

The StraightTalk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

The Power of Shared Learning

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

Today: Most organizations view learning from one of two perspectives. First, what does an individual need to learn to be effective in his or her job? Second, what does the organization need to know to improve a product, its distribution and/or its appeal to customers?

Tomorrow: Successful organizations embrace shared learning as a strategy for building sustainable competitive advantage. The entire organization is focused on and structured around the process of discovering optimal solutions to complex problems.

The different functions of learning in these scenarios represent a revolution with profound implications. Transforming learning from an individual- or product-oriented response into the engine that drives an organization fundamentally affects its leadership behaviors, mission, structure and culture and enhances its growth potential.

The Shared Learning Strategy

Shared learning is a continuous cycle of collaboration between leading practitioners (see Career Building, Part One, *The StraightTalk Coach*, Volume 4, Issue 2) who extract relevant information from a nearly infinite and overwhelming

amount of available data and synthesize it for new insight into challenging business problems or opportunities. Leading practitioners then collaborate to apply that insight to develop innovative solutions that drive a distinctive competitive advantage and stronger relationships with customers and suppliers.

Leading practitioners' central role in shared learning recognizes that creating a human capital advantage requires raising the level of technical or functional and leadership expertise from the top down and the bottom up. Shared learning also recognizes that the most creative responses to complex opportunities arise from interdisciplinary collaboration rather than from a single discipline.

As the following chart illustrates, shared learning reflects the reality that applying innovative solutions to opportunities always generates new data that trigger another shared learning cycle.

Using shared learning effectively requires a diversity of leading practitioners who have outstanding depth of expertise, as well as equally outstanding collaboration and leadership skills. These leading practitioners will likely exceed organizational boundaries to include customers and suppliers, as well as regulators, representatives of universities, think tanks and so on.

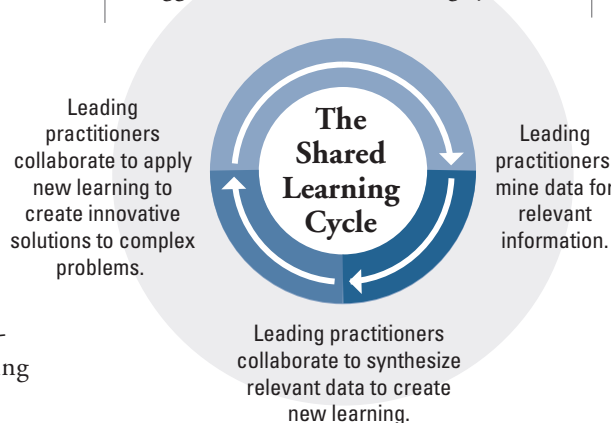
Taking advantage of shared learning requires that an organization align its mission and culture appropriately and develop the necessary leadership behaviors.

A New Mission

Traditionally, an organization defines its mission by what it is trying to accomplish — usually a desired end-state such as making the best cars.

In contrast, an organization that uses shared learning defines its mission in terms of what it is trying to discover, which could be as ambitious as reinventing how people transport themselves around the world.

The distinction between an accomplishment-based mission and a discovery-based mission is far from semantic. A shared learning organization's mission becomes about *how* it makes discoveries and applies them to constantly provide better alternatives for its customers. The



organization coalesces around what it is responsible for discovering rather than a targeted end-state.

Yet shared learning environments are the ultimate **TM** and organizations. Although discovery is the foundation of their mission, culture and structure, shared learning organizations understand that they must also apply their discoveries to deliver consistently better results.

A New Culture

Not surprisingly, organizations focused on discovery and learning have different structures and cultures than organizations focused primarily on results.

In shared learning organizations, flexible teams of leading practitioners drawn from inside and outside the organization are critical to providing the greatest diversity of ideas and expertise. Teams readily form, dissolve and re-form to make discoveries, apply them and accelerate the pace of learning across the organization.

Organizational charts are flat, looking more like networks than hierarchies. Shared learning organizations value dialogue and collaboration above all, so there are literally and figuratively more connections and fewer walls.

New Behaviors

Such discovery-based cultures also place new demands on leaders and employees. Chief among them is that every individual must take responsibility for leading in his or her area of expertise, including:

- ◆ A clear understanding and the highest level of integrity regarding one's roles and responsibilities. Shared learning requires that individuals genuinely bring not only their expertise to the table, but also a clear sense of their unique role in the discovery effort.

- ◆ Commitment to and capacity for specialized and general learning. Each person must stay ahead of current learning in his or her area of expertise and also understand other disciplines, how the business makes money, the marketplace, customer needs and more. In this

environment, each individual must be as much of a **TM** learning machine as the larger organization. This will challenge individuals and organizations alike to diversify their learning strategies, including greater emphasis on discovery and action-learning methods.

- ◆ Positive, productive collaboration and relationship-building skills. In a shared learning organization, each individual must excel at his or her discipline and at building relationships and collaborating with others in the discovery process, be they colleagues, customers, suppliers, regulators, etc.

TM if human beings could
invent the modern
industrial organization,
then they can reinvent it.

~ Gary Hamel

- ◆ Flexibility, adaptability and openness to continuous change. A shared learning environment demands the highest degree of agility so individuals and the organization can move and stay ahead of the market. Doing this in a fluid, discovery-oriented environment requires that individuals rapidly shift from one team to another and between internal and external viewpoints. The degree of agility required will also challenge individuals and organizations to quickly relinquish useless conventions or behaviors.

- ◆ Team orientation. In shared learning organizations, team orientation means not only playing leader or follower on various teams; it also means easily stepping in and out of these roles on the same team at different times in the discovery process.

- ◆ Capacity as a Thought Catalyst and/or Change Agent. Shared learning environments will be driven by Thought Catalysts, Change Agents and individuals who exhibit the best characteristics of both to provide creativity for innovative discoveries and implementation skills to apply discoveries for maximum results. The challenge will be accelerating

development of Thought Catalyst and Change Agent skills to enhance the quality and pace of the learning cycle.

- ◆ StraightTalk and straight listening. StraightTalk's open, honest dialogue is fundamental to shared learning because the leadership behaviors described above fail without it. In shared learning organizations, every individual is responsible for using and reinforcing StraightTalk in his or her relationships with others.

Shared learning will not only require new behaviors; it will also significantly change many job roles.

New Roles

Managers in shared learning organizations will specialize in deploying and developing the right talent for each team, while simultaneously orchestrating collaboration within and between teams to enhance learning. They will need exceptional talent assessment, facilitation and coaching skills. Managers will also be expected to design and champion the most effective shared learning approaches to create new value and competitive distinction.

Marketing and sales staff will constantly seek to connect the right cadre of customers and leading practitioners to deliver the highest levels of discovery and innovation. Finance will begin to measure learning cycle effectiveness and its impact on the bottom line. Human resources will strive to recruit best-in-class leading practitioners, while aligning talent to drive highly productive and competitively differentiating shared learning cycles.

Shared learning is the most effective response to a world in which technology offers much more data than any single individual can interpret *and* too little time in which to do so.

Embracing shared learning places new demands on every individual at every level of an organization. In the process, shared learning creates unprecedented opportunities for each individual and organization to grow and collaborate \pm and make new discoveries that create a truly distinctive competitive advantage. **HK**

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