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TOO LOW?

### Leadership Through Learning Part 4E: Four Types of Learning — Learning About Things and Learning To Do Things

by Tom Boydell, Marilyn  
 Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“Culture has a powerful influence on you and the way you learn. Equally importantly, what and how you learn can, and does, affect your cultural context. At the same time, your organization is itself part of a context made up of a whole number of things such as economic climate, market sector, political forces, social trends, ecological and environmental changes, global movements, and technological developments.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)

Recall from the previous newsletters that there are three cultural stances or levels that describe ways in which people learn. Although the three stances or levels of learning are helpful, they do not capture the

complexity inherent in corporate cultures. What is needed is another perspective to help broaden and deepen our understanding of each level of learning. Each level of learning can be applied to four main sets of learning outcomes. Mike Pedler and Kath Aspinwall, authors and researchers in organizational learning, call these different outcomes the *four types of learning*:

- Learning about things
- Learning to do things
- Learning to become yourself
- Learning to achieve things with others

In this newsletter, the first two types of learning will be described; in the next two newsletters, the last two types of learning will be described. Although each of these four types of learning occurs at each of the three stances or levels of learning, each type of learning manifests itself differently, depending at which stance or level of learning it is found operating. For example, *learning about things* occurs at Level 1 (con~forming stance), Level 2 (com~peting stance), and Level 3 (co~operating stance). But it manifests itself differently at each level.

**Learning about things** is about knowing.

- **At Level 1 (con~forming stance): Implementing,** *learning about things* covers a broad spectrum of knowledge and understanding. It includes memorizing, and being aware of, or understanding and identifying with, basic information, data, facts, existing

explanations, and standard procedures, as stated by others to be *correct*. Learning about things at Level 1 relates to what Reg Revans, the father of action learning, refers to as *programmed knowledge*. This is a form of expert knowledge. Another way to describe programmed knowledge is that it is what is already known. Programmed knowledge is useful for tackling *puzzles*, where there is a relatively easy solution already in existence, and/or the solution is easily known in some way (e.g., known by an expert, or found in a database or a procedure manual).

- **At Level 2 (com~peting stance): Improving,** *learning about things* is the ability to think for yourself, to create new ideas, to think things through, to collect and analyze data, and to draw conclusions. Revans calls learning about things at level 2 *questioning insight* — a form of questioning that is used to solve problems that seem to have no pre-existing solutions. Questioning insight is genuinely curious, open, provocative, rich, charged, connected, and practical in focus. The outcome of questioning insight is an enhanced capacity to perceive a situation systemically, and from viewpoints that are transformative in nature.
- **At Level 3 (co~operating stance): Integrating,** *learning about things* is the ability to understand whole fields of ideas and the way these are interrelated. You are able to see a holistic overview of the way different sets of information or ideas or concepts

are connected. Perhaps even more important is that you are able to see the interrelationships and interdependence of different sets of people — individuals, groups, communities, societies — and their hopes, fears, aspirations, and lives. For example, you are able to use the ability to see how the various functions and departments of your organization are part of a larger whole, and how they are all interdependent. In turn, you see your organization as being part of an even larger whole — a community of practice made up of suppliers, customers, neighbours, and the environment, each of which have their own interdependent aspirations and hopes for the future.

**Learning to do things** is, broadly speaking, about practice.

- **At Level 1 (con~forming stance): Implementing:** *learning to do things* focuses on skills and techniques. In the realm of Revans' puzzles, this is about dealing with relatively standard, routine *programmed* tasks, by selecting and applying the appropriate technique. This often means using standard processes that are likely to be written down in various procedure manuals. For example, if an organization wants to gain the ISO 9000 quality assurance standard, it needs to have such manuals prepared and kept up-to-date.
- **At Level 2 (com~peting stance): Improving:** *learning to do things* is the ability to make improvements by dealing with problems that have no pre-existing correct solution. Faced with a variety of techniques, you have to know which ones are appropriate for your particular

situation, and to what extent they need modifying to suit your own unique circumstances. Level 2 requires initiative, and the courage to step into the unknown and to take risks when the outcomes are uncertain. This is very different from simply following standard procedures. Learning to do things at this level involves skills such as prioritizing, collecting and processing information, evaluating alternatives, choosing solutions, and allocating responsibility for implementation. For example, the ISO 9001:2000 that replaced the original ISO 9000 calls for continuous improvements of this nature.

- **At Level 3 (co~operating stance): Integrating:** *learning to do things* is the ability to weave together whole sets of techniques, so that they become interconnected and coordinated, thus creating new processes, products, and services. Doing this requires competencies such as organizing and coordinating. Above all, Level 3 requires mental resilience — the ability to cope with uncertainty, to balance the requirements of competing alternatives, and to see things in terms of *both this and that*, rather than the relatively simple demands of *either this or that*. For example, a manager operating from Level 3 *learning to do things* has to be able to learn to:
  - *Both* step forward *and* hold himself or herself in the background
  - *Both* be dynamic *and* be reflective
  - *Both* be confident *and* be humble
  - *Both* be able to keep a close relationship with staff *and* keep a suitable distance

When people or organizations focus on *learning about things* and *learning to do things*, they focus on tasks,

goals, outcomes, deliverables, and, most importantly, producing specified results. This is an important aspect of an organizational culture because these two types of learning make sure that things get done, that they are done within defined parameters (i.e., quality), and that they are done on time. The strength in focusing on these two types of learning is that they produce results. The weakness in focusing on only these two types of learning is that the results achieved may be too narrow and rigid for the conditions of complexity and change. This is why there are two more types of learning to be considered that will be described in the next two newsletters: *learning to become yourself* and *learning to achieve things with others*.

“As the organization and its cultural system form *your* context, you and your learning will in turn be affected by the way the organization responds to and creates *its* context. Your individual learning activities form part of the context of your organization's corporate culture, *and* you can change that corporate culture by the way you learn.”

— Tom Boydell, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, (2005)



**Corporate Culture and Organizational Change: Strategic Practice Guide**, see [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca) for more information

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