

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 5

Maximising team learning

This newsletter builds on the principles and practices presented (Vol. 2 No. 4) about team learning. Here, a number of practical techniques are presented to ensure that groups of individuals who come together (typically to complete a task) are able to develop into learning teams over time.

Dialogue vs. discussion

In ***The Fifth Discipline*** (1990), Peter Senge makes the distinction between dialogue and discussion central to his discipline of team learning.

He perceives discussion as a tossing back and forth of ideas in a competitive mode, the object being for one person's view or position to prevail within the group. Though different opinions may be presented, each is stoutly defended by its originator ("verbal jousting"). The topic under discussion may be exhaustively analysed and dissected, and someone's point of view may at times be made part of someone else's argument (for the purpose of strengthening that argument still further), but the overall aim remains to win, by having one's perspective accepted by all.

Dialogue, on the other hand, is described as a free-flowing style of inquiry and intellectual play that allows groups to attain meanings and understandings, perceptions and insights possibly beyond the reach of any one individual within the group. Dialogue is a team discipline, because it assumes the existence of a "larger pool of meaning" accessible only to a group. It is a powerful tool for fostering collective inquiry and consensus building.

According to Senge, two types of consensus are possible: "focussing down" consensus that seeks the common denominator (the common ground upon which all can agree), and "opening up" consensus capable of encompassing and integrating a range of individual viewpoints.

For groups to become effective learning teams, it is essential that dialogue be made to complement discussion. Yet, in most corporate settings, only discussion is practiced. The team leader intent on promoting dialogue must focus on fostering collective interaction that is quite alien to most employees in Western cultures.

Practice

For any group of individuals to develop into a coherent (let alone superior) team, practice and rehearsal are essential. Few would dispute the need for practice by, say, a football team, the cast of a play, or an orchestra. In fact, for them, the practice field or the rehearsal hall **is where they become a team**, as they strive to play or act together in coordinated ways, align their individual talents and functions, understand and complement one another's strengths and areas of specialisation, and compensate smoothly for deficiencies any of their members may possess.

From such a perspective, actual performances can be viewed almost as afterthoughts, opportunities to demonstrate to audiences how faultlessly team members have developed their capacity for ensemble playing.

Yet, in corporate settings, few if any groups are given the freedom to coalesce into true teams. There is urgent work to be done, key results to be achieved, major decisions to be reached and pressing deadlines to be met. There is little room for the "luxury" of practice. Everything must be completed as swiftly as possible, and be right the first time and every time.

Looking beyond the tyranny of the immediate, however, helps restore practice to its rightful place, for teams in organisations as much as on the playing field or in the concert hall. Donald Schon, in his 1983 book, ***The Reflective Practitioner***, was the first to point out the essential advantage of practice: the freedom it allows to experiment in a "virtual environment". In the absence of the constraints of the "real world", actions and processes can be broken down into their constituent parts, and each examined separately and at length. The elements of a complex system can be isolated, and each studied on its own. The pace and sequence of an event can be slowed down or speeded up, and its "tape" run backwards and forwards for as long as necessary. Alternative scenarios can be devised and tried out, extrapolated, projected forward into the future or backward into the past, and the implications of each examined in detail. Nothing is impossible or irreversible, nothing is beyond the collective reach of the team.

That is why it is essential for the leader of a team to focus repeatedly on opportunities to practice, until what is being practiced becomes second nature to most team members.

Only when the team has practiced sufficiently can it deem itself ready for the rigours of the "real world". Its constraints can be reintroduced gradually into the situation, and their effects (and the limits of their influence) ascertained. The team now has the confidence to see itself as fully capable of facing whatever challenges and inequities the "real world" may have in store for it.

Define and redefine

K. Dechant & V. Marsick (***Towards a Model of Team Learning***) rightly view framing and reframing as a critical team learning dynamic. Continuous (or, at the very least, frequent) reframing of team members' perceptions of someone or something external to them (the "non-self") is essential to the development of pooled understandings, shared insights, common purposes, and mutual trust tempered with tolerance for individual differences.

Defining and redefining one's frame of reference is the mechanism through which individual perceptions and, especially, unexamined assumptions and pre-conceived notions about the "other" are brought to the surface, analysed, discussed, challenged and, as a consequence, modified into more broadly or commonly held, or convergent, perspectives.

This constant process of defining and redefining team members' views and frames of reference can, if not skillfully handled, lead to resentment or hostility on the part of those whose most cherished tenets may be questioned openly. This may be exacerbated by a judgmental or rejecting attitude on the part of those doing the questioning. If the process of defining and redefining perspectives is to lead to the unfettered pooling of know-how and understanding, it is essential for the individual assuming the role of team leader to ensure that the inquiry into assumptions (which though unexamined, may be closely held) does not become "inquisitorial" or degenerates into a search for what/who to blame.

Asking "what" and "why" questions

Asking "what" and "why" questions is an excellent way to inquire into people's experiences, perceptions, conclusions, mental models, motives and outlooks. As mentioned above, care must be taken to ensure that the questioning does not become interrogatory but, skillfully handled, "what" and "why" questions can be extremely revealing in the context of a team coming to grips with the dynamics of learning and understanding itself better.

Most people are fairly adept at asking "what" questions of one another. "Why" questions, however, are a different matter. Often, they do not come naturally to people after "what" questions have been asked and answered. The conversation simply moves on to a different issue, and a different "what" question.

Knowing how to ask both "what" and "why" questions, and explicitly being able to link one to the other can lay the foundation for effective discussion and dialogue. Thus, not only, "what do you think of. . .?" but also, "why do you say that?" Not only, "what would you do in the case of. . .?" but also, "why do you think this might be the most productive/worthwhile/appropriate way to proceed here?"

Through skillful use of "what" and "why" questions, the person assuming the role of team leadership can ensure that a team's interactions become far more productive and "learningful", and less dependent on the specifics of the team's composition, function or the outlook of its members.

Facilitation

There can be little doubt that, for individuals assuming the responsibility for leading teams, skillful facilitation of the evolution of groups into effective learning teams is critical. This is essential to achieve some or all of the following:

- Establish the self-perception of the team as a joint entity, rather than a mere collection of individuals
- Emphasise the development of collective understandings and mutually constructed know-how

- Encourage the team to strike a balance between task and learning, by increasing the importance of collective learning until it comes to be viewed, in team members' eyes, as co-equal to the completion of their appointed tasks
- Encourage the team to strike a balance between action and reflection, by gradually ensuring that collective reflection-in-action becomes part of the team's normal functioning
- Enable the team to move from fragmented to synergistic learning, by explicitly assisting the transition over time from divergent, unshared individual learning to active joint experimentation with an expanding range of ideas and behaviours; lead the team in the shared development of new know-how, as the result of a synthesis of perspectives and the modification of (possibly long-held) individual views and assumptions
- Encourage team members to surface, probe, challenge, and discard or modify as appropriate the mental models and assumptions that may lie unexamined below the level of their consciousness, especially when these unknowingly contribute to or shape the defensive routines that help protect the existence of these models and assumptions
- Help the team to engage in both discussion and dialogue, as appropriate, especially the practice of dialogue in a free, cooperative, non-judgmental atmosphere that encourages individual contributions, the unfettered exploration of ideas and viewpoints, non-linear leaps of imagination and intuition, the joint search for meaning and understanding, and a rich diversity of expression

- Help team members to practice and to experiment with "virtual environments" which are free from the constraints of the real world, especially in advance of their "real-life performances" where decisions once made are immutable; consequences matter; many events and processes, once set in motion, cannot be halted or reversed; and so on
- Enable team members to enhance their capacity to continually define and redefine their perceptions and frames of reference, so that they may create common or convergent perspectives
- Enable team members to improve their ability to ask effective "what" and "why" questions, to enhance the team's understanding of itself and its learning dynamics.

For team leaders, facilitation capabilities can prove critical in enabling groups of individuals to coalesce into true learning teams, that is, to attain the level of collective know-how needed to accomplish what they truly set about to create.