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Building Learning Organizations Part 4: Managing Change Means Managing Learning

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“... current circumstances tell us that learning is no longer a choice but a necessity and that the most urgent priority is learning how to learn — and learning faster. If we are to do this, we must speak about several things that are not often discussed among leaders and managers, particularly the role of anxiety in learning and the role of groups and communities in helping us cope with anxiety, and, thus, facilitating learning.”

— Edgar Schein, *How Can Organizations Learn Faster? The Challenge of Entering the Green Room*, *Sloan Management Review* (Winter 1993)

Understanding the role of learning in organizations means understanding how people deal with change. Edgar Schein, a professor of management

at the MIT Sloan School of Management, uses the *green room* as a metaphor for how change creates anxiety. “If you put a dog in a green room and give it electric shocks, it learns to steer clear of that room. But what if the green room is organizational change, and people are so afraid of past experiences with it that they won’t try anything new?” Like the dog, people in organizations learn to steer clear of change because their past experience with change has been disturbing, frustrating, and stressful. The fact is that, once we have learned to steer clear of change, our *anxiety* towards change is enough to keep us from trying anything new.

Schein calls this anxiety towards trying anything new *Anxiety 1*. “Anxiety 1 is the feeling associated with an inability or unwillingness to learn something new because it appears too difficult or disruptive.” Recall the *Signing of the Name Activity* (*InfoMine*, Vol. 3, No. 1). Learning something new produces

thoughts and feelings of discomfort, unnaturalness, frustration, childishness, slowness, and incompetence. These are the same thoughts and feelings that occur when people are asked to undergo organizational change, because in any form of change, people are being asked to learn something new. When was the last time that your organization acknowledged and supported these thoughts and feelings? Most organizations not only expect people to change, but also expect people to do it as if they already know how to change, and to do it quickly. As a result, there is neither time nor support given for the learning process that change requires, no matter how small or large the change.

That is why most change efforts fail to produce what is intended, and often leave the organization in a worse position than before the change. The change effort has created a *green room* effect by reinforcing Anxiety 1. Now, everyone is shocked and scared, which leads to an unwillingness or

inability to learn what is necessary to change.

Edgar Schein, Chris Argyris, and Peter Senge, among others, believe that any change effort **must** include a component that effectively addresses this anxiety. Schein states that we must replace Anxiety 1 with another anxiety, one that he calls *Anxiety 2*. “Anxiety 2 is the fear, shame, and guilt associated with **not** learning anything new.” However, in order to create Anxiety 2, people must be given the time and support in a **safe** environment in which to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes. This requires the organization, especially senior management, to build infrastructures that support learning throughout the organization. There is only one problem: most senior management does not understand learning and what learning requires in order for it to be effective (**InfoMine**, Vol. 3, No. 2). If senior management does not understand learning, it cannot begin to build infrastructures that support learning. Therefore, the change effort is doomed from the start, and will produce more Anxiety 1 than existed before the change was introduced.

Schein states that the **first** place that an organizational change effort must begin is at the level of senior and middle management. “Leaders must learn something new.” This means that the leaders in an organization must understand learning from a personal perspective. As a facilitator of learning in the workplace, I take Schein’s statement seriously. I cannot facilitate an organization or another person’s learning unless I understand, at a personal level, what I am asking them to do.

Currently, I am learning to play the piano. I have always wanted to play the piano, so this gives me an opportunity to use this learning experience to study and understand what a large change requires. When I am learning to play the piano, I enter the realm of *not knowing*. Playing the piano requires me to think and do things differently than I have ever done before. Practicing on the piano helps me to understand how incompetence feels. It is during these times that Anxiety 1 rears its head. Because I have an excellent piano teacher, who provides me with a *safe* practice field, I can explore my Anxiety 1 and discover effective ways to address it. Over the last year, I have noticed my Anxiety 1 being replaced with Anxiety 2, “the fear, shame, or guilt associated with **not** learning anything new” (Schein, 1993). With each day, I feel the need (Anxiety 2) to learn to play the piano becoming more compelling than the need to give in to my Anxiety 1. In order to come to this understanding, it has taken me three years of consciously analyzing my thoughts and behaviours in learning to play the piano. It is this learning that gives me a heightened capacity to understand organizational change and to facilitate the learning in the workplace that such change requires.

Tips for Overcoming Anxiety 1

According to Schein, “If you are a leader and want to speed up the learning process in your organization, start with an analysis of yourself and your own learning needs. Then consider what anxieties, defenses, and cultural assumptions stand in your way.” To do this:

1. Learn something new that requires you to undergo a large change in how you think and do things.

2. Observe your own thoughts and behaviours towards change, and record your observations in a journal.
3. Observe what helps and what hinders your ability to learn, and analyze these for evidence of Anxiety 1.
4. Identify your strengths and weaknesses in your learning style preferences, and observe when Anxiety 1 appears during your use of these different learning styles.
5. Identify ways to replace Anxiety 1 with Anxiety 2, and observe when this actually occurs.
6. Form a learning circle of colleagues who are interested in learning, and use this learning circle to share your discoveries about learning and change.

“Only when you have done all of this will you know whether your visions and incentives will be enough to enable the members of your organization to enter the green room and to do so faster.”

— Edgar Schein, *How Can Organizations Learn Faster? The Challenge of Entering the Green Room*, *Sloan Management Review* (Winter 1993)

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