

# **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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### **Team learning**

A previous ***Entelechy*** newsletter (Vol. 1 No. 7) introduced the concept of team learning as a critical rung in the hierarchy of learning (from individual to organisational learning). It also made the point that relatively little is known about how members of a team might learn as a group. This newsletter elaborates upon the concept of learning, and explores the dynamics of team learning.

#### **Perspectives into learning teams**

Two models of how groups at work may develop into learning teams have been produced in recent years. Both attempt to describe the fundamental dynamics, strategies and practices of successful learning teams. One model was developed in the U.S. by Kathleen Dechant and Victoria Marsick, who used their pioneering insights as the basis for their 1993 book, ***Towards a Model of Team Learning***, and their ***Team Learning Survey***. The other is contained in Peter Senge's 1990 book, ***The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization***.

The Dechant & Marsick model identifies four team learning processes:

- Experimenting
- Crossing boundaries
- Framing and reframing

- Integrating perspectives

Similarly, Senge identifies four "disciplines" of the learning organisation (the fifth being team learning itself):

- Personal mastery
- Systems thinking
- Mental models
- Shared vision

The two models are in fact quite consistent with one another. They can be integrated into an overall conceptual framework, which lies outside the scope of this newsletter. However, they provide insights into how learning team may be formed, developed and maintained within organizations.

### **From groups of individuals to learning teams**

Within enterprises, teams are formed for particular purposes. Whether it be to agree on a change in strategic direction; solve a production problem; hammer out a new mission statement; collect information in support of specific marketing recommendations; or determine how to implement a new procedure, teams are expected to perform tasks and accomplish results (usually within a defined time-frame).

When a group of individuals comes together, most of the initial learning that takes place occurs at the individual level. Typically, interactions among members of a newly formed team aim to determine who everyone is, why they've been brought together, what they're meant to accomplish, and how they're expected to operate as a joint entity. However, as soon as a pool of team-held know-how, common experiences and shared understandings forms, team learning begins to occur.

A great deal of information and guidance is available on how to improve team dynamics and effectiveness. The emphasis, however, is primarily on the conditions and relationships that must be established and/or maintained if a team is to have the best possible chance of producing the results it sets for itself (or that are set for it). That is, major focus is on

team leaders' and team members' efforts with the **task** aspects of what the group has been brought together to produce, and how best to structure the group to do it.

Yet a team cannot be successful in accomplishing its mission unless it also learns how to learn as a team, that is, collectively. Thus, its outcomes must also include what the team can progressively learn about itself and its internal functionings as a collective entity, as distinct from a disparate assortment of individuals.

Thus, a balance must be struck between:

- What's to be done, and how
- What can be learnt from the existence and workings of the team

Most teams (that is, most individuals within teams) are far more comfortable with the "tangible" task aspects of what to do and how to go about doing it. These seem "real", something substantial to which one can devote one's energies. On the other hand, what changes might take place at the level of team members' perceptions, know-how, or ability to work more harmoniously together (as a result of individual and/or collective learning along the way), seem far more fluid and intangible. Hence these aspects tend to be viewed with ambivalence.

If a group is to develop into a learning team, it must consciously set out not only to **achieve** something, but also to **learn** something. One must be made at least as significant as the other.

### **Balancing action with reflection**

Most employees see themselves chiefly as action-oriented individuals, getting things done for, within and through the organisation that employs them. They perceive their key function as producing results, either directly or through others.

When individuals become part of teams, it is only natural that they bring their conceptions and tendencies to their new surroundings. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to find most groups drawn to short-term

"here-and-now" problems and challenges. They tend to be especially comfortable with situations where things need to get done, problems solved and courses of action plotted in decisive yet straightforward ways.

Under these circumstances, team learning is likely to be, at best, fragmented and incidental. If it is to move beyond this rudimentary level, it must be given the chance to flourish through conscious **collective** learning processes, as team members gradually align their perspectives and efforts while tackling problems, performing tasks or working towards results. A balance must be struck between action and reflection. Better still, collective reflection-in-action must become the norm for the group.

Team members need to be presented with opportunities to stand back, so that they may:

- Ponder or observe what is occurring from different angles and perspectives.
- Adopt a low individual profile, and act in concert with one another within the larger whole.
- Collect/Analyse information and points of view, and jointly and explicitly research issues, ideas, conceptual frameworks, and the like.
- Listen to people both inside and outside the team in order to exchange opinions or understandings; gather past or historical viewpoints and frames of reference; scrutinise developments and shifting priorities; reach comprehensive conclusions and make unhurried decisions.

### **Challenging mental models**

In ***The Fifth Discipline***, Peter Senge discusses at length the importance of making our views open to influence, and the problem of confusing our mental models with reality. He also provides a useful "roadmap" of how to surface, reflect on and publicly examine our mental models. He advocates that we:

- Recognise "leaps of abstraction" (guard against jumping from observation to unfounded generalisation).
- Expose/Articulate what we normally do not say (the "left-hand column" of the mental ledger we keep when dealing with others).
- Balance advocacy with inquiry (it's acceptable for us to take a position on a given topic, but we should also inquire into others' views and remain open to modifying our original position as a result of such inquiry).
- Face up to distinctions between espoused theories (what we say) and theories-in-use (the theories implied in what we actually do).

If it is very important for us to challenge our mental models in our individual dealings with others, it is imperative that we do so when we are part of a working group, particularly if it aspires to evolve into a learning team.

### **Responsibilities of a team leader**

Implicit in much of what has been described in this newsletter is the notion that the leader of a team shoulders a heavy responsibility in ensuring that it evolves from a disparate group of individuals into a learning team.

Here team leadership has little to do with job title, position or official status. The person who is "the boss" within a group because of his/her standing on the organisation chart is not necessarily the one to whom the group will look for team leadership. At best, the individual demonstrating leadership within a team will not always be the same person, but the role will naturally rotate among team members as a function of any number of factors: the demands of the moment; the issue that is being examined; the degree of ease or difficulty the group is experiencing with a particular matter; or the amount of progress it has made in progressing into a learning team.

However, any individual who assumes the mantle of team leadership, whether implicitly or explicitly, whether deliberately or accidentally, or whether for a period of time or only for a short while, will need to come to grips with the issue of team learning.

The next newsletter (Vol. 2 No. 5) describes a range of practical techniques team leaders can use to enable their teams to evolve into true learning teams.