ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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Transformative Learning in Human Resources

Staff training is a necessary step for a company that wants to grow. The challenge is to avoid that greater competence is accompanied by less open-mindedness with regard to possible decision alternatives.

Learning is not enough

Imagine the scenario: Your company is booming. It is one of those dynamic SMEs that has been able to find the right solution to a problem. Your product took time to establish itself: adjustments had to be made to understand what the market was asking for. There were many difficulties, but you were quick and competent in dealing with them, and fortune smiled on you. The first phase is complete. Now we must grow. New collaborators have arrived, more will come. Your Human Resources have set up training and mentoring programmes for them. The workload is adequate and the newcomers are good. Yet, something does not seem to be going right.

Soon you realise that your organisation is not as vital as it used to be: new employees seem to repeat the same mistakes, even after passing all the tests at the end of their training; their managers complain that they do their own thing in the end; salespeople criticise customer assistants, who take it out on the planners. Few feel they are being listened to; many notice problems that seem to come back again and again.

What your company is going through is a **crisis of organisational growth**. Luckily for you, this is a happy problem: a problem that is better to have, since the alternative would be worse. You just have to figure out how best to solve it.

According to the model created by Professor Larry Greiner, there are a few successive stages in the growth of a company:

- The **Creativity** phase
- The **Direction** phase
- The **Delegation** phase
- The **Co-ordination** Stage
- The **Collaboration** Stage
- The **Alliances** phase

Each of these phases is punctuated by a transition phase that may present more or less cautious crises, in order:

- The **Leadership** crisis
- The **Autonomy** crisis
- The crisis of **Control**
- The crisis of **Bureaucracy**
- The **Growth** Crisis
- The **Identity** Crisis

In the beginning, the enterprise is driven by **Creativity**, where a few people make quick decisions, concentrate on essential activities and are privy to all information. As soon as the activities and people increase, a clear corporate **Leadership** emerges, which will initiate the **Management** phase, in which managers are appointed for the different functions and mid-level management is defined to support the founders. The training of personnel directly involved in the value chain is important: salespeople, customer care and marketing employees must know how to value the work of those who create the product.

As the growth of activities and personnel continues, the need for greater autonomy leads to the **Delegation** phase, in which managers are granted increasing decision-making autonomy. This is a delicate phase for the cohesion and future growth of the company: some managers may not have the appropriate skills for more complex management or may find it difficult to grant autonomy to their more qualified employees. It becomes necessary to reflect on their training or replacement. Your company

may find itself in this situation, with management and senior management seeing their control challenged by the demands of growth if it is to remain dynamic and competitive.

This crisis can be overcome by reaching a stage of **Coordination** between the procedures of the different activities. In addition to the training of employees and management, you will have to train all staff in the company's procedures and values in order to guide the autonomy of the company areas.

When you reach a significant size, it may be necessary to resort to **Alliances**, where your company may have to acquire other companies or outsource certain functions. Here the problem will be to maintain a unique corporate identity. At all levels of personnel training, reminders of corporate values and culture will be important to ensure that the various companies in the group fully share them.

The sum more than the parts

Of course, not all growth follows exactly the same path, but whatever stage your company is in, at least two organisational issues are constant:

- **Train your employees** in their tasks
- **Adapting the organisation and procedures** to secure the growth path

The two problems influence each other. In order to grow your company, you need your colleagues to learn how best to perform their increasingly complex tasks: you need to consider **continuous training**, in all its forms. In particular eLearning, for the various advantages it offers. But to do this, you also need to make it clear to Human Resources and Management that the evolution that your organisation will be able to sustain depends on the characteristics of your people and your skills capital.

Staff training adapts to the organisation; the growing organisation adapts to the trained staff. If one is not performed at its best, the other suffers as well. **Training without organisational growth is short of breath; the organisation without continuous training is paralysed.**

Are you about to land in some foreign market? Your new salespeople will need to be familiar with the cultural differences between countries: it is not enough to know how to sell, you need training in internationalisation, perhaps some Business English courses. You may also need to adapt your reporting systems to understand how international expansion is progressing and after that, revise your decision-making procedures. You are good managers: you know that organisational crises are physiological and can be addressed and resolved before they escalate; but you also know that **incomplete training can undermine organisational growth**.

It is not enough for you and your staff to learn new procedures if you do not adapt them to a changing structure. It is not enough to acquire new skills, perhaps at advanced levels: you need the **relationship between individual and organisation to be part of your mindset**. Your country managers will need to organise their teams as well as possible, but also be able to recognise and adapt when other markets require more corporate resources. Similarly, the salespeople reporting to them will need to be able to propose changes to procedures when a few occur.

Transformative Learning

From a training point of view, the risk is that more operational skills are accompanied by less open-mindedness with respect to possible decision alternatives: I have learnt to kick the perfect free kick for a goal, so I will always try to get the ball to the same spot on the pitch before shooting. How can mental and organisational **flexibility** be maintained once new skills have been learnt? **Transformative Learning** can help.

The underlying objective of this approach is to enable a student or learner to integrate new ideas to **solve problems creatively** and adapt to change. One could say, move from know-how to know-why.

According to this theory, experiences that challenge a learner's deep-seated beliefs are those that can prompt **deep reflection on one's own mental patterns**. When confronted with a problem for which the tools one has are not effective, students are forced to think creatively according to a four-step path:

- Confrontation with a problem that disorients, that challenges one's skills and beliefs
- From which a critical reflection on one's own limitations and alternatives is generated
- The recognition that others have also undertaken a similar transformation, which encourages greater collaboration and definition of roles
- Through collaboration, new shared ideas can emerge and the individual's behaviour can integrate better with the group

Transforming people, transforming businesses

Learning processes are the focus of several psychological theories: from behaviourism to cognitivism to constructivism. Transformative Learning focuses on learning in adults. The basic idea is that the **Instructional Designer** structures the training course by emphasising disorienting experiences. A course should first raise doubts, then provide certainty: shake the foundations to strengthen the structure.

This approach can also have **drawbacks**: not everyone likes to feel disoriented when faced with a task. Especially in adults, questioning acquired skills and one's own mental patterns can be emotionally and professionally frustrating. During the eLearning course, your installation technicians may convince themselves that someone is thinking of replacing them if the experience proves too frustrating. For a course to be successful, it is debatable whether the objectives are clear and the environment reassuring: it is the mindset to be formed, not the people.

For this to happen, it is necessary to foster a **corporate culture that rewards attempt** more than it punishes error: the best way not to get bogged down in the crisis of control or bureaucracy is to allow free initiative to formulate proposals, to be carefully examined only later. More brainstorming and less conformism. If at the end of the course, your salespeople propose to sell refrigerators to the Eskimos, they may be considering the effects of global warming.

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