ENTELECHY

Entelechy n, [LL, entelechia, from Greek]1. the vital force or principle directing life and growth. 2. a realisation or actuality as opposed to a potentiality.

On leadership and change

By Guy C. Gattegno

From individual to organisational learning

A few years ago, one of the most frequently used buzzwords in the corporate world was "**the learning organisation**". Many books and articles were written on the subject and hardly a week went by without another conference about the virtues of learning organisations and how to bring those virtues to your firm. Much of this was fuelled by the popularity of Peter Senge's book, ***The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization,*** which was published in 1990.

Although Senge detailed many useful concepts regarding learning organisations in his book, inevitably his ideas became blurred as they spread, and much nonsense came to be bandied about in the name of learning organisations. I remember one of my corporate clients at the time proudly showing me their latest strategic framework, which contained the following among its key objectives: "***By next October, we will be a learning organisation***"!

In particular, two of the key points that Senge made in his book were conveniently ignored by many of those who climbed aboard the bandwagon. He pointed out that while it was possible to develop individual learners within an enterprise that was not a learning organisation, the reverse was not possible. Senge was in no doubt that it was not possible to create a learning organisation without having first succeeded in creating learning at the individual level.

In addition, Senge made much of what he called team learning, which also needed to precede any attempts at achieving a learning organisation.

In fact, Senge's constraints could be extended to produce a hierarchy of learning, with each rung being a pre-requisite for the next.

A hierarchy of learning

In our view, effective organisational learning can be created in an enterprise only if the following hierarchy is respected, and each rung is consciously, carefully and extensively focused on and nurtured before efforts aimed at the next rung are initiated.
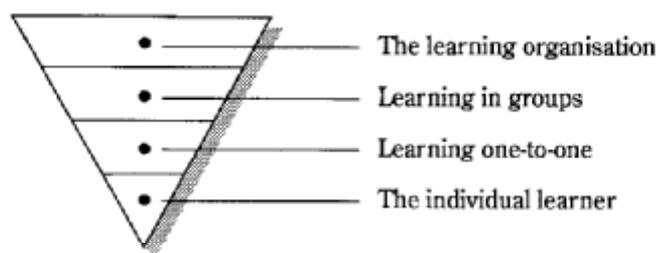
Learning at the individual level

Creating a learning organisation must start at the individual level. Employees must be given extensive opportunities to know themselves as learners. These opportunities can be provided incidentally, as part of the day-to-day work that individuals do, or formally in the context of specifically designated learning programs.

How do individuals learn? When do they learn? Why do they learn? What do they learn most easily? What do they have the greatest difficulty with? What are their preferred learning styles? Their least preferred styles? These and many similar questions need to be comprehensively considered by large numbers of learners within the enterprise, and conclusions drawn by each learner, before it can be claimed that learning at the individual level is adequate.

This requirement is further complicated by the fact that, at work, the "natural" state of affairs for most employees is to focus their energies on accomplishing the **task** aspects of their roles, and to give only cursory attention to any learning that may be taking place as they do so.

So, for the organisation, success at this level of the hierarchy requires that **learning** be made at least as significant as, say, performing tasks or achieving results.

Only when learning is viewed as a legitimate component of what happens at work will employees make the necessary investment of time and effort to know themselves as learners.

Fortunately, the last quarter-century has seen major steps taken on the subject of individuals as learners. The seminal work performed by David Kolb in the 1970s and 80s (see, for example his 1984 book, *Experiential Learning – Experience as the source of learning and development*), and the work on learning styles by UK-based Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (*The Manual of Learning Styles*) are two examples that come to mind.

Learning one-to-one

Once learning at the individual level is firmly established as a worthwhile purpose within an organisation, plans to tackle the second learning rung can begin to be formulated.

At this level of the hierarchy of learning, fundamental spadework still needs to be performed, because much less is known about what it is and how it might best be accomplished.

Until recently, efforts at this level tended to focus on **performance appraisa**l processes, in which a more senior (and presumably more knowledgeable) employee worked with a junior individual to establish, periodically monitor and ultimately assess that person's performance against agreed objectives. The purpose here was predominantly corporate and judgmental, with focus on learning at best incidental. For

example, only the last page of a performance appraisal form might ask about the team member's training or development needs.

In recent years, one-to-one developmental efforts have shifted to "coaching" and "mentoring" programs. While the variety of these programs is great, coaching initiatives have tended to focus on efforts to develop individuals' skills or capabilities for their current positions (with the boss or other subject matter expert acting as coach), while mentoring programs have often involved a corporation's "tribal elders" acting as guides or resources to individuals identified as future leaders. Typically, the aim of mentoring programs has been to provide broad-based advice about navigating internal politics, making judicious career choices, enhancing one's prospects for promotion, and the like.

Here again, learning has often been of secondary importance.

What is being proposed in this newsletter is that all activities in which people work one-on-one with others (whether appraising performance, coaching, mentoring or acting in any other support role) be explicitly identified as **learning** opportunities for **both** the individuals involved.

The overall approach ought to be, "***Now that I know myself (to some extent at least) as a learner, let me see if I can be of use to you in a learning context***".

The driving force(s) motivating individuals to interact in mutually beneficial one-on-one relationships might be:

- To act as the other person's "learning mentor".

- To make, for the other person, an on-going focus on learning at least as important as achieving results, managing a budget, maximising the team's performance, or any of the other task-related purposes that commonly motivate people at work.

- To enable the other person to recognise or give conscious attention to the learning experiences that his/her involvement in work can yield.

- To help the other person understand that learning can flow from both the content and the processes of his/her work-related experiences.

- To share in the other person's successes as a learner, and to provide him/her with the understanding, encouragement and guidance to overcome any frustrations or failures along the road to becoming a more consciously competent learner.

Team learning

Team learning is neither a well studied nor a well understood phenomenon. Although there is a vast amount of published material about the ways in which individuals interact within groups, there is very little about groups that operate with a specific learning goal. And there is almost nothing about how teams at work might learn **as a group**. The most notable exceptions are Peter Senge (as mentioned at the beginning of this newsletter) and Kathy Dechant and her colleagues in the U.S. (see, for example, the 1993 book by K. Dechant and V. Marsick, ***Towards a Model of Team Learning***, and their ***Team Learning Survey***).

Despite this lack of reliable information, researchers who have investigated team learning are unanimous in stressing its relevance, particularly in today's increasingly uncertain and turbulent world.

Here is what Peter Senge has to say in ***The Fifth Discipline***:

> ***"Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental***
> ***learning unit in modern organizations. This is where 'the rubber meets***
> ***the road'; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn."***

Also, those who maintain that it is desirable — even crucial — for teams to learn, make a sharp distinction between team learning and learning by individuals while they are part of a team. Collective learning differs from individual learning in that it occurs only as a consequence of shared experiences which are harnessed in the service of shared purposes and outcomes. Just as a collection of accomplished musicians will not inevitably produce a good jazz band, a group of employees who,

separately, are skilled individual learners will not necessarily meld into an effective learning team.

As they live a succession of experiences in common, and practise how to enter into meaningful dialogue with one another, members of a team can gradually develop the capacity to achieve a collective understanding which is more encompassing than the sum of their individual perspectives. Thus, the end-result of real team learning is **mutually constructed, shared know-how**.

As Senge remarked, at their best learning teams must learn how to learn together, by coming to conceive of themselves, and to function, as "learning bodies".

In most enterprises today, team learning is the essential link between individual and organisational learning. In fact, individual learning generally occurs in ways that yields little or no organisational learning. Effective team learning, on the other hand, is both a microcosm of, and a prerequisite for, significant organisational learning.

Teams, described as "people who need one another to act" by Arie de Geus, former group planning executive at Royal Dutch/Shell, are not only where most key decisions are made within organisations, but also the vehicles through which most decisions become reality. Thus, teams enable key messages and blueprints for action to be transmitted throughout an enterprise; policies developed in one setting to be implemented elsewhere; conclusions reached and insights forged locally to be disseminated globally; and the successes and accomplishments of a particular group to set the standard throughout the organisation. That is why the ways in which teams work and learn together are so critical.

The learning organisation

Only when an array of proficient learning teams are developed and maintained throughout an enterprise, can it legitimately aspire to become a learning organisation. The topmost rung of the learning hierarchy is finally within reach!

Unfortunately, the goal is not only highly elusive and enormously difficult to achieve, it is also highly likely that, on those rare occasions that an organisation manages to reach such an exalted state, a multitude of factors will conspire to ensure that its accomplishment is short-lived.

Think about it. . . the senior executive group may change; employees may come and go; strategic directions may be modified; favourable economic conditions may turn sour; markets may be adversely affected by unforeseen political developments; the enterprise that was "in fit" with its suppliers and customers may suddenly find itself facing unexpected difficulties. Even if no dire changes engulf internal or external environments, complacency or apathy may creep into the organisation's ways of doing things. All these and more are likely to spell disaster for the enterprise's capacity to maintain itself as a learning organisation.

That is not to say that, ephemeral though it may be, the goal of becoming a learning organisation should not continue to act as a powerful motivating force for thousands of business entities around the world. The benefits of achieving the goal for a very short time, or even of failing to do so but continuing to strive for it, are enormous (and not only in terms of maximising organisational capability at all levels).

In following editions of the **Entelechy** newsletter, further details about learning at each of the four levels of the hierarchy will be discussed.