

# Learning Mode

## Adapting and Innovating Is Crucial for Teams



Teams in the modern organizational world are awash in change and confronted by continually shifting opportunities and threats. Those that do not learn and adapt are bound to fail. There are four general practices teams can engage in to ensure they are learning as they work: *establishing a climate for learning, continually assessing team members' work together, working with a team coach, and managing knowledge effectively.* The team leader plays a central role in all of these efforts.

**A**s teams and teamwork are increasingly woven into the fabric of global organizations' operations, a major question arises: how do teams learn? Management strategist Peter Senge, in his classic book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday, 1990), talked about organizations "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." Learning teams are

often at the core of learning organizations, so it's important to gain an understanding of team learning.

Teams in the modern organizational world are awash in change and confronted by continually shifting opportunities and threats. Those that do not learn and adapt are bound to fail. Recent research has shown that teams that regularly engage in learning behaviors perform better than those that don't.

There are four general practices teams can engage in to ensure they are learning as they work:

*Establishing a climate for learning.* Taking early action to create a

by **Dennis Lindoerfer**

learning climate in a team is a critical prerequisite to rapid learning in later stages of team development and performance. Norms and corollary practices must be established to create and maintain a learning climate.

Amy Edmondson, a professor of leadership and management at Harvard Business School, studied a diverse array of teams in a large manufacturing company and grouped them into *high-learning* and *low-learning* teams. She also examined the teams' performance. Her findings provide a framework for team learning and identify several factors that influence learning and performance in teams. She and several other researchers have identified an *action/reflection* cycle as the engine of team learning.

For a team to achieve consistently high performance levels, its members must actively ask questions, discuss errors, engage in experimentation and reflection, and seek external feedback. In high-learning teams, mistakes are analyzed to determine how improvements might be made. Feedback, both positive and negative, is considered to be essential and helpful rather than critical. The results of this type of analysis are then converted into the next round of team action, followed by a period of reflective analysis.

To willingly engage in these learning behaviors, a team must gain a shared belief that no member of the team will be embarrassed, rejected, or punished for speaking up and identifying errors or problems. Team members must also believe that the team will not let itself be unduly demoralized by setbacks or failures and that team members will support each other during challenging times. Without these pivotal beliefs, team members will not take the interpersonal risks involved in team learning.

Edmondson refers to this shared sense of supportiveness, respect, and trust among team members as *psy-*

*chological safety*. A climate of psychological safety in high-learning teams allows team members to experiment, take risks, make errors, and ask for help. This climate is necessary to make learning possible. In low-learning teams, an emphasis on criticism and a general lack of trust have often been observed.

One of the most reliable indicators of teams that learn well is the visible and effective conflict of ideas. In great teams, conflict is frequent and productive. In lesser-performing teams, conflict is typically suppressed below the surface or it erupts in a highly polarizing fashion.

To achieve healthy group dynamics, teams must move from avoiding conflict to confronting it constructively. Team learning dictates that teams move from constructive confrontation to leveraging previously unseen knowledge at the interface of the tension. Teams that actively learn from their ongoing work together develop conflict management and resolution skills for a larger purpose than just attending to group maintenance. They develop these skills in order to surface new ideas, knowledge, and options.

*Continually assessing team members' work together.* This practice requires team members to use some portion of each meeting to examine how they are working together, to identify what is effective about their working methods and what is not, and to make decisions about altering their ways of operating to increase their effectiveness.

Among the numerous metrics that teams can use to assess their work are the

- New knowledge and skills acquired by team members
- Adherence to norms set at the team's inception
- Progress against performance goals
- Degree of team member satisfaction

- Volume of task-relevant information brought into play
- Degree of flexibility in the use of authority in the team
- Effectiveness of team decision making
- Performance against stakeholder expectations

Team members need to agree to one or more of these types of benchmarks and assess themselves against them during the last fifteen minutes or so of each working session. They need to plan for adjustments needed for the next meeting based on this assessment, and the next meeting should begin with a brief review of these adjustments. This process will dramatically increase team learning and pay tremendous dividends in performance gains over time.

In addition to this brief and ongoing assessment practice, learning teams can perform a couple of periodic assessment activities. The first is the *after-action review*. This is a more comprehensive assessment of the team's functioning and is much more thorough than the team meeting assessments. Learning teams often schedule such reviews to occur during naturally evolving junctures or milestones in their work. At the designated time, an entire meeting or two will be spent examining the team's interactions so far, articulating best practices, and developing plans for remediating areas of poor functioning or deficits in skills or knowledge. This practice can

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enable a team to make a quantum leap in its level of performance in the next round of task work.

Another potentially useful periodic activity is completion of a formal *team assessment instrument*. There are many such tools on the market, and the structured, focused feedback they provide can give a team great clarity about what's working and what's not.

Team members will need to set aside sufficient time and energy to explore the feedback from such an instrument and its implications for their functioning. As a result of these explorations, decisions must be made, and later implemented, to alter the team's operating methods. Repeated use of the same assessment instrument allows a team to monitor its performance improvement over time.



**A coach can help team members become more aware of the effective and ineffective aspects of their functioning.**

*Working with a team coach.* The chosen coach should be skilled in team dynamics and process facilitation. He or she can work directly with the team to help the members become more aware of the effective and ineffective aspects of their functioning. The coach can provide the team with information about alternative approaches, encouragement for efforts to use this new information, and feedback about the impact of these efforts.

Coaches can also facilitate the ongoing and periodic assessments. This practice allows the members of the team to participate in these activities without dual responsibilities. It

also lets the coach observe the team focusing specifically on itself and its work processes rather than on the official tasks at hand. This enables the coach to gain additional insight and perspective on the team's range of operating dynamics and skills.

*Managing knowledge effectively.* At least two aspects of knowledge management further team learning: capturing and disseminating emerging knowledge, and acquiring and disseminating new knowledge relevant to the team's tasks.

Capturing and disseminating emerging knowledge requires a systematic way of handling the team's ongoing learning. Teams may take widely differing approaches to doing this, but it is essential that they use some disciplined approach that captures lessons learned and best practices from their work and disseminates these among the team members and others in the organization. The choice of method will be driven to a large extent by the information technology resources available to the team and the knowledge management norms and expected practices in the larger organization.

A learning team can be encouraged to devote time and energy to knowledge management by incorporating this expectation into the team's original charter and its performance norms and metrics.

In today's complex business environment, it is rare for any team to have among its members all the knowledge it needs to be effective in accomplishing its mission. Consequently, all teams must have boundaries that are permeable enough for taking in additional information from outside, and effective mechanisms for conducting this process.

Sources for acquiring and disseminating new, relevant knowledge include research partners, technical experts, competitors, business partners, stakeholders, and other teams both inside and outside the organization.

A team norm and accompanying practices for seeking out, incorporating, and disseminating new, relevant information from outside the team should be set, modeled, and consistently reinforced by the team leader from the beginning of the team's life. Information access and dissemination tools must be made available to the team. If these are not available from the organization, the team will need to develop this capacity itself.

Learning teams acquire and use knowledge as a by-product of how they work. They are continually stockpiling intellectual capital for themselves and their organizations. If intellectual capital is truly the competitive arena of the current business world, learning teams can provide a potent competitive advantage.

## PROACTIVE LEADERS

A great deal of responsibility falls on the team leader to initiate and maintain the requisite norms and practices. When teams are at an early stage in their development, the assumptions and expectations of team members will be driven foremost by what the leader demonstrates in his or her own behavior, not by what is written down or inferred from visible designs, procedures, rituals, and published philosophies.

In high-learning teams, leaders are proactive and engaged rather than distant. They take action to establish a climate of psychological safety in the team. They operate as committed coaches rather than as supervisors. If the leader is supportive, coaching oriented, and has a nondefensive response to challenges and questions, team members are more likely to conclude that the environment is safe for learning. In contrast, if the leader displays punitive and authoritarian behaviors, team members' inherent willingness to take interpersonal risks, such as sharing the responsibility for errors or revealing misunderstandings, is likely to be reduced.

In what Harvard Business School's Edmondson has termed *interdisciplinary action teams*—teams in which members with specialized skills must improvise and coordinate their actions in intense, unpredictable situations—the team leader is often in the unique position of seeing the whole picture and understanding how different sources of expertise fit together in the project. As a result, the team leader can help the team create shared meaning about the situations it faces.

Teams that learn new procedures most quickly share three essential characteristics: they are designed for learning, their leaders frame the challenge in such a way that team members are highly motivated to learn, and their leaders' behavior creates an environment of psychological safety that fosters communication and innovation.

Leaders who capitalize on the opportunity to choose particular individuals from relevant specialties reap significant benefits. Selection should be based not only on competence but also on such factors as individuals' ability to work with others, their willingness to deal with new and ambiguous situations, and their confidence in offering suggestions to team members with higher status.

Team members often risk appearing ignorant or incompetent when they suggest or try something new. Neutralizing the fear of embarrassment is necessary to achieve the robust back-and-forth communication among team members required for real-time learning. Teams whose members feel comfortable making suggestions, trying things out that might not work, pointing out potential problems, and admitting mistakes tend to be more successful in learning new procedures.

## **SOCIAL VALIDATION**

Team leaders must first talk directly about the desired learning norms and practices in the opening team meet-

ings and then model the desired behaviors—such as taking personal risks, thinking on the margins, questioning established procedures, and experimenting with new techniques—early and consistently. Subsequently, the leader must respond positively to and overtly protect those who exhibit similar behaviors. He or she must do so until the team members can validate that these are desirable behaviors that will continue to be treated reliably within the team. Only after this social validation occurs can these practices move from the foreground, as an uncertain experiment, to the background, as a shared set of deeply embedded assumptions. Once this occurs, the rate of team learning will increase dramatically.

Aside from establishing and maintaining a productive learning climate, the team leader also plays a key role in the other team learning activities discussed earlier. During the ongoing, end-of-work-meeting team debriefings and the more substantial, periodic after-action reviews and team assessments, the team leader must be both purposeful and participatory. These times in a team's life provide great opportunities for the leader to mitigate power differences that may have arisen in the team by demonstrating his or her own fallibility (commenting on personal teamwork missteps, for example), by encouraging the quieter team members to participate more actively, and by restraining the contributions of more domineering team members. It is also useful to rotate the facilitation of the debriefing and review sessions among the team members, to further spread the use of authority in the team.

In most teams' early life, maintaining the discipline of these reflection sessions and ensuring that the lessons learned and best practices identified are put into play fall to the team leader. As effective learning teams mature and increase their accountability for their work perfor-


mance, these responsibilities begin to be taken on by the team members themselves.

With regard to the practice of having a team coach work periodically with a learning team, the team leader must continually model thoughtful consideration of the coach's observations and suggestions. In their overt relationships with team coaches, leaders illustrate the essential aspects of the relationships that they themselves hope to have with the members of the team.

Lastly, when it comes to learning teams' need to employ effective knowledge management, the team leader is often the shepherd of the processes involved. As with the practices of conducting ongoing and periodic assessments, using knowledge management tools is a discipline that is often initiated and maintained by the team leader, at least in the early life of a learning team. It is only after team members experience the benefits of some of the painstaking activities involved in the codification of new information that they will willingly embrace these processes.

It is worth noting that effective knowledge management always involves boundary spanning. Whether disseminating their own acquired knowledge or seeking new knowledge outside their own domain, teams must reach out to others. Here again the team leader must play a key role in encouraging and modeling the behaviors required of learning teams in reaching outside the sphere of team operations.

## **ADAPT AND INNOVATE**

Teams can be a potent force in the modern organizational world. The dynamic nature of this world requires continual adaptation and innovation. By engaging in the effective learning behaviors outlined in this article, teams can deliver on the tremendous potential they carry. 

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