



## Ghostbusting...what it really takes to help organizations climb bigger hills

**Learning how to deliver superior results faster by motivating people and growing their capability is a key source of shareholder value and competitive advantage for our clients. It is the “magic” that enables all successful organizations to maximize the return on their strategy, assets and investments.**

Evolve exists to enable people to make the impossible possible—to find meaning and excitement in achieving performance that once seemed beyond imagination.

However, learning is a form of personal change that can be resisted as often as it is embraced. It implies the loss involved for the experienced adult in changing their ways. This change is termed “supplative learning,” to be contrasted with simple “additive learning” in that instead of just adding new knowledge or skills, supplative learning calls into question previous ways of acting or prior knowledge, and replaces them.

This paper describes the specific issues around supplative learning and provides key insights on why learning is so difficult based on recent research, and provides tactics on how to facilitate that process.

It began with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage hung a banana on a string with a set of stairs underneath it. Before long, a monkey went to the stairs and started to climb towards the banana. As soon as he touched the stairs, all of the other monkeys were sprayed with cold water. Monkeys hate being sprayed with cold water.



After a while, another monkey made an attempt with the same result - all the other monkeys were sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon, when a monkey tried to climb the stairs, the other monkeys tried to prevent it.

Then one monkey was removed from the cage and replaced with a new one. The new monkey saw the banana and wanted to climb the stairs. To his surprise and horror, all the other monkeys stopped him.

After another attempt and attack, he knew that if he tried to climb the stairs, he would be stopped.

Next, another of the original five monkeys was removed and replaced with a new one. Whenever the newcomer went to the stairs he was stopped by all the other monkeys. The previous newcomer took part in the punishment with the same zeal as the original monkeys.

The same happened when a third original monkey was replaced with a new one. Then a fourth. Then the fifth. Every time the newest monkey took to the stairs, he was stopped by the remaining monkeys. Most of the monkeys that stopped him had no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs or why they were participating in the assault of the newest monkey.

After all the original monkeys had been replaced, none of the remaining monkeys had ever been sprayed with cold water. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approached the stairs to try for the banana.

**“We are all learning, all the time. Our ability to learn is one of mankind’s particular evolutionary gifts. It is in our nature.”**



Historically, the level of success of managerial efforts to realize the potential of an organization is not always great and the ability to do so and sustain the gains is even less so. The common explanation for this lack of success is that well-contrived and well-crafted change initiatives are undermined by a lack of alignment at

senior management levels, or by ineffective communication, or by a high-level of reactive thinking, or by the inability of management to lead or, most likely, by a combination of all these and more. But if we know why change fails, why aren't we more successful?

The reason is that the leaders of most change programs focus on changing things or on managing change and fail to recognize that the primary purpose of such programs should be to provide opportunities for people to learn. To be certain, processes must be improved and better systems implemented for businesses to deliver better results. But in real terms, the limit to such improvement is the capability of the people in the business to make the right things happen. Good change programs use the requirement to implement new systems and processes as the opportunity to learn new skills to make business improvement happen more successfully.

So sustainable improvement requires a shift in the capability of our people, and making big shifts in performance therefore requires big shifts in capability through learning. The difficulty in all this lies in the nature of the learning that must take place, in the consequences of this learning for those that must go through it, and in the possibility of the organization itself rejecting the learning that it needs.

We are all learning, all the time. Our ability to learn is one of mankind's particular evolutionary gifts. It is in our nature. So by the time we have reached positions of seniority and influence in our jobs, we have spent years gathering and adding to our store of what we know and have likely reached close to the summit of what we feel we can achieve at this point.

The analogy of climbing a hill is particularly relevant. It is common to observe that as we get older the rate at which we learn slows until it reaches a point, usually at about the time we are established in more senior positions, where we can be said to have reached our local maximum. We are at the top of our hill. From this point it appears there is nowhere else to go in an upwards direction.

We may continue to add knowledge and update and reclassify what we know, but we are unlikely to make leaps forward.

It is for this reason that it is so common for experienced managers to seem to reach a plateau in terms of performance. And with them the organization. The business treads water, maybe keeps pace with the market and with the competition, but it struggles to leap ahead.

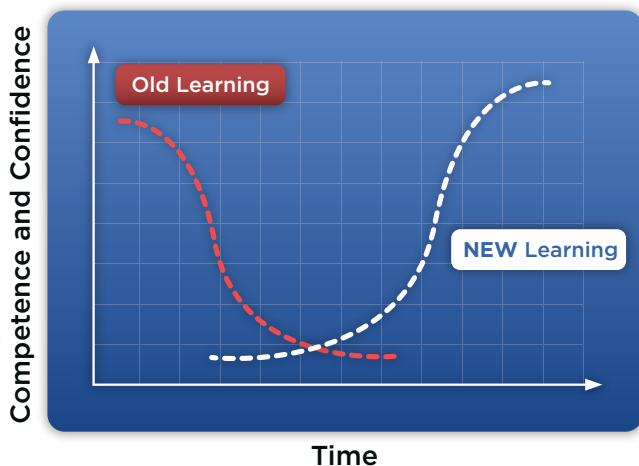
The problem now is that if we are to get any higher in our capability-building journey we have to be able to find and climb a bigger hill. For this to happen, change programs have to specifically address two major barriers that will otherwise fatally impede organizational progress. The first barrier lies within the individual. He or she will have worked hard for a long time to get to the top of the hill they are on today. They have come to rely on and be relied upon for, what they know. In a very powerful way, their current position defines them. It is completely logical for them to resist the notion that they need to move anywhere, since by implication, seeking out a higher peak must involve coming down from where they currently are.

The loss they will feel at having to give up what they have already learned and what has made them successful so far is what is described by James Atherton as the "cost of learning".

This phenomenon is common to all individuals and hence all organizations, and is well illustrated when executives struggle in their own transition from one leadership level to another, often finding it difficult to let go of old habits, and struggling with the fact that the new level requires doing different things – not just more of the same. Without support, the cost of learning for an individual will be too great and the learning journey will be abandoned. So where does the support need to come from?

Well, it should come from the organizational environment in which our executive seeks to grow. But very often the culture of the organization, far from supporting change, is in fact a stealthy and all-pervasive ally in helping our executive ensure that things stay exactly as they are. This second barrier to be overcome was identified and named a long time ago.

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The ancient Greeks established a whole area of study of what they termed the “mythos over logos” argument. The word logic comes from the Greek word logos and refers to the rational understanding of a situation – cause and effect, definable, measurable. Mythos refers to the sum total of everything that makes up a local culture – every belief, mental model, rumor and urban myth. It is so all-pervading that it is virtually impossible, as a member of that culture’s population, to recognize its effects or even its existence.

The mythos over logos argument says that our rationality is in fact defined by our culture – things will only seem logical if they fall within our common body of knowledge as to what can happen here. In other words, the ghosts of the past regulate the understanding of the present.

So at the same time as the individual is resisting the imperative to move personally from his position of comfort and authority at the top of his current hill, the culture of the organization is supporting his position with the argument of “we don’t do that around here, we’ve never done that and we have no experience of being successful beyond what we already do”. It is then likely to support this view by asserting that current performance is as good as it could be and in doing this, not only casts doubt on the need to climb a different hill but also whether such a hill exists at all.

It therefore follows that to begin to make sustainable changes to behavior, there is at the very least a need to

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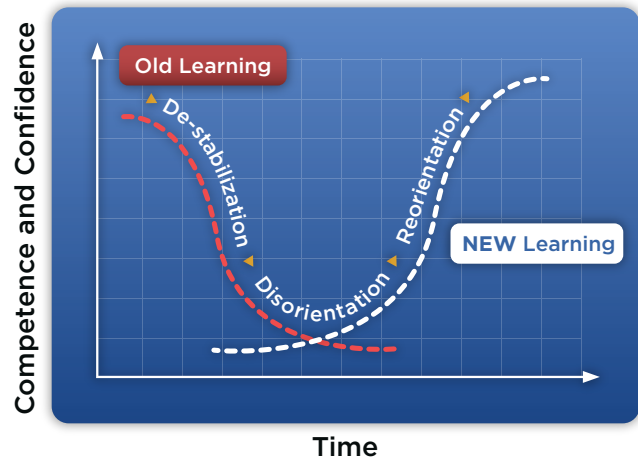
recognize the power of the working culture and create opportunities for individuals to see possibilities outside of its influence. These very particular learning moments must be provided within the implementation process.

These learning moments have been described as Supplative Learning, which can be contrasted

with Additive Learning. Additive Learning is the process of adding new knowledge and experience that build on what we are already. It is useful and is what we tend to do all the time, but it can also cement our position more firmly on the hill we are on. Supplative Learning helps the individual move to a higher level of performance because it recognizes the requirement to leave behind some of what has been learned so far. And because the new learning is through experience it cannot be denied by the learner, and can start to move the boundaries of the prevailing frame of reference and so overcome the constraining effects of culture. If done effectively, a change program can have

the cumulative effect of having many individuals undergo this supplative transformation at a similar time, which again can continue to move the boundaries of what is believed possible. Supplative Learning embraces the sudden lack of competence that the learner will experience as he starts the journey down the hill, looks at the emotional effects and uses them to provide motivation to learn. What can be observed is that two processes take in the learning journey – the loss of the old skill and the acquisition of the new – and together these define a learning trough.

## Facilitating Environment



In considering an implementation strategy from the learning perspective, it therefore becomes necessary to see a need to provide a facilitating environment, to support the person going through the learning process, and particularly to successfully navigate the learning trough. The environment should be a combination of required support and challenge of leaders, peers and sometime external expertise, and structural support in the form of resources, plans, training, and alignment of activities in the business, which should be provided within the architecture of the change initiative.

Critically the facilitating environment must provide the learner with clarity of need to go on the journey (that there is a higher hill) and with hope that the journey can be completed (provided by a good plan and business case, provision of support, examples of how similar transitions have been achieved in the past or elsewhere etc.) and this support must be maintained through the journey or throughout the change program.

For this reason, good change programs will deliver the Supplative Learning moments within a program which has a clear and meaningful results delivery objective and personal wins that the individuals find meaningful has clear themes and content to work on which connect directly to people’s jobs, and which provides the thing to be improved for which new skills are needed. The cumulative effect is to align enough of the organization to the cause to remove or at least lessen the voices

of “we don’t do that around here” that otherwise will sap the energy going into the effort.

With the facilitating environment established, the learner will go through three distinct phases in the Supplative Learning journey.

De-stabilization is the uncomfortable realization that what we’re good at now won’t be enough to achieve our goals. Within the change implementation perspective, it is the effect of actively challenging the individual to confront future needs with present ability. Rigorous facilitation is required for this to occur in most cases as a more general personal dissatisfaction is not enough. In short, it is a necessary function to raise awareness within the individual of their lack of “fitness” for the task ahead.

Not surprisingly, such realization can be difficult and will be resisted.

Disorientation is the repercussion of this awareness and the consequent lack of confidence it engendered. It manifests in many common emotions including denial, anger, blame and self-doubt. The emotional pattern is, of course, subject to personal variance but in all cases facilitation of the decline is crucial as the individual has to be supported to arrive at a position where breakthrough for them is possible (the so-termed “a-ha” moment) rather than having them languish in a state of can’t-go-forward-can’t-go-back.

Reorientation is the process of applying the new learning to the demands of achieving their defined result. With this process happening for enough individuals at the same time, the boundaries of “what is possible here” are redrawn. The ghosts of the past start to be exorcised. At this point the

provision of new tools, models and coaching can accelerate the learning process, providing the means to work in new ways, and creating a feeling of support and motivation following resultant new success.

The above story shows why so many improvement initiatives fail and what so many “how-to” books miss. Far from people’s dissatisfaction and discomfort being a risk to the change program that must be managed and mitigated, it is actually a necessary component that must be maintained in a careful manner. Too often, in an era of empowerment and engagement, we rush to remove the discomfort and frustration felt by our people as they face new and challenging circumstances, simply because we feel uncomfortable ourselves. But in so doing, we remove the

opportunity to solve the real problem we face - that our people have reached a plateau and stopped learning, and that holding the tension that manifests initially as discomfort for long enough is a key step towards helping people move from their comfort zones to wanting to scale new heights.

Just recognizing this fact is not enough, as without recognition for the need for the conditions for Supplative Learning, or the provision of careful facilitation of the appropriate environment and support for people to re-orientate and learn, the process runs a high likelihood of being painful and haphazard. As has often been observed, it can leave individuals, and the organization as a whole, in a worse place than it started, with more ghosts rather than less.

But if the challenge is understood correctly and the right support provided, the process is both stimulating and rewarding. And what is of most value is that once a person has been through the process of genuine Supplative Learning, and has understood both its difficulties and reward, they are much more likely to want to challenge themselves to climb new hills in the future.

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