

Learning to Master Environmental Change at Work

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In 1999, the author conducted a research project that examined how communication managers learned within their work organizations, and examined the types of informal learning mechanisms used to accomplish this learning. This article discusses how the effects of environmental change impacted a group of training and communications managers. Current developments and tentative recommendations regarding business management development are offered to understand such influences as technology, corporate restructuring, the rules of accountability, and the demise of employee loyalty.

Introduction

In 1999, I completed a doctoral dissertation titled “A Naturalistic Inquiry of the Relationship between Organizational Change and Informal Learning in the Workplace (Skiba, 1999)” at Columbia University. During the decade before the study was conducted, corporate reorganizations intended to revitalize productivity levels significantly affecting the ways in which learning occurred in work organizations. Decision-makers underestimated the difficulty of transforming and conveying policies, procedures, practices, systems, and traditions after downsizing. In fact, as early as 1990, many firms reported major misgivings about the principles and repercussions of downsizing (Heenan, 1990). The study took shape as a result of the increasing need for a new compact between organizations and their workers after restructuring (Morgan, 1988; Kanter, 1989; Senge, 1990), the shift in skills needed for the new knowledge-based workforce, surging global trade, and the advent of new technologies. As a result of these factors, the research goal was to determine how a select group of communication and education managers learn informally to master environmental change that occurred both inside and outside of their work organizations. The problems addressed in the study were as follows:

- how communication and education managers reacted to their changing environments;
- the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors they believed were needed to master the effects of their respective environments on themselves and their work;
- how they, particularly in informal ways, developed the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors they believed they needed;
- the factors in their organizations that enhanced or impeded their learning; and
- how their ability to learn to master the effects of change affected their ability to meet the changing needs of their management and clients.

Two bodies of knowledge were researched and reviewed at the beginning of the study. The first, organizational change, examined four types of models: classical organizational models (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1947; Fayol, 1949; Perrow, 1986; Urwick, 1937; Blau & Scott, 1962; and Hall, 1963), human relations models (Lewin, 1935; Weisbord, 1987; and McGregor, 1960), political models (Baldrige, 1975; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Boulding, 1962; and Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976), and cultural models (Peters & Waterman, 1982; and Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Other topics under the aegis of organizational change included the effects of organizational restructuring, loss of personal control, the disappearance of corporate loyalty, corporate and personal instability, leadership, developmental/learning opportunities, and organizational learning (Dixon, 1994). The second body of knowledge was comprised of literature dealing with informal learning; particularly, reflection and critical reflectivity (Schon, 1987; Argyris & Schon, 1974; and Knowles, 1990), incidental and informal learning (Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; and Kao, 1996), and electronic performance support systems (Raybould, 1995; Laffey, 1995; and Gery, 1991).

Research Methodology

A purposeful, stratified sample of 20 participants from a variety of work organizations was chosen for the study. Four methods of ethnographic data collection were utilized: a written questionnaire, semistructured informal interviews, field notes, and the critical incident technique. To ensure relevance to the sample, all research tools were reviewed for inter-rater reliability by both preresearch participants and professional colleagues. All participants met the following selection criteria:

- managers within their organizations who influenced authority over budgets, personnel, and resources;
- professional employees for at least 10 years;
- access to the creation or dissemination of learning materials; and
- professional interest in knowledge acquisition (to minimize problems with self-reporting).

The written questionnaire ensured that participants indeed met the criteria by which they were initially selected, and collection of baseline information and closed-answer responses that later would enrich the final, semistructured interview guide. It also eliminated the need to collect demographics during precious interview time. Semistructured interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for analysis and interpretation. Ten (50%) of these interviews were conducted at participant work sites; seven (35%) were conducted in neutral sites away from work locations; and, due to geography, time, and work-related challenges, three (15%) were done by telephone.

Field notes included changes in vocal tone, inflections, changes

in emotion, and observations of environmental conditions; in other words, everything heard and seen (Judd, Smith & Kidder, 1991). Two journals included verbalized remarks, gestures, physical behaviors, and conversations that occurred before and after the interviews. The critical incident technique was used to unearth data that may not have been recorded through other data collection methods. While it relied upon participants' recall, it was merely used as a post-interview, follow-up device, and it enabled participants to apply certain experiences and beliefs to real world, work-specific situations. Fourteen (70%) of the sample completed this instrument.

Questionnaire Results

Demographically, the sample was evenly dispersed with 10 males and 10 females whose ages ranged from 38 to 58. Three participants were minorities (one female and two males). All participants had a confirmed baseline education of a college degree, and their work experiences were between 10 and 24 years with an average of 18 years. Functional disciplines varied widely. Eleven participants were grouped under the heading "corporate positions"; they were in marketing or sales (six participants), human resources (two participants), professional services (one participant), general management (one participant), or in technology (one participant). Three participants were grouped as "medical" professionals in human resources administration (two participants) and multimedia education (one participant). Three others were not easily defined; two of them worked in technology education and the third in marketing communications. The remaining three participants were self-employed in business development (one participant), organizational development (one participant), and government-sponsored professional development (one participant). The longest tenure in the same position was eight out of 20 years (one participant).

In terms of departmental information, 25 was the greatest number of employees any single participant supervised, followed by another participant with 20, and another with 10. Seven participants had no direct reports, and the three self-employed participants were excluded from this dimension due to their independent status. Both operational and procedural variances illustrated the randomness of the sample's work environments, and more than half of the sample (11 participants) perceived themselves as having managerial independence.

Data regarding the attainment of work knowledge/information was revealing. While more than half the sample (11 participants) stated that they frequently sought job knowledge, the quality of their search was rated as "fairly adequate." Formal internal courses received the lowest ranking for frequency of job-related knowledge acquisition, while the most frequently cited learning method was on-the-job through trial and error (50% of the sample).

Analysis of Findings

Although the sum total of data collected and analyzed through the use of the aforementioned qualitative instruments was extensive,

it was grouped according to three central themes: the participants' reactions to their changing environments; their mastery of their changing environments; and the results of their learning.

Reactions to Changing Environments

The study elicited a number of subthemes related to organizational change that later gained prominence in both the scholarly and academic press. These subthemes included:

- **Rise of the consultant.**
With increased frequency, participants were moving from specialist to generalist roles. In addition, they were expected to be more flexible, autonomous, and entrepreneurial.
- **Importance of professional networking.**
Lifelong career planning and job search strategies led several participants to spend more time networking for their next job than they did working in their current job.
- **Disparate views of security and stability issues.**
These issues appeared to affect participants' self-concept in both positive and negative ways. Some expressed fear about the future; others saw the end of the social contract as a way to take risks and experiment.
- **Use of technology.**
Technological influences increasingly affected perceptions of time, speed, and access to information, resources, and other persons (co-workers and clients).
- **Emphasis on political savvy.**
Political acumen was viewed as crucial to corporate success.
- **Value of compensation.**
This subtheme included both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

Mastering Environmental Change

These participants utilized a number of methods to obtain the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors needed to master environmental change:

- Personal support systems included professional sources, personal and professional sources, and, in one instance, no personal source (one participant).
- Professional survival skills included interpersonal communication, the ability to manage and to organize work, and technical savvy.
- When asked to cite traits that were essential in subordinates, participants noted the following: experience and skillfulness, and the desire to complete work-related tasks and to achieve success through their completion. Desire was defined by such traits as attitude, initiative, orientation to success, and self-motivation.
- Fourteen of the 20 participants rated a cooperative team spirit as the most important trait among their peers.

Results of Analysis of Learning

Lewin (1935) recognized the complexity of the relationship between objective (external) conditions and subjective

(individual) experiences. He believed that behavior is a function of a person and his/her environment. While a person's life space can be viewed as a field of forces, personal characteristics, environmental influences, and behavior all operate reciprocally, and each factor influences the others in an interlocking way. This study identified some of the organizational forces that led to the types of learning that resulted from these factors.

Prevailing workplace changes during the study revolved around layoffs, internal organizational chaos (reorganizations, technology changes, and changes in leadership), and voluntary terminations. However, the study participants viewed the demise of the social contract, the concept of speed and its effect on productivity, and technology and its effects upon information as the most profound changes in their work lives. Furthermore, the majority of participants expressed disappointment with corporate life by citing a lack of teamwork, escalating expectations placed on employees, growing polarization of people, and a lack of security as inhibitors to success and personal happiness.

This sample recommended a set of core competencies related to management development and professionalism, including: interpersonal skill, networking ability and visibility (both inside and outside one's present work organization), versatility, awareness of change management, values alignment, and technical expertise. Of equal importance was the learning that resulted from organizational change. Eighty percent of the sample stressed the importance of collaboration, learning by doing, and connecting with others face-to-face. Similarly, 80% believed the learning organization concept was not satisfactorily implemented within their respective organizations. The greatest disadvantage cited by all participants was the absence of a mentor or a coach.

Styles of Personal Change Management: A New Model

Participants emphasized and reiterated certain themes that pervaded both their interviews and the critical incidents they reported. These themes became the 13 management characteristics and the four management types that comprise this study's management styles model as seen in Table 1. The first management type, the isolationist, clearly separates work from personal life. Isolationists are risk-averse, prefer one-on-one interactions at work, seek support systems elsewhere, and perceive workplace politics as dishonest. They require loyalty and respect from subordinates—two traits that they have trouble giving and receiving—and they seek honesty and integrity from peers. They are not prone to experimentation. Essentially, isolationists survive.

The second management type, the pragmatist, views the world of work in a dispassionate manner, has realistic security needs, derives limited pleasure from work, and creates a balance between professional and personal life. Pragmatists communicate one-on-one and in small groups, and they welcome external exposure. In addition, they engage in networking for practical reasons, prefer not to direct subordinates, and are somewhat experimental. Pragmatists endure.

The third management type, the revisionist, needs security but is willing to take certain risks and engage in political activity to obtain goals. Revisionists' work and personal lives often collide, but they balance their available support systems well. They look for initiative and playfulness in subordinates and seek mutual respect and occasional social contacts from peers. They also enjoy leading others and occasionally experimenting in order to learn. Revisionists redefine their environments.

The fourth management type, the individualist, equates autonomy at work with adventure and creative accomplishment. Individualists do not draw boundaries between personal and work lives because they are one. They seek subordinates who thrive on ambiguity and create actionable results. Their professional relationships are extensive and their communications are diverse. They thrive on leading and learning from others. Individualists both inspire and defy.

Conclusions

Ninety percent of the sample in this study did indeed master environmental change. Close exposure to change phenomena gave most of the sample group the impetus to learn what was needed to move forward. For some of the participants, outplacement counseling provided the tools needed to master future change. In addition, relocations throughout their careers contributed to understanding and acceptance of the changing nature of the workforce. The shift from specialist to generalist roles also reinforced their perceptions of themselves as consultants.

Attitudes about change were revealing and signaled the beginning of future research topics. While all participants resented being micromanaged, efficacy related to fulfilling job responsibilities varied with the degree to which their organizations were involved in change. Perhaps not surprisingly, loyalty was defined as being true to oneself first and to certain coworkers second. A strong emphasis was placed on the need for developing collaborative and problem-solving skills among subordinates in the form of coaching or mentoring programs. Although executive compensation arose as a secondary finding, it was cited as an important byproduct of leadership commitment.

Internal and external environmental change affected learning in a number of significant ways. The need to professionally network—self-promotion—was described as an activity that has almost replaced work itself. While job changes both within and outside of their organizations increased during the timeframe of this study, the sample continued to learn independently and regardless of environmental changes. Learning venues that involved significant interactivity were favored over traditional methods; however, leadership development opportunities were perceived as delimited.

The increased use of informal and incidental learning mechanisms arose from the transitions from specialist to generalist roles, the increased autonomy expected from almost all levels of workers within these organizations, the increased availability of technological tools, and the absence of mentors and coaches.

From these conclusions and in light of the data collected from this sample, the results of environmental change within this study were as follows:

- information sharing was frequently impeded during organizational change;
- in terms of Lewin’s concept, findings indicated that environmental change conditions clearly affected the way in which participants behaved and how/how well they continued to learn;
- workplace learning was primarily confined to acquisition of skills and abilities that ensured continued employment; and
- the paucity of work-centered learning happened informally and incidentally via desktop tools, one-on-one collaborations with others, personal networks and trial and error.

Recent Developments

The workplace has changed a great deal over the last five years. No one could have predicted how and to what extent acts of terrorism, the demise and the slow recovery of the technology boom in the late 1990s, outsourcing, and the economy would affect the business landscape. However, business leaders appear to continue to ignore many of the fundamentals that ensure successful selection, retention, and development of professional workers.

Since the autumn of 2003, economists have consistently and sharply overestimated each month the number of jobs added by the economy. In fact, while 110,000 new jobs were reportedly added each month, the actual number has been 60,000 per month as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Porter, 2004). At this writing, these disparate numbers may remain unexplained in light of factors such as the underreported slow economic recovery and the upcoming national election. Last April, a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) survey of Chief Executive Officers of small to mid-sized companies showed that “retention of key workers” was cited by 78% (Breden, 2004). Although this source did not define the characteristics of “key workers,” other authors who worked on the Demography Is Destiny Project (Dychtwald, Erickson, Morison, 2004) noted that not one company studied created high-retention pools among over-55 workers. If criteria for key worker

status include advanced knowledge or experience, this type of study does not reflect progress.

While some businesses such as Sears (with its talent management strategy), Dow Chemical (with its continuous re-recruitment program) and Aerospace and Monsanto (with their retiree programs) (Dychtwald, Erickson, Morison, 2004) are interested in experienced workers, the broader work environment does not bode well for either experienced or other levels of employees. Today, the U.S. economy is predominantly service-driven (read “low pay”). Large company growth is almost nonexistent, and the blended career—working more than one job—is becoming the norm.

Recommendations Regarding Future Research

Upon reflection of this study, its findings, and recent developments, it must be stated that environmental change phenomena and their effect on learning warrant further research. To correct for research bias and small sample size, surveys of larger communities of business managers should be conducted. Similar research should be conducted with the same criteria to address why people who have experienced various change phenomena learn to master these changes better than those

Table 1: CHANGE MANAGEMENT STYLES ©Michaeline Skiba, August 11, 2004

Characteristics	Isolationist	Pragmatist	Revisionist	Individualist
Professional Relationships	Has difficulty networking and finds it demeaning	Makes contacts but does so for practical outcomes or survival	Makes contacts for personal and professional advancements	Enjoys contacts for personal and professional advancements/what can be learned from them
Level of Autonomy	Equates autonomy with abandonment	Equates autonomy as a “fact of life”	Equates autonomy with a certain level of freedom	Equates autonomy with adventure/creativity
Work Enjoyment	Does not derive pleasure from the workplace	Derives limited pleasure from the workplace	Derives and occasionally creates enjoyable work	Frequently creates and experiences enjoyable work
Importance of Security	Risk-averse	Seeks reasonable level of security	Seeks security yet takes certain risks	High risk-taker
Time Management	Clearly separates work life from personal life	Tries to balance work life with personal life	Tends to allow work life to intrude upon personal life	Views work life and personal life as one
Work Politics	Avoids workplace politics (in themselves and others)	Reluctantly adjusts or accommodates to politics; viewed as a necessary evil	Complies with workplace politics as a means to reach or achieve certain goals	Develops political acumen to create new/equitable rules/policies
Communication Methods	Prefers one-on-one dealings within immediate environment	One-on-one and small group; would prefer more extraorganizational interaction	One-on-one, small group, and extraorganizational	Utilizes all forms (interpersonal, intraorganizational, –extraorganizational)
Personal Rewards	Needs both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards	Needs extrinsic rewards and occasional intrinsic rewards	Needs extrinsic rewards; has high need for intrinsic rewards	Gains rewards from personal values/integrity
Support Systems	Acts alone in the workplace; relies on family/friends	Limits relations in workplace; relies on family/friends	Tentatively balances all available resources	Effortlessly balances all available sources
Subordinate Roles	Seeks loyalty and respect	Seeks flexibility and reliability	Seeks initiative, open-mindedness, and playfulness	Seeks those who thrive on ambiguity and turns ideas into action
Peer Roles	Seeks honesty and integrity	Seeks cooperation and mutual respect	Seeks mutual respect and some social connection	Seeks empathy (may not have many peers)
Leadership Roles	Unable/unwilling to lead	Prefers not to lead	Selectively enjoys leading others	Lives to lead
Learning Style	Non-experimental	Tentatively experimental	Occasionally experimental	Actively experimental

who have not had such experience. In addition, it is hoped that researchers will conduct studies that examine how technology tools are affecting the ways in which managers informally learn and/or engage themselves in critical reflectivity. Finally, comparison studies including such population variables as younger managers and less experienced workers would enhance understanding of these critical issues.

I believe that the academic model—a combination of two or more types of work that may include consulting, teaching, writing, or other forms of income-producing work—is slowly becoming the American model of professional work, and not just for experienced professionals. Only further research and a reexamination of how and why people learn to master environmental change will test this belief.

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