

89 { Training as an organisational change intervention: the case for grounded experiential learning

“OK Mr Jones, I think that’s enough ‘almost real life’ simulation for one day...”



Continuous change and learning is a mantra we hear more frequently in an increasingly global, competitive world. Organisations are becoming more adept at building new capabilities and re-designing business processes. Training, whether linked to the deployment of the new capabilities or as part of an organisational change management initiative, is now commonplace. Yet, **the opportunity offered by training, not simply to impart knowledge and develop skills but to reshape people’s ways of thinking and working, is rarely exploited.** In this Lucid Thought we discuss how a grounded experiential learning intervention can be used as a key element of a wider process of transforming working practices, mindsets and culture.

As organisations embark upon planned change, training is usually conceived as providing key competencies and incremental knowledge. It enables people to follow new processes and to use new systems, and complements announcements and information

about the change. Resource constrained organisations are increasingly embracing on-line and eLearning technologies that straddle learning and communication. These technologies deliver pre-packaged content conveniently and cost effectively to a geographically distributed workforce, and have in-built functions to track usage and to test understanding. On-line or telephone-based support is usually available for individuals to ask questions. Much of the education, socialisation or indoctrination individuals receive, though, is from work colleagues. Typically, the change is viewed from the perspective of existing routines and attitudes. Ideas, practices and techniques are often reconstructed to fit the cultural norms, or dismissed as irrelevant or inapplicable. We observe that vital change often does not occur, despite the effort and expense to develop new skills and capabilities.

Conventional, broadcast-oriented face-to-face training costs more, but is little better at helping individuals put knowledge into practice. They typically promote passive reception, with little effort demanded of attendees to see for themselves the relevance, application and practicality of concepts presented. Predetermined solutions eliminate the need to analyse, to evaluate options and to reach personal conclusions. Critique and challenge are deflected by referring to the chosen strategy and approach. Learning is superficial: understanding and appreciation are replaced by acceptance and awareness.

Where members of the organisation need to enact new organisational strategies, not (just) refine existing operating models, more fundamental and contextual learning is required. The grounded, experiential learning (GEL) approach, set within a broader organisational change process, better addresses the key challenges:

The focus is on individuals’ learning rather than teaching prescribed knowledge;

The learning is grounded or embedded within the organisational reality of the individuals, and co-facilitated by external professionals and experienced internal managers;

The approach emphasises action and experience over passive absorption – helping individuals to do something better, not (just) know something more.

At the heart of GEL are business simulations - the enactment of critical aspects of the work – undertaken by members of the organisation and observed by their peers. The intense, ‘almost real-life’ simulations are powerful ways of initiated a shift in mindset and attitudes. GEL face-to-face interventions capture much of the intimacy and immediate relevance of ‘on the job’ training and mentoring, while providing a vehicle for introducing new ideas and prompting deeper reflection. Otherwise discordant ideas, practices and techniques are set within the work context and their applicability demonstrated. Through experience, abstract concepts and instructions become more tangible. Moreover, senior managers can manifest their support of, and participate in, the learning process. They are, or become, acutely aware of practical challenges, and are actively engaged in finding and sharing contextually sensitive responses.

We are currently facilitating GEL ‘training’ for a large multi-national that is re-positioning itself in its market and changing one of its core offerings. While labelled as ‘training’, our work is having a profound effect on how individuals perceive the organisational changes and what is expected of them. **Our work stirs emotions, stimulates reflection and causes individuals to question taken-for-granted assumptions. We expose and discuss counter-productive tendencies and dysfunctional behaviours in relation to the organisation’s new strategy.** We surface resistance to and concerns about the new strategy. Where appropriate, we share our insights on the intentions and strategic logic underpinning the changes. We seek to build the

awareness, understanding and judgement necessary to put the strategy into action.

Few organisations, though, appreciate the power and importance of such interventions. The apparent similarity of current and future ways of working and the intuitive simplicity of new technology, at least in the eyes of senior managers, obscures the coordinated effort required to change. For senior managers, the case for change is clear and its implementation seems straightforward. Others in the organisation struggle to grasp the nuances and implications of the strategy and to alter ingrained behaviours. Unsurprisingly, most strategic change is only partially successful.

Our view is that work, in and between, organisations is essentially social in nature, and that changing the ways of working needs to tap into these lived, social processes. Experiences that enable people to examine intensely and to ‘live-out’ the new ways of working are vital interventions. This view is not widely shared, despite the repeated compromises and shortcomings experienced by organisations in bringing about desired change. **Our concern is that the tolerable under-performance of the past becomes the outright failure of the future.**

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