

Learning from Experience

To move from organizational insanity to enterprise instancy, leaders must break existing orthodoxies by engaging the organization in experiences that reframe its limiting beliefs and change its restrictive behavior. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



Tony O'Driscoll is regional managing director of Duke CE in Singapore, where he focuses on identifying and implementing next-generation learning strategies and approaches that accelerate the development of Leadership Sense-Abilities in this rapidly growing part of the world.

As someone who lived on four continents and attended 14 different schools before university, I am a poster child for the adage, “Experience is the greatest teacher.”

I will never forget the experiences I endured during the first two decades of my life as I repeatedly struggled to learn a new language or assimilate to a new culture that was foreign to me. While painful at the time, there is little doubt in my mind that these experiences were both foundational and formative in shaping the human being who writes these words today.

Korn Ferry defines learning agility as “*the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time situations.*” For me, the process of undergoing multiple experiences of unlearning what I believed to be true in order to create the space to embrace something new has been instrumental in cultivating my personal learning agility.

The modern-day enterprise lives in an era of “Digital Darwinism” where markets shift in the blink of an eye, disruptive technologies wipe out age-old industries at unprecedented rates, and previously successful offerings are rendered obsolete almost overnight. To avoid extinction in an environment where the only constant is change, leaders must ensure that their organizations become more responsive to unanticipated market shifts, more resilient to unpredicted technological disruptions, and more adaptive to unforeseen deviations.

In short, to avoid extinction, leaders need to cultivate the capacity for instancy within their enterprises. Instant enterprises develop a perpetual state of readiness for the unexpected. Readiness is the ability to adopt and adapt what you know and what you can do under a varying and unknown set of environmental circumstances.

THE EXPERIENCE PARADOX

Many of the challenges leaders face in dealing with Digital Darwinism today closely resemble those I experienced during my youth. In describing the paradox of leveraging the wisdom of experience, Clay Christensen notes, “*Nothing sets us up for future failure more than the experience of prior*

success.” Most organizations today go through a cycle where they successfully see and seize a market opportunity and build the competencies and capabilities required to better capitalize on that opportunity while simultaneously creating barriers to entry for competitors. Over time, however, these very same capabilities become structural and procedural rigidities that ultimately manifest as cultural orthodoxies that calcify the belief system within the organization. What began as the pursuit of opportunity culminates in the adoption of crippling orthodoxies that undermine the organization’s learning agility.

Paradoxically, while experience may be the cause of crippling organizational orthodoxies, it also may be the source of the solution to overcome them. In order for people and organizations to change, they must undergo an experience that compels them to unlearn what they know to be true to create the space to embrace something new. Through such experiences, people cultivate the willingness to take on new behaviors that drive different actions that yield differentiated results.

WILL BEFORE SKILL

Lasting behavior change begins with cultivating a visceral understanding of “why” transformation is required on both a personal and organizational level. Once this “why” has been established, the intrinsic motivation to know “what” to do and “how” to do it follows naturally. In short, when driving behavior change within organizations, the cultivation of “will” always must precede the development of “skill.”

Einstein defines insanity as “*doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.*” To move from organizational insanity to enterprise instancy, leaders must break existing orthodoxies by engaging the organization in experiences that reframe its limiting beliefs and change its restrictive behavior.

The first step in this transformative journey begins with leaders themselves being willing to learn from experience and being mindful about when to apply the wisdom of experience and when to ignore it. **■**