

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 learning and development

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VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1

In this newsletter, the word “manager” is used in a generic sense, as someone who has other employees reporting to him or her, and who is responsible for their performance. Thus, whether the word occurs in his or her official job title, or whether the individual is a team leader, supervisor, foreperson or other similar role, provided that the basic requirement is met, what follows is applicable.

What managers really do

Recent research confirms that managers view themselves chiefly as action-oriented individuals, getting things done for, within and through the organisation that employs them. They perceive their key function as being to accomplish results — either directly or through those who report to them.

Few would dispute that the classical depiction of managers as people who deliberately and methodically plan, organise, direct and control the activities of others in a stable and predictable environment no longer applies in today's workplace (if it ever did).

Instead, circumstances dictate that managers work on many issues at once; deal with an array of knotty, imperfectly grasped problems; respond in a swift and credible way to whatever demands are made of

them; and yet fulfil their primary purpose of achieving the longer-term end results expected of them.

Thus, managers' work tends to be performed reactively and discontinuously. Calm, rational and fully developed responses to events become the exception rather than the norm. How a manager acts under given circumstances is more likely to be contingent on the needs of the moment, rather than to flow from an immutable set of broadly applicable principles.

In addition, though all managerial jobs share certain basic characteristics, it is the peculiar, distinctive and ever-shifting aspects of particular positions that often present the greatest challenges to the individuals who hold them..

As a result, on those comparatively rare occasions when managers pause to reflect on themselves in relation to the work being performed, they are likely to do so in terms of their effectiveness in getting things done, especially under unpredictable and often unknowable circumstances.

Managers' view of learning and development

Given the fragmented, pressured and reactive ways in which they operate, it is not surprising that managers, when asked, tend to be of the opinion that whatever they have learned has been acquired primarily from the workplace, in a variety of informal, immediate and often unconscious ways. They identify these types of casual and even accidental on-the-job experiences as the major sources of their development, because these experiences are seen as practical, relevant and applicable, and hence "real".

Managers prefer informal learning processes to intentionally planned and structured initiatives (such as training courses or distance learning programs), because the latter are often seen as:

- Having content that is unrealistic and even irrelevant to their concerns or at the very least not readily transferable to the requirements of their real-life jobs.
- Utilising processes that reflect more the preferences and preconceived notions of those who designed the developmental activities, rather than the needs and requirements of those invited to participate in them.

However, and precisely because they are not specifically structured as learning experiences, the types of informal development experiences prized by managers can also be characterised as inefficient, disorganised, hit-or-miss propositions, which even in the aggregate fall far short of what might be required for optimal results.

Ideally, what is needed whenever efforts to develop managers are deliberately planned, is to find ways to preserve the merits of informal learning that managers prefer, while at the same time drawing on the advantages of formal programs. Not an easy task, but certain guidelines can be followed.

Structuring successful management development initiatives

Many management training and development programs differentiate between knowledge, skills and attitudes — in fact, are explicitly built on this distinction. Managers, on the other hand, do not commonly make such distinctions.

It is important to remember that managers **do** achieve results at, from and through their work. Therefore, if learning and development programs are to be recognised as useful by managers, they cannot diverge too far away from the reality of managers' on-the-job responsibilities.

To be readily accepted by managers, development activities must focus on what managers need if they are to meet the demands of their roles. Attention should be focused primarily on the managerial **results** they

(and their organisations) require, and not on enhancing particular skills or knowledge as an end in itself.

Instead of emphasising predetermining skills or bodies of knowledge to be acquired, then asking participants somehow to "transfer" these to their on-the-job situations through follow-up actions, attention should be focused on what managers need to do to perform proficiently.

Proficiency (also known as "capability" or "competence") can be defined as the set of enabling characteristics of a manager which, when used appropriately within the organisation that employs him/her, leads to effective performance. Importantly, unlike the meaning of "competencies" as understood, for example, by those who advocate competency-based training programs, proficiency does not somehow *cause* effectiveness in managerial performance but, under the right conditions, may *lead to* (or *result in*) effective performance.

Key implications of this distinction:

- Proficiency is what is **developable** in managers. Only by developing proficiency can managers' effectiveness be improved.
- What matters is not acquisition of discrete skills or competencies as a pre-condition to enhanced performance, but development of the overall capability of managers to do what is required under an ever-widening array of organisational requirements and circumstances.
- The development of proficiency is situational and contingent, in the sense that it is relevant only in a specific context. This is determined by an organisation's culture, history and "folklore", its business requirements and strategic imperatives and its fundamental compact with its employees. Thus, organisational considerations have a very strong influence on the nature and structure of the management development initiatives that are perceived as successful within a given enterprise.

It is becoming increasingly accepted that people derive meaning from their lives at work primarily through daily interaction with others. As they get work done with, for or through others, individuals seek to organise, interpret and comprehend the events that occur around them. They attempt to make sense of the large flows of information they receive. They strive to reflect on, contrast, integrate or assimilate the experiences they have and the results they achieve. In doing so, they seek to acquire, enhance, modify or refine the aptitudes, understandings and perspectives they develop through their contacts with others. In short, they **learn**.

What does it all mean?

The central premise is that successful development of work-related proficiency depends on individuals learning and, in so doing, improving their capacity to learn (which in turn ensures that further learning can occur). For each individual, therefore, development of proficiency becomes an iterative process.

With opportunities to learn at work present whether or not they are structured by trainers, the key to transforming "the natural state of affairs" into a powerful vehicle for development is to optimise the learning that already takes place in accidental and informal ways.

In his 1993 book, ***Management Development: Strategies for action***, UK-based researcher Alan Mumford provides a very useful conceptual model, which has been elaborated upon here. His Model of Management Development recognises three types of experiences and processes from which managers may learn. These are described in more detail below.

TYPE 1: Informal managerial experiences — accidental processes

- Characteristics
- Occur within managerial activities
 - Explicit intention is task performance
 - No clear development objectives
 - Unstructured in development terms
 - Not planned in advance
 - Owned by managers

Development consequences Learning is real, direct, unconscious, and insufficient.

TYPE 2: Integrated managerial experiences — opportunistic processes

- Characteristics
- Occur within managerial activities
 - Explicit intention is both task performance and development
 - Clear development objectives
 - Structured for development by boss and subordinate
 - Planned beforehand and/or reviewed subsequently/recurringly as learning experiences
 - Owned by managers

Development consequences Learning is real, direct, conscious, and substantial.

TYPE 3: Formal management development experiences — planned processes

- Characteristics
- Often occur away from normal managerial activities
 - Explicit intention is development
 - Clear development objectives
 - Structured for development by developers
 - Planned beforehand but not always reviewed subsequently as learning experiences
 - Owned more by developers than by managers

Development consequences Learning may be real (through a job) or detached (through a course), likely to be conscious, infrequent.

Mumford states, "In learning cycle terms, Type 2 attempts to provide precisely that opportunity to review, conclude, plan, act again, review and plan, which we know managers do not normally undertake."

With minor modifications, it is Mumford's Type 2 learning that is being highlighted in this newsletter as providing the best integration of incidental on-the-job learning with formal developmental programs.

In subsequent newsletters, this approach is discussed in greater detail.