

LEARNING OR PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT: Which Is It?

To create a high-performance organization, learning leaders must focus on behavioral and interpersonal strategies. Although the specifics vary from company to company, this always is accomplished one individual at a time.

By Mark Brenner

Remember that trite zinger, “If you’re so smart, why aren’t you rich?” (Of course, it always was spoken to other folks — never to us!) However, if that sarcastic barb instead is aimed at the leaders of struggling companies, it takes on surprisingly profound accuracy. Indeed, why isn’t the company doing well? It’s a fair question, and it gets at the very heart of why many companies are frustrated in their attempts to build high-performing organizations.

Much of the source of this frustrated effort is the misplaced and widely held belief that the way to advance an organization’s (or an individual’s) performance is by making it smarter. To that end, companies around the world have been frantically transforming themselves into quasi-universities, converting office space into classrooms, forcing senior executives into teacher’s robes, crafting cutting-edge curricula, all with the misplaced hope that with enough junior-executive and managerial butts in enough high-concept seminars for enough hours, company X’s high potentials will finally blossom into full-fledged leaders.

But here’s the rub: Learning about leadership and teamwork isn’t the same as being able to demonstrate those skills effectively. Need proof? Ask a person who’s read any one of the thousands of books on the subject whether the absorption of informational content resulted in that miraculous transformation. Further complicating matters is the confusion many companies have regarding what their fundamental objectives are and how to achieve them. If, for example, a company’s goal is to create a learning-oriented culture — which many organizations apparently desire — the “corporate university” model is a logical choice. Classrooms are very good at churning out people with minds full of information. Unfortunately, there’s no demonstrable connection between intellectual power and business success.

On the other hand, if a corporation desires a performance-centric culture replete with measurable results, putting intelligent people into classrooms to make them smarter won’t do the trick. Let’s face it: Lack of IQ has never been a problem in most U.S. companies. American business is smart. What’s required, instead, is a change in work-related behavioral and performance strategies at the individual and group levels. Unfortunately, the model for achieving that goal does not originate from teaching and learning. Rather, the model needs to be reverse-engineered to deliver what it promises — namely, enhanced performance and execution.

Defining the Value of the Learning Culture

There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong with training or teaching in an organization. They are indispensable tools, particularly when it comes to keeping people current on the technical side of their work and advancing specific, job-related skill levels. But for increasing individual and organizational performance, an entirely different set of tools is necessary. Rather, focus needs to be brought to bear on one’s emotional intelligence (EQ), not the person’s (or group’s) IQ.



Instead of being classroom-based and theoretical, this model operates in the workplace where people actually live, breath and conduct the day-to-day business of the enterprise — a realm dominated by the rhythms of human emotions and interpersonal dynamics.

A meaningful shift in management style and culture that doesn't address these profoundly human realities has scant chance for success. Just consider what's required of a company's leaders in order to successfully implement a significant organizational transformation. First and foremost, they have to be versatile and talented in the art of discovering, advising, mentoring, coaching, nurturing and deploying talent. So the question is: What is the driving force behind those essential leadership abilities? Almost exclusively, they are a product of an individual's EQ-related qualities, not intellectual horsepower. Here are some of the classic EQ characteristics executives need to have:

- Accurate self-awareness.
- Self-confidence.
- A steward-like relationship with colleagues and stakeholders.
- Trustworthiness.
- Transparency and authenticity (perceived by others as an “open book”).
- Mastery of self (composure, self-control and/or grace under pressure).
- Flexibility and a welcoming attitude regarding change.
- Passionate interest in learning and achievement.
- Consistently optimistic and resilient.
- Organizationally astute.
- Empathy as a teacher/mentor.
- Inspiring as a role model.

Good luck trying to “teach” these EQ characteristics, skills and behaviors in a series of “leadership and teamwork” seminars. It can't be done. However, they can be nurtured, encouraged and developed in high- potential individuals. In fact, that's a fundamental requirement for any company that seeks to build a performance-centric culture. The entire process pivots on an organization's ability to move its people — all of them — into an environment in which meaningful personal and team contributions to the enterprise are esteemed, supported and rewarded.

Becoming a High-Performing Organization

Common sense dictates that since an organization's people drive its performance, the process of enhancing that performance must be focused entirely on people, by refining their behavior in a strategic way. Fairly obvious, right? But it's at this point that many companies begin to lose the way. They mistakenly believe the key to leveraging the behavioral routines of their people is through education-centered models. They either forget or never learned this well-established fact: Adults simply do not take in new information quickly or easily. Additionally, and even more importantly, the acquisition of knowledge rarely leads to lasting behavioral changes.

Again, when it comes to successfully creating a high-performance organization, the emphasis has to be on changing behavioral and interpersonal strategies, not teaching and learning. It's an individual process that varies from organization to organization. Each company needs to find its own way to catalyze the collective passion, enthusiasm and potential of its people and then harness it to serve the enterprise's larger strategic goals. But in the end, this is accomplished one person at a time.



Adult Behavior-Change Theory

While the process of enhancing an individual's EQ repertoire is partially informed by adult learning theory, its main focus is on refining behavioral and performance strategies, rather than learning. Given that important distinction, it is better referred to as "adult behavior change theory." In short, the theory puts forth that success is optimized when:

1. The WIIFM ("What's In It For Me?") is crystal clear to each individual.
2. The change agenda feels self-initiated rather than imposed by the organization ("This is what I want for myself, and this is where I want to go.").
3. The development experience is perceived as being self-directed ("This is my action plan, and these are the tactics that will move me from here to there.").
4. Adequate time is allowed for real-world practice and experimentation on the job (e.g., action learning).
5. Individuals are allowed to cope with the various "get out of the comfort zone" challenges in their own unique fashion.
6. An individual's gap profile is made crystal clear — the "gap" being the distance between how one is performing today versus one's ideal performance level at some specific future time.

The Gap Profile: Essential to Changing Behavior

The purpose behind the development and use of a gap profile — a process notably absent in the classic adult learning model — is to create a committed, relevant and visceral sense of urgency for change on the part of the individual and an entire organization. The vast majority of enterprise-wide management development initiatives lack this essential and compelling element. Constructing a gap profile lends a palpable shape, depth and texture to the burning platform that ultimately serves to shift an organization and its individuals out of their comfort zones.

A wide assortment of assessment tools and methodologies is available for identifying and describing organization-wide gaps and using these provocative findings to move an organization and its people dramatically beyond the gap and toward the next level of performance.

Of necessity, the assessment phase of this process must unfold systematically. However, the bulk of an organization's transformational heavy lifting takes place in the realm of everyday corporate life, where people conduct the day-to-day business of the enterprise. It's a sometimes nonrational, fluid milieu of human relationships, loyalties, motivations and emotions, where team and individual dynamics interact and continually evolve.

Experience shows repeatedly that the only place where authentic human development can occur is where people actually live (that is, on the job). And make no mistake, it's a daunting task, one that can make rocket science seem like a Sunday stroll.

Cascading Strategy Into People Development

If an organization can be thought of as having a soul, now is the time to search it. Words and constructs such as success, results, growth and performance should be characterized and examined in light of where the organization is today and where it wants to go.



In that spirit, here is a general sequence of steps that form the critical moving parts required by an organization as it builds a performance-centric culture, one where productivity and talent can flourish. Each organization should:

1. Conduct an eyes-wide-open exercise of self-study. Guiding the process are questions such as: What do the above terms mean to our institution? To our organizational family? What will they look like on the ground? The purpose of this difficult, creative and thoughtful work is to lead an organization to a relatively straightforward portrayal of its vision for its stakeholders.

2. Identify and describe the organization's gap profile. The goal here is to reveal the true mission, vision and core values of the enterprise and where it falls short of them. Unless the endeavor resonates with depth and authenticity and challenges people with a breathtaking goal, it will not create a burning platform sufficiently capable of grabbing and holding the attention of the senior management team.

3. Map out a strategy. This is accomplished by harnessing the intense energy that comes from standing on a burning platform and relying on the navigational instruments created by the first two phases' deeply challenging work. The mission, vision, core values and strategy documents produced now become the equivalent of compass and gyroscope for management as it navigates the uncharted waters ahead, a journey that will test its imagination, courage and leadership.

4. Develop a leadership-competency model and improve talent development resources. The above core strategic processes and benchmarks should lead the organization to develop a leadership-competency model, an exceptionally useful directional tool for helping leaders maintain a course toward true north. Management also should utilize the same core strategic processes to refine and add to its array of talent development resources. By using these steps, a strategically informed, EQ-savvy leadership team will be able to create the levels of trust, communication, inspiration and meaning that will support and fuel an organization's transformation and continued growth, individual by individual.

Leader-Like Behavior

Although true change can't be taught in a classroom or mechanistically imposed from the top down, it has to begin at the top. To accomplish this, an organization's leaders need to behave in ways appropriate to their roles at all times. The fact is that employees view their executives, managers and supervisors as role models and measure their leaders' behavior against an intrinsic, personal set of expectations. If leaders of the enterprise don't individually and collectively embody their corporate strategy with integrity, transparency and passion, employees almost certainly will become disillusioned and cynical, a death knell for any change initiative.

The only realistic way for an organization's leaders to conduct themselves with such consistency is by regularly consulting the company's set of orienting devices (the compass, gyroscope and maps discussed earlier). It's at this point that an organization's leaders can begin strategically cultivating an enterprise-wide performance culture seeded with change agents, individuals who flourish in the dynamic environment of what is an unfolding, self-supporting and continually evolving social experiment.

This is how ordinary companies transform themselves into extraordinary ones. They're built by large numbers of ordinary people who are genuinely empowered and encouraged to discover their respective muses, find their true voices and function at their highest potential levels — individually and collectively.

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