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# Learning: Your Suppleness Quotient

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At what point do you begin to be old? When the first gray hair appears? When you feel stiff after sitting through a 90-minute airplane ride? When your radio listening is confined to “golden oldies”? “When I think of people who are older chronologically but seem

young at heart, there’s a notable continued curiosity about the world,” says a colleague. “It relates to still being in the learning mode. Think about infants: They have their senses wide open, taking in a lot and trying to make sense of it all the time. It’s natural for us, when we’re children, to formulate ideas about the world around us and then to discard them when better ideas come along. There’s a link between youth and learning, just as there’s a link between youth and flexibility or suppleness.”

Just as physical suppleness keeps our bodies moving despite difficulties, mental suppleness allows us to keep up in a world in which the half-life of best practices is getting shorter and shorter. Suppleness is important for individuals but also for corporate cultures. In short, one indicator of business viability is a kind of “Suppleness Quotient.” And that is

linked to “learning mode.”

In their infancy, organizations are wide open to information, especially feedback from the marketplace, which fosters a learning/growth cycle. What happens next? Typically, having achieved a level of success, the company settles into a pattern that will allow it to capitalize on the business model it has honed. For example, a client of ours, launched in the late 1990s, refined its offering based on customer feedback. It quickly found a few things that worked: In five years, it scored \$500 million in annual revenue and \$1 billion in market capitalization. Assuming that the initial patterns could be a model for everything, the leader imposed rigor around a singular M.O. All too soon, however, the rigor snapped into rigidity, and the firm faltered.

Contrary to that is WD-40. About 10 years ago, President/CEO Garry

Ridge recognized that his company’s reliance on a single product was double-edged: It reaped the benefits of icon status, but it was tipping into stagnation. To kick growth back into high gear, Ridge drove to create a learning culture. WD-40 was a \$116 million company in 1996; in FY 2004, it recorded sales of \$242.25 million. The most important change Ridge made, from our viewpoint,

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was to institutionalize a greater comfort level with mistakes.

“A learning moment is the moment you recognize either a positive or negative outcome of an action,” Ridge has said in multiple interviews, recently in *The Wall Street Journal* (May 23, 2006). “But what it

really is, is a culture where people are applauded and rewarded for sharing what works and what doesn't work. It's a freedom culture. It is one that takes away fear." Ridge reports that he has one sign on his door that says "Intellectual Collision Zone" and another announcing a "Blame-Free Zone."

In other words, every failure is a learning opportunity. Everything that goes wrong contains a nugget of gold—something you can learn about your company to make it better. As Thomas Edison famously said, "If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward." And as described by MIT's Peter Senge, influential author of *The Fifth Discipline*, a learning organization is "a group of people who are continually enhancing their capabilities to create what they want to create."

Yet the fear of making a mistake or of not knowing is pervasive. All sorts of cultural influences reinforce the feeling that it is downright dangerous not to "know." In families, the traditional father/mother role model is one of knowing. In school, we stop asking "stupid questions" to avert ridicule by our peers. By the time we get into business, we've learned to form an opinion as soon as we come across new data. The Suppleness Quotient has been lowered. And that, we believe, is the single greatest contributor to failed change initiatives and organizational downfalls.

The first step to restoring your Suppleness Quotient is to recognize threats to a learning culture. They include:

- ◆ Reluctance to conduct a post-mortem after a problem has occurred or to perform such an

analysis only to assign blame.

- ◆ Failure to set up performance metrics. This is often due to a perception that the purpose of measurement is to assess pass/fail, reward/punishment instead of to catch when things aren't optimal or going as desired so that they can be improved.

- ◆ Data analysis in service of verification of beliefs instead of a no-agenda exploration.

However your organization "scores" on these threats, you can take steps to nurture a learning culture:

- ◆ Let information in without judging it. Don't process it too fast; stay curious. If you realize that you are judging something different as "wrong," use that as reminder to yourself: "This is an opportunity to learn something. The other person has either different data or different assumptions. I could learn from them, or they could learn from me." Realize that we always have something to learn and also to teach.

- ◆ Check out Six Sigma, the system made famous by GE that puts structure around commitment to higher quality. "The central idea behind Six Sigma is that if you can measure how many 'defects' you have in a process, you can systematically figure out how to eliminate them and get as close to 'zero defects' as possible," GE's website explains. We've seen Six Sigma misunderstood so that it becomes shorthand for calling people to task. That's 180 degrees off the basic philosophy, which is to delve for the root causes of problems, extracting lessons from *individual missteps* in order to make *systemic improvements*.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be hard to foster a learning culture because *learning mode* is ac-

tually hard-wired into every human being. We are biological organisms; our bodies are constantly changing—for example, our outer layer of skin regenerates about every four weeks. Coping with different stimuli every day, continually adapting and changing, our bodies are constantly in *learning mode*.

Our conscious mind, the faculty that uses day-to-day information to process work, often doesn't seem to be learning things. Unless we are applying effort to the process—analyzing, sorting, memorizing—we feel that we aren't doing *anything*, that we're ensconced in the familiar. We don't realize that, by just being alive, we're taking in millions of bits of data each day. We're always picking things up—trying out new routines, tasting new recipes. In a day, we might walk by a store we've never seen, read the newspaper, or notice a new product advertised on a billboard. Or we may come home from work and watch our children do something they picked up at school. It's all new; it's all fresh. We may not think of it as learning, but it is.

If we stay open and curious, as individuals and as organizations, we'll find so much data and stimuli to learn from that we'll constantly be in learning mode. And, in the way that really matters, we'll be forever full of promise and possibilities. In other words, we'll be young. ■

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