than that of any single team member. In the same way, enhancing the level of an organisation's learning increases the intelligence of the whole organisation*

An organisation needs to learn at least as fast as change in its environment, such as in; markets, supply chain, technologies, materials, economies and human expectations.

Clearly an organisation can only learn if it is populated with individuals who are themselves learning. However, before we conflate learning with development, we need to recognise that learning takes place at different levels. Thus we should see learning as not only as the acquisition of knowledge or technique, but also as structural change in the learner's way of being. To clarify what I am getting at, let's recall the levels of learning described by cyberneticist and social scientist, Gregory Bateson. "Learning merely adds to and updates information".

Learning 1 is associated with acquiring routines for dealing with familiar situations, without yet changing the learner. Thus we go to university to refine legacy knowledge from previous generations. Most formal learning is of this kind. Learning 2 changes the mental models by which we interpret experience. It also improves Learning 1 - we learn how to learn. Learning at this level requires us to observe accurately, to seek and respond rapidly to feedback. Learning 3, a further level of abstraction, questions the WHY of things. Disrupting who and what we are, it transforms both forms and structures.

Learning - and the much more difficult un-learning - are required for us to become more than we were. Learning 4 is a meta-level, which Bateson says is rarely present on Earth!

Most learning in organisations is focused on keeping abreast of technical push and marketing pull - in both cases Learning 1.

But no amount of Learning 1 will bring about Learning 2. Nor will more Learning 2 get us to Learning 3. Everyone in an organisation is capable of higher levels of learning but unless the executive team is engaged, the organisation as a whole will not thrive. Each executive team should ask itself three questions: How are we, in our daily practice, individually and collectively engaging in Learnings 1, 2 and 3? In what ways do we encourage and support each level of learning throughout our organisation? How does our organisational development relate to and inform our business strategy?

International consultant, Charlie Krone talked of three kinds of work. He used the acronym OLS to distinguish Operational, Leadership, and Strategic work. They are often conflated or confused by the misconception that Operations is for operators, Strategy for the executive and Leadership mediates between them. Such a view is demeaning and destructive, because everybody in an organisation performs all three. Even the lowliest employee is strategic in their area of responsibility, as in the story of the NASA cleaner who, when asked his role, said he was helping put men on the moon. Leadership can be contributed in every interaction between people, so long as hierarchy does not intervene. And even the chief executive has operational work to do. Unfortunately, because we rarely make these distinctions, we deprive the organisation of much of the talent and energy that is available and overburden those who try to fill the gaps.

The corollary to the OLS triad is SCI; Skill, Capacity and Intent. Everyone has Skill

and Knowledge to act (What), Capacity for initiative (How) and Intent to succeed (Why). If we insist on top down control we deny most of our employees the exercise of their capacity and intent. Thus our organisation is deprived of most of its human resource. If, on the other hand, we engage in higher level learning and develop that triad within each person, we will transform their collective effort through the way they organise.

Teams are microcosms of organisations and team development is more easily grasped than organisational development. Team-working gives us a way of engaging people in lifting their game and transforming performance by stimulating higher-order learning. It develops how people do what they do. It transforms relationships. Of course, we are talking about real high-performing teams, not just any bunch of people with the word team in their title. The collective intelligence of a high-performing team is greater than that of any team member. In the same way, enhancing the level of an organisation's learning increases the intelligence of the whole organisation.



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