"Inviting Insights to Work: A Step toward the Learning Organization"

by Patrick Hopp, Ph.D.

I was recently invited to facilitate a two-day offsite meeting for the leaders of Microsoft's market research group. The topic was "Inviting Insights." What they hoped to gain from the meeting was a better understanding of how to take multiple data points from their research findings and use them to arrive at truly meaningful insights to drive business performance. Although they were specifically focused on research data, their challenge was similar to those that face many business leaders today… "How can we learn to take all of this information and use it to improve our business?" A familiar question, but at the heart of it is a deeper question…"How can we learn to learn?"

Psychologists have studied the relationships between problem solving and learning for years. We know that certain conditions make it more likely for people to learn effectively and find insightful answers to complex and challenging problems. One of the more intriguing areas of study is "insight." Insight occurs when you seem to work relentlessly on a problem and then--all of a sudden--as if by magic, the solution suddenly appears to you in a flash. We've all experienced this phenomenon but probably haven't taken the time to ponder it further. Might it be possible to actually learn how to be more insightful? Since Microsoft's session goal was to learn how to generate more insights, I thought this might be worth studying. I reviewed the research on insight, summarized some of the key findings, and then suggested they discuss how the findings applied to their work. Microsoft found this exercise helpful and was able to generate some tangible actions they thought would improve their organization. I hope you do too.

Insights are more likely to occur when the following conditions exist: 1) Psychological Safety, 2) Creative Dissonance, 3) Intrinsic Motivation, and 4) Access to Relevant Information.

1) Psychological Safety

The reason it's difficult to figure out where your car keys are when you're running late is primarily because you're *stressed*. When you relax and allow yourself to get some distance from the problem, you're much more likely to say, "a ha!" A simple lesson, but one that is hard to apply when the pressure is on.

Because most people feel pressure to achieve results quickly, they often feel stressed and consequently pass this stress onto those around them. In unhealthy organizations, this becomes contagious and makes it difficult for anyone to take the necessary risks to innovate and learn. "I think I might know how to improve this, but I remember what happened the last time I made a suggestion," is a familiar sentiment in such organizations. There are countless ways to create stress and undermine psychological safety, but any behavior or policy that causes people to feel threatened or vulnerable will interfere with their ability to learn and arrive at meaningful insights. Do you think your people feel free to challenge, disagree, take risks, and learn from their mistakes? Good, now ask them what *they* think.

2) Creative Dissonance

Think of this term as an unconscious awareness of how your current situation differs from your desired situation. The creative part of your brain can generate some amazing solutions to challenges with seemingly little input from the rest of you. We seem to learn the most when we get out of the way and let it happen. But, in order to do this, we must first try to understand and define the challenge so we can recognize solutions when they appear. We can't find solutions to challenges we are not informed about.

Most business leaders are adept at making people aware of challenges. The trouble is they tend to frame them as "problems" and then pressure others to quickly fix them. When people rush into problem solving mode, an interesting thing happens…they think less clearly and, ironically, are less likely to find solutions. Furthermore, when they do find solutions, they then tend to go right back to doing things the way they did before. In other words*, they really haven't learned anything other than how to escape the discomfort of the pressure.*

Good leaders understand this, and instead of generating discomfort by focusing on problems, they generate creative dissonance by focusing on solutions. They clearly communicate a positive vision of what their organization can achieve and become, then invite everyone to share their dream. This allows people to recognize how their current situation differs from their desired situation and *frees their minds to find creative ways to close the gap*.

Ask yourself:

- Does your organization focus on problems or solutions?
- How clear is your vision for what you want to achieve and become?
- Does everyone share your dream and know their role in making it a reality?

3) Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation exists when we want to do something even without the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. We do it not because we have to, but because we want to. When you were in school, you probably found it easiest to learn when studying subjects that genuinely interested you. Those were likely the subjects that you could most easily relate to your own experience. Outstanding teachers have a way of making even the most archaic subjects interesting and fun by presenting them in ways that clearly link to people's common experiences.

Outstanding leaders make work interesting and fun by following the same approach. Although everyone has unique interests and talents that should be matched appropriately to their roles, there are some commonalities that we all share: A) We need to know our lives have meaning and our work contributes to something important. B) We need a sense of purpose. C) When we believe our work has purpose, we tend to find it intrinsically motivating.

Ask yourself:

- How inspiring is the stated purpose of your company?
- Do you know why your organization exists? (If your answer is, "To make money," you may have a problem.)

4) Access to Relevant Information

This is the most obvious of the conditions for insight. Or is it? We know we need access to good information to make good decisions, but this is easier said than done. Today, information changes quickly and it is sometimes difficult to recognize what is relevant. In their attempt to deal with this challenge, leaders often make one of two mistakes. They either inundate people with information by sending too many emails and scheduling too many meetings, making it next to impossible for people to know what priorities to focus on, or they make information available on a "need to know basis," preventing people from seeing the big picture and forcing them into myopic silos.

The best leaders, and the best organizations, create ways for people to learn from each other by *sharing relevant information freely through well-organized, easily accessed systems and meaningful dialogue*. They then allow enough time for people to reflect on and learn from the information. When insights occur, they are quickly recognized and shared with those who might benefit from them. Does your organization practice this?

The Learning Organization

Good companies know that it pays to invest not only in training, but in learning. In today's fast paced business markets, change and information comes too quickly for leaders to keep everyone fully up-to-speed and educated. Only those organizations that can create sustainable ways for their people to adjust, adapt and respond to situations that they have not been trained for will thrive in these times. Today's leaders need to realize that *their people's performance depends on their ability to learn*.

The term "Learning Organization" was first popularized by Peter Senge in his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline.* Since then, the concept has inspired many organizations to "learn how to learn." Senge defined learning organizations as:

> 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.

While this is an inspiring vision, many leaders feel their organizations are too under staffed or overwhelmed to take on such a challenge. If this is you, I hope you might reconsider. I invite you to reflect on the questions presented here and measure the distance between your current situation and Senge's vision. To travel this distance would be a challenge and a journey, but one with great purpose. With insight, I'm confident you will learn how to take the first step.

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