

LEARNING 2: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?



Research shows that periods of intense learning must be punctuated by play and reflection to yield truly transformational results.

The “Suppleness Quotient” – individual and organizational resiliency and flexibility in the face of change – is fostered by “learning mode,” as we discussed in last month’s column. It’s a subject worth exploring further because it’s key to unleashing the powerful force that too often seems to elude organizations: creativity.

As we’ve seen, at the core of a learning culture is sustained curiosity—not judging data, but staying open to new possibilities. But let’s look further at how learning works. We constantly receive data as our senses send electric impulses through the brain. We store information in our brains along neural pathways, or clusters of cells. As we acquire new information, we create new neural networks. If we think about the information over and over, the network gets stronger and stronger; just as a trickle of water can, over time, cut a river bed into the landscape, so does the stream of repetitive thoughts create a kind of “groove” in the brain.

Getting Out of the Groove

No wonder it’s hard to “make room” for new ideas, to give up old beliefs to accommodate the new. The path of least resistance or our default setting favors our familiar thinking. In the arena of corporate decision-making, this manifests as an impulse to find a quick answer to every question. We’re so afraid of looking stupid or so uncomfortable not knowing what to do that we may pounce on the first idea that offers a solution. Of course, we may be lucky: what shows up may be a brilliant insight; going with our gut, we get quick results. But all too often, leaping to an answer cuts off avenues of exploration that might lead to something better. In other words, as much as we say we prize creativity, we’re not allowing it to emerge.

The solution: getting comfortable with discomfort, giving up the ego kick of “knowing-it-all,” hanging out in the question. This is particularly important for leaders. Curiosity-fueled learning allows us to see and understand that which others don’t. This translates into the broad perspective that is essential to leadership. Routine problems can usually be handled by sifting through past experiences, but significant change can’t be achieved using only old information. Change requires leaders to provide insights, new perspectives, fresh ideas; to expand what is known so that people can see further than they usually see.

And the most challenging problems are like blind alleys: the lessons of the past just aren’t enough. Our rational mind tends to follow the neural path of least resistance; but no matter how much effort we put into that kind of thinking, we’re still stuck. Meanwhile, more remote pathways are not being used – and that’s what we need to

engage in order to have insights. If we don't figure things out quickly, we're tempted to give up; go on to something else; or hand in a half-baked piece of work.

Give It Time

Einstein and other creative minds offer us the solution: when you hit a blind alley, you must allow your thoughts to incubate. Reflect. Give up the conscious effort of "working the problem." Put it on the back burner; let it sit for a while; walk around the block. Your usual neural pathways can take a break. As they do, you will naturally start accessing more remote areas of the brain; in fact, neurological research shows that the brain will start to light up spontaneously in different places. At some point, links will be created to previously unconnected clusters of brain cells. Images will be created out of these connections – and, pop! you'll have an insight. Then you can submit that insight to your rational mind, your analytical thought process, for verification.

The steps in the creative process can be summarized as follows:

- Preparation: gather and analyze information, and focus attention on the key issues.
- Incubation: place the problem on the "backburner."
- Illumination (or insight): links are facilitated between previously unconnected, but primed, remote neural pathways; an image is projected into consciousness.
- Verification: re-focus attention to explore implications in more detail and generate rational conclusions.

This concept has been captured by Guy Claxton, an academic psychologist, in *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind: How Intelligence Increases When You Think Less*. "Hare brain" refers to the deliberate, effortful, conscious application of reason and logic to data. "Tortoise mind" is more open-ended; it has a leisurely texture to it.

Among its endorsers is John Cleese, the comic genius who came to fame with "Monty Python's Flying" circus and who has studied creativity for more than 40 years. In an article for *Edutopoia*, Cleese cites research done by Donald W. MacKinnon at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1970s. "...he found that the professionals rated 'most creative' by their colleagues displayed two characteristics: They had a greater facility for play, meaning they would contemplate and play with a problem out of real curiosity, not because they had to, and they were prepared to ponder the problem for much longer before resolving it...We all understand that the slower kind of thinking regularly works for us. Yet, for some reason, we don't quite trust it."

Creativity: An Innate Ability

In other words, people we think of as "creative" are simply good at trusting the natural functioning of the human brain. One example: McCann Erickson's "Priceless" ad campaign for MasterCard. As *Fortune* magazine explained (June 12, 2006) five ad campaigns had failed to make a dent in Visa's dominance in the 10 years between 1987 and 1997. In a quest for a breakthrough, three members of the ad agency discussed strategy and brainstormed for a month. But the solution didn't emerge during one of the many debates about every aspect of the problem; it came to

the creative director as a tagline – “some things money can’t buy” – while she was taking a shower. Disciplined analysis had prepared Thomas, in a sense pointing her sub-conscious into the right playing field. Then, with the mental reins loose, the apt insight emerged.

You are creative, too. The key is to have the confidence in your own resources, the capacity of your brain beyond what you normally use. During most of our days, we’re buried in transactions. But no matter how busy you are, build in time to let your thoughts drift; daydream; reflect. Allow a glimpse of that which you’re not seeing in the normal course of business.

Which points us to the title of this column. Can learning be too much of a good thing? Some people would have us set a goal of “constant learning.” But even if that were possible, would it be advisable?

We have all experienced times of intense learning; the process can feel deeply satisfying – as if we were plants drinking in the first rainfall after a long drought. But like the parched earth, our brains can absorb only so much at a time. After we’ve studied hard, we need to unwind; let the new information and perspectives sink in; sit with them for while. “So many times, I’m rushing through my day, not even acknowledging that I’ve seen things, heard things,” notes a colleague. “It’s only when I stop at the end of the day and take time to process that I realize what I’ve learned. Really creative people understand something about incubating and eliminating ideas that others don’t. Learning is linked to reflection.”

Or, as Albert Einstein said: “The world we have made, as a result of the level of thinking we have done thus far, creates problems we cannot solve at the same level of thinking at which we created them.”

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