

Leaders in The Driver's Seat

By Angelika Dahmen

We partly create the problems we face, and we have a responsibility for this
(Gregory Bateson, 1979)

In times like this, every penny counts. So, how do we ensure we get the most out of our learning & development dollars spent? Many studies prove what practitioners have known for long: formal training programmes do not deliver the promised ROI – especially when the so-called 'soft skills' are concerned. We must find a way to craft a learning experience for our leaders that will really make a change.

Why Many Leaders Struggle With Traditional Learning Initiatives

Values: Like any other human being, they design their actions according to four basic values¹:

1. To remain in unilateral control
2. To maximize 'winning' and minimize 'losing'
3. To suppress negative feelings; and
4. To be as 'rational' as possible – by which people mean defining clear objectives and evaluating their behaviour in terms of whether or not they have achieved them.

Many learning and development initiatives challenge these values, and the natural human reaction will be 'fight or flight'.

Fear of failure: We also need to remember that our most successful leaders may not have learned how to cope with failure and are afraid of it. Usually, they will blame it on other people or the circumstances.

Feeling of guilt: Admitting that the status quo or current approach is the best is part of any learning process. For leaders, this is difficult as they feel guilty when not performing to their best.

How to Craft Learning Initiatives That Work

In view of the learners' and organisations' realities, learning initiatives must be crafted that are tightly linked to business outcomes yet cater to the specific learning ambitions of our leaders. On the individual and the organisational level alike, there are initiatives that accommodate the values, fear of failure, and feeling of guilt, mentioned above.

On an individual level, a proper coaching assignment with a qualified internal or external coach is an appropriate solution. Supervisor and employee agree together on which changes they want to achieve – which are aligned with both, business and individual aspirations. Then, the coachee gets into the driver's seat. With the support of the coach, they come up with an action plan in order to achieve the objectives set out with the supervisor. They meet

regularly with the coach to review, reflect, and adjust their plan – in short: to learn. All the time through, the coach will mainly concentrate on providing the process, while the driver of the content is the coachee. An intermediate pulse check and a final discussion with the supervisor about the progress made will wrap this process up.

On an organizational level, a management development programme that is based on Action Learning can create tremendous impact and change, both for the individuals involved and the organisation. Two crucial factors have to be in place before embarking on a programme like this:

1. Organization's readiness for change
2. Top management support

Only then can meaningful projects and their sponsors be identified, project teams formed, and the process kicked off. The individual's learning process in an action learning programme follows roughly the same process as in coaching. The biggest difference is that the action learning projects will be the platform during which the learning can take place – while in coaching the learner defines the platform themselves.

Again, the individual learners are in the driver seat – but this time, the actions taken have a broader impact; their result can usually be seen and measured easily. Excellent facilitation will help maintain momentum throughout the programme - and ensure that attention and consideration are equally given to the project AND the learning taken place.

Conclusion

No matter which learning initiative is most suited for developing your leaders and your talent, ensure you put them into the driver's seat – and provide the right process to support their learning. Like this, you are one step closer to create openness, readiness and excitement for learning. Once your leaders take charge, the learning will increase dramatically and will deliver significantly higher results for the business.

About the Author

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¹ Chris Argyris: Teaching smart people how to learn. *Harvard Business Review*, 1991