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Learning Organizations Part 9: Team Learning Through Action

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“People learn best when they tackle real problems together in small teams of peers, none of whom is the expert. They take action and think about results, using others in the group to see the situation in new ways.”

— Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick, *Sculpting the Learning Organization* (1993)

Whenever I ask people what the word *learning* means to them, I get many responses: school, discipline, restrictive, rules, structure, panic, stress, competition, boring, and testing. These responses tell me that people are equating learning with a myriad of experiences that may have little to do with what learning actually is. The most troubling aspect of these responses is that so many experiences have been negative and unfulfilling. As a

result, people may harbour negative mental models towards the word, and ultimately the concept of, learning.

Why is learning so important for organizations? The individuals, teams, and organizations that are willing to learn are those that are able to respond effectively to the customer's needs. Today, information may be power, but the ability to learn effectively is the competitive advantage. According to Peter Senge, **knowledge** is the capacity for effective action, and **learning** is enhancing our capacity for effective action. Therefore, the key to being successful in the 21st Century is *learning*.

Senge identifies four cornerstones of learning:

1. The learner learns what the learner wants to learn.
2. We learn through what we do.
3. Learning moves through action and reflection.

4. Human beings are designed to learn.

These four cornerstones speak to the power of team learning through action. As an example, I will use the events of Apollo 13, as portrayed in the movie *Apollo 13*. Apollo 13 was the second mission to put a man on the moon. There was an explosion in the command module that led to a series of events that endangered the lives of the three astronauts. The movie focuses on what the astronauts and Mission Control did after the explosion to solve the problem of getting home safely.

Watkins and Marsick state that “work must be meaningful to be motivating” (p. 120). When work is meaningful, the employee knows how his or her work contributes to the work of both the team and the organization. There is a sense of importance, and a desire to learn what is necessary, so that the employee can *enhance his or her capacity for effective action*. In *Apollo 13*, each person, both at Mission Control and on the disabled

ship in space, played a vital role in solving the emerging problems.

Senge's second and third cornerstones speak to our need for experiential learning. A team continually solves real-life problems and experiences real-time solutions. According to Watkins and Marsick, "People solve real problems in real contexts. Problems must be meaningful" (p. 125). Without question, in *Apollo 13*, the problems were real problems occurring in real time. It was clear that problem solving did not occur in a vacuum. People worked together to develop innovative and creative solutions to problems. For example, one astronaut at Mission Control used a simulator to test a variety of scenarios to determine the best re-entry flight plan for the disabled ship. The astronaut could not have done this without:

- Actually being able to test the scenarios to determine whether or not they would work
- Working with others who helped him to determine whether or not his assumptions were valid and accurate
- Being able to reflect on his actions to determine which action was leading towards the solution and why, and which action was taking him further away from the solution, and why
- Having a desire to bring his fellow astronauts home safely

Senge's fourth cornerstone is probably the most important, because it is the underlying premise for all learning. After the explosion, everything about the Apollo 13 mission seemed to be impossible to solve. Every time one problem was solved, another emerged that seemed even more extreme and unsolvable. Most of the problems that occurred had not been anticipated; people were experiencing what *no one had experienced before*. The fourth cornerstone of learning is exemplified in a flight director who believed in the ability of his people to rise to this challenge, and to learn what they needed to learn in order to solve the problems.

In *Apollo 13*, the three astronauts had to take refuge in the lunar landing module. This caused enormous problems because the lunar module was not designed to house three men over an extended period of time. One problem was that the CO₂ filtering canisters in the lunar module, which filtered the toxic CO₂ out of the air, became saturated, causing the CO₂ levels to rise to toxic levels. To solve this problem, the astronauts needed to be able to transfer the CO₂ filtering canisters in the command module to the lunar module. Because the canisters were different shapes and sizes, this process was like fitting a square peg into a round hole. Because "human beings are designed to learn," the team at Mission Control needed to learn a way to build an adapter, working with only what the astronauts had in their disabled ship. The adapter that was needed to solve the problem had to be built in the spacecraft, not at Mission Control. Real people solved this real problem by using team learning through action.

"People learn from their experience as they work, taking time to reflect together about new insights into the problem and its solution, their work together as a group, and their own learning patterns."

— Karen E. Watkins and Victoria J. Marsick, **Sculpting the Learning Organization** (1993)

Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to read the book **Sculpting the Learning Organization**, especially pages 118-143, and then to go to the movie *Apollo 13*. This will give you a clear perspective on what team learning through action actually looks like.

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