

Generating a Commitment to Organizational Learning

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If you were to analyze your existing organizational culture, would “commitment to ongoing learning” rate among your highest characteristics? If you could increase the desire among your employees for personal growth, would the health of your organizational processes and results improve?

Adults learn differently from children. An adult authority figure can say to a kid, “Sit down and pay attention. You’ll need to know this as an adult. And you’ll need to know this in three days, because I’m going to test you on it.”

Usually the child will work to master the material just because an authority figure said, “Learn it!” That often doesn’t work with adults. Unless the curiosity is there naturally, many adults have mentally said “good-bye” to their days of education.

However, if you make it easy, interesting, and very relevant to their daily life, you can often engage adults. The objective of this article is to help you implement a routine process for helping members of your team gain new insight and become interested in learning new skills.

About ten years ago, I wrote an article describing how to start a study group. Folks interested in learning together can, over a period of weeks, read a book and discuss its applicability to their work. You can find that article, “Starting a Study Group,” on the Article Archives page of my website.

With the passage of time and with the proliferation of handheld electronic devices, it seems like people read a lot less than in years past. I personally think that’s rather unfortunate, because many smart people have put their very beneficial thoughts down in books.

But there is hope! With the internet, there has been an explosion of short articles on practically any subject you can name! So, I suggest that you start a study group among your leaders (and future leaders) where you focus on a short article instead of a book.

Once you start this process, it can be self-sustaining. Somebody (maybe you?) starts it with a very interesting article that’s relevant to your work. You distribute copies and announce that, at a particular time and place (Wednesday, April 10 at 9:30am in the main conference room), you’ll be leading a half-hour discussion of the article.

When people arrive, make sure everyone has a copy of the article (some people will leave theirs at home or in the office). Give a brief synopsis of the article (no more than three minutes). The purpose of the overview is to introduce the topic for those folks who didn’t read the article. It’s also to offer some perspective on how the article applies to your real work.

Then you ask a series of three or four open-ended questions that cause people to think about and offer ideas on how the article applies in your workplace. Please avoid working any kind of manipulative agenda. Your sole objective should be to stimulate ideas about potential improvements that folks could make in what you do and how you do it.

Before the end of that first meeting, ask “What did we do well today?” and “What could we do better next time we do this?” Capture the ideas and incorporate them into the plan for your next dialogue. Set the time and place for that conversation, and pass out copies of the next article.

By the third meeting, start inviting ideas about your process: how to identify topics to address, suggestions for future articles, ways to share the leadership of the discussion, etc. Can you see how quickly you are able to engage your colleagues in this process? Periodically, evaluate the quality of the conversations, so that energy and interest remain high.

There are, of course, thousands (maybe millions) of articles available on the internet. I recommend a concentration of over 300 of them focused on various aspects of leadership. Most are about one page in length. They are easy to read and very relevant to most workplaces.

Go to my website (see address below). Click on the "Article Archives" page. At the top of the page is a "search" box. Put in something of interest to you (topics such as collaboration, improvement, or servant leadership) and see what pops up.

If you can't find what you want, please let me know that. Your suggestion will be a wonderful gift, as I'll put that topic on my list of future articles!

I hope that you will experiment with setting up this kind of organizational learning process. You'll find that incorporating this process into the fabric of your culture will bring great value!

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