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MAXIMIZING RESULTS

A SNAPSHOT OF IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS

Based on the advisory work of David Seregow, Ed. D.

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IS YOUR ORGANIZATION LEARNING AND IS IT LEARNING FASTER THAN THE COMPETITION?

The ability of an organization to learn faster than its competition may be its only sustainable competitive advantage. Success in the market place is now defined by how fast new knowledge, skills, and processes are diffused throughout the company.

But for many companies, the issue isn't the speed of organizational learning but whether or not the organization is learning at all. Often isolated in specific functional areas such as HR or sales, learning rarely realizes its full potential as a corporate core competency.

Because markets change, technologies proliferate, competitors increase, and products become obsolete before they're introduced, only those companies that continuously create and apply new knowledge throughout the organization will be successful.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, says it well - "Even a business that's taken thirty years to build can be lost in two years if it doesn't adapt and change" (in Organizational Learning: The Key Management Innovation).

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FROM INDIVIDUAL TO ORGANIZATION

In most organizations, learning is highly structured, explicit, and targeted to the individual. Although formalized learning is an important foundation and a place to begin, it is unable to capture and diffuse the highly unstructured, informal, often implicit, or tacit, learning that drives innovation.

To have strategic impact, the definition of learning must expand to include the collective knowledge, skills, experience, and insight of individuals as well as teams, business units, customers, stakeholders, partners, and others.

FROM SKILLS TRAINING TO CONTINUOUS INNOVATION

At a very high level, the various forms of learning can be grouped into three broad categories: organizational, formal, and deep.

Organizational learning

- Gives special attention to the secondary learning that results from the formal and deep learning.
- Focuses primarily on what individuals, teams, and others learn while doing the company's business.
- Is about both explicit and tacit knowledge, with tacit knowledge often having the greatest value to the organization.

Formal learning:

- Consists of the courses and workshops regularly offered to employees.
- Focuses on the individual and, in some cases, intact teams.
- Develops the knowledge and skills required to perform specific job-related tasks.
- Learning is explicit—can be documented and easily shared--and can have an immediate impact on work performance.

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Deep learning:

- Happens more informally as individual employees continuously:
 - Study on their own.
 - Spend time thinking about and rehearsing what they learn.
 - Gain experience on the job.
 - Regularly network and share information with others that have similar interests.
- Builds on formal learning, yet happens over time and grows with experience.
- Is commonly referred to as expertise, and is the source of innovation.
- Is mostly tacit—very hard, if not impossible, to document and easily share.

MOVING BEYOND THE HR FUNCTION TO CORPORATE CORE COMPETENCY

Here are ten recommendations for beginning the process of transforming learning into a core corporate competency and enhancing the speed at which your organization learns:

1. As part of formal learning, ensure that everyone in the organization understands the company's business strategy, products and services, markets and competition, and success factors. This is critical to developing the context in which new formal and deep learning can take place. Also focus on helping smart people—your employees—to become exceptional learners.
2. Develop a culture of feedback and disclosure.

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3. Encourage and reward continuous formal and deep learning. Ensure employee compensation reflects collaborative learning, even with sales personnel who may also be compensated for individual sales.
4. Develop processes for quickly and continuously creating, diffusing, and applying knowledge throughout the organization. Identify what's critical to know and what's not. Avoid overload--not all knowledge is worth capturing.
5. Ensure that your most valuable employees—those that have significant, direct impact on the company's ability to meet customer needs—have ample time and resources for personal study, networking, and the sharing of information with others with similar interests. Also ensure ample time to think about, experiment with, and rehearse what they learn. Be patient and don't expect immediate payback.
6. Encourage the transfer of tacit knowledge through communities of practice, networking, and regular face-to-face meetings. Also encourage the transfer of tacit knowledge through mentoring and by including senior talent on strategic teams. Remember, tacit knowledge is very difficult, if not impossible, to document and face-to-face communication is the best way to transfer it.
7. Enhance access to your intellectual capital by developing employee yellow pages that identify each employee's unique knowledge and skills. Within and between functions, find out who needs what information and from whom.
8. Speed up the application of new ideas by streamlining the decision-making and execution processes. Empower employees to make decisions.

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9. Develop organizational learning goals. For example, require each group and/or function to find five ways to improve products and services each quarter. As another example, require business units to generate thirty percent of their gross income from products and services that are less than three years old.
10. Recognize and celebrate any movement toward shared learning.

Organizational learning applies to the entire organization. It embodies the collective knowledge, skills, experience, and insight of individuals as well as teams, business units, customers, stakeholders, partners, and others.

So ask yourself—is your organization learning and is it learning faster than the competition?

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