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FOOD FOR THOUGHT SINCE 2011

THINKING BIG ABOUT THE ROLE OF LEARNING IN ORGANIZATIONS

A CONVERSATION WITH NIGEL PAINE

Nigel Paine is a workplace learning expert and a change-focused leader. As a strategic thinker, he motivates, leads and drives organizations forward to deliver business and training objectives. In his books and articles, he re-examines learning organizations and learning culture.

In the introduction of your book "Workplace learning: How to build a culture of continuous employee development", you mention that it was written out of a sense of frustration. Learning culture seems to be everywhere but often times, it remains superficial and organizations miss the mark. Although every organization has been trying to grasp and manifest the concept of a learning culture, there are still a lot of misconceptions. What myths or misconceptions would you like to get rid of?

I would love to get rid of the assumption that a learning culture is easy. People seem to think that it's something you can switch on and off, like a light switch. My big frustration is when people tell me that they've just started a corporate academy and, therefore, their organization has a learning culture. Or when they say "we have installed an LXP, now we have a learning culture." That is naïve, wrong and it devalues the complexity of what it takes to build a learning culture. And, more importantly, it devalues what a learning culture can offer an organization. Lots of organizations have a culture in which learning is permitted,

respectable and encouraged. But that is not a learning culture. Having smart and confident individuals is nowhere near sufficient and can sometimes even be counterproductive. It can put teams up against each other. If you've got an organization full of individuals thinking about themselves, all of the benefits that a learning culture offers are lost.

In fact, a learning culture transcends the individual level. In an organization with a learning culture, learning happens in the spaces between people. It's all about insights being shared rapidly within the organization, the organization's ability to adjust and the connections between people. Organizations that continue to increase pathways and make them more dense, have the ability to behave and change smarter. One person is nowhere near as smart as twenty people working together in focus. No matter how smart one person is, twenty people will always be able to pivot better. On top of that, people will always come and go. That is a certainty. In a learning culture, someone's expertise is everywhere in the organization - and it stays there when that person leaves. If you don't have a learning culture, the organization is left with a big whole every time someone leaves.

In the past year, we have seen those organizations that can adapt and those who can't. It has nothing to do with how smart their people are. It has everything to do with the ability to exchange, share and make decisions collectively. This is a long way from saying "you have permission to do as many courses as you like." That is not a learning culture, that is a culture of learning.

> ## "A culture of learning vs. a learning culture"

You talk about making better decisions, behaving in a smarter way, adapting rapidly, … Learning culture is not as fuzzy as people may think it is. It's all about business alignment and driving the business objectives. On a podcast, you even said "If there's no business benefit, don't do it. If you can't make a business case, there shouldn't be a project." For me, that shows the difference between treating learning as a goal as opposed to treating learning as a means to an end?

Exactly. Learning has to have a focus and a purpose. It's about making the organization more agile and more expert. This is incredibly important. If you don't understand that, you have a lesser understanding about the role of learning in organizations.

People have different views of learning culture, which sometimes leads to fuzzy ideas and even cynicism. But the fact that people have destroyed the concept of a learning culture by misunderstanding it, does not mean we can't fight to get the concept back again.

People often ask me to give them "two things to build a learning culture". It's not that simple. There's no acronym, no predetermined roadmap. It's a delusion is that everything needs to be simple. People ask me "How do I do this by Friday?" You can't. You can get started by Friday but it's going to take time. You've got to focus on the business. What does YOUR business need?

"Never accept an order."

Could you provide any tips for learning teams that want to move away from their role as an order-taker and want to align more with the business?

First of all, you should never accept an order. Order taking is easy, but it's not satisfactory. Instead, ask why the order is needed. Explore the issue and talk to the people involved. Sometimes, you'll be told shut up. But sometimes, people will find it to be incredibly helpful and you'll do a completely different job than usual. That's when you build momentum for change.

Better conversations are the key to building a real learning culture. It's about listening to people, thinking through their role and re-aligning. By doing that, you change the conversation. And you will start to understand profoundly what is going wrong in the organization. What are the deficits of the organization? What bad decisions and poor investments is it making? What is holding people back? Then, you can build your focus around unblocking the challenges that people face.

It's a challenging journey but it's definitely doable. And now is the right time to start doing it. Businesses are beginning to see the problem with people's lack of initiative, collaboration and inability to solve problems. They just haven't connected it to a different kind of learning yet. Learning teams can help them understand the problem in learning terms.

Lots of businesses are wondering "how do we decrease the cost of L&D?" That is the wrong question. It should be "how do we increase value of L&D?". By focusing on impact. We should think bigger, solve communication problems and build communities. Learning is a means to an end, not the end.

You often talk about building trust, communicating, engagement … These are all crucial elements in order for people to want to learn and to be able to learn. How do you create such an environment?

That's not a solo job of the learning team. . A learning culture almost self-generates, but you have got to fix the important things first. You

have got to scan the environment and detect the blockages in the organization. If you don't fix the quality of leadership, trust, engagement, … you can't have autonomy, purpose or collaboration.

Trust is a big one, for example. In a low trust organization, people don't share or collaborate. They think about themselves and go in defense mode by pushing blame, trying to avoid mistakes being pinned to them and always attempting to look good. Whereas in high trust organizations, people operate for the benefit of the organization as a whole. That results in less arrogance and better communication. Admitting what you don't know instead of screaming about what you do know, is a profound element of trust. You can't build a learning culture with people who know everything. Like Satya Nadella said: "an organization of know-it-alls has to become an organization of learn-it-alls."

There's a hierarchy to knowing, doing and being. Learning teams that only focus on knowing and doing, are missing the point. Learning is about helping the organization perform, with all its components: the human, skills, attitude and mindset component. Skills out of context, without attitude or mindset, are a waste of time. That's been made massively clear in the last year. The pandemic has shown that we are real people, not just "workers". There was a dramatic increase in mental health problems, so many people have come off the rails in the last year. We need to have a holistic view on people, organizations and their learning.

Learning professionals that have been focusing on communities rather than courses, are more successful. That's a real differentiator. There's a huge difference between asking people "What do you need to be able to do your job?" or "Here is a list of courses to complete by Friday". I think it's clear which option is going to allow people to do their best work.

Learning professionals should start having those honest conversations: Is there anything we can do to help you be more effective in your job at the moment? Are you able to deal with what you do? Unfortunately, that is not what a learning professional does. Most times, they just say "here's our catalogue" of "here's a course".

I would like to invite them to think big about the important role of learning in organizations. If you think big, you will have a job for life. You will help the organization survive and thrive. Or you could supply courses. Which one do you pick? ∎

Ning De Baere supports organizations in building a learning culture that goes beyond formal training. She is an L&D consultant at De Opleidingscoach and has expertise in instructional design, on-the-job-support and job-specific training programs.