

'Learn, unlearn and relearn'

Leaders must help employees embrace new skills

We live in a world of rapid change. From the economy to technology, many aspects of our lives have changed and will continue to experience dramatic change.

As a learning facilitator, one of the greatest obstacles I observe is the resistance people feel when they realize they have to “unlearn” – when their old habits and behaviors must be replaced by new ways of doing things.

To illustrate, have you ever found yourself driving on the opposite side of the road in a foreign country? How comfortable was it for you to “unlearn” your natural tendencies? When most adults drive, they don't think about every nuance associated with driving – they just do it. However, driving in a foreign country requires a new level of engagement and discipline.

How many times as a leader have you been face-to-face with learning resistance? We are responsible for facilitating the transformation of old behaviors, attitudes and skills to new levels of understanding and

competency. This process requires a delicate balancing act between honoring what is and creating a bridge to what can be.

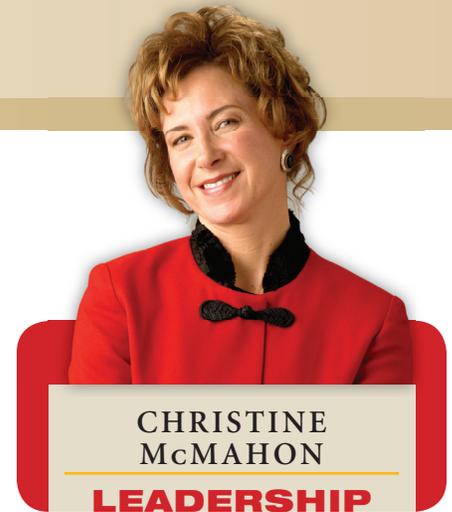
Futurist Alvin Toffler states, “The challenge of the 21st century is not that we will be unable to read or write; but that we will be unable to learn, unlearn and relearn.”

The Learning Continuum (detailed below) reflects the five, distinct phases people can experience when striving for personal excellence.

For illustration purposes, let's assume that “Jeff” worked in the business sector for eight years following college, returned to get his master's degree and is beginning a new position with a different company.

1. Learning phase: Jeff greets this new responsibility with a high degree of enthusiasm and wants to prove his capability and competency. Unfortunately, he doesn't know the systems or have adequate knowledge to operate independently often finding himself in a holding pattern waiting for guidance from others. He is also tired from the steep learning curve – lots of information to process in a short period of time. He can't wait until he's through this learning boot camp and has moved on to becoming more self-sufficient.

2. Proficiency: Once Jeff gains adequate knowledge and understanding of the company's systems, processes and products, he continues to expand and refine his competencies. He intention-



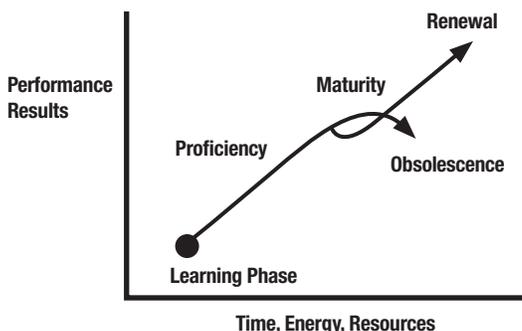
ally builds his “brand” with team members and customers and is seen as the go-to guy for a number of core disciplines. He continually works to expand his relationship network – you never know who you need to know. He has built a strong reputation and is well-respected by everyone.

3. Maturity: After spending years in a company assuming several positions, Jeff has gained great wisdom and is regarded as an expert. He is able to quickly assess situations and develop effective strategies for implementation. He is often called upon to mentor those who are in the Learning Phase. He is seen as an icon both within the company and nationally. He frequently speaks at conferences sharing his unique perspective and expertise.

4. Obsolescence: Jeff doesn't follow this path but others who he has worked with in the past have. Obsolescence occurs when a company grows and adapts, but the individual remains static. In time, the team member no longer meets the needs of the corporation and should either be reassigned or terminated.

5. Renewal: Anywhere along the Learning Continuum is another divergent trajectory, called Renewal. Renewal occurs when a person desiring performance excellence embraces a new way of doing, being and/or behaving. Jeff has continually embraced Renewal – the process of

The Learning Continuum



letting go of the old in an effort to embrace the new. During transition periods, as reflected by the downward loop, his productivity and that of his team declines. He has witnessed co-workers who were once confident performers experience embarrassment, frustration and even anger as they struggled to learn new skills. Jeff too has experienced vulnerability and utter frustration as well. He's learned to acknowledge what is and offer encouragement. In doing so, their fear and frustration are often replaced with productive engagement. On many occasions, his patience has been rewarded as his team made the shift from unlearning to relearning. Together, they celebrated their personal successes and positive business growth.

As leaders, we play an integral role in how we support and personally demonstrate ongoing Renewal. Here are four disciplines to keep in mind:

1. Acceptance: We need to understand where people are and acknowledge that it's natural to feel fear, frustration, sadness, and even overwhelm when learning new competencies. As

leaders, when we show others that we can be vulnerable, that we don't know it all and welcome assistance from those who are in the know, we are truly leading by example.

2. Set realistic timelines: People don't learn by hearing a lecture or seeing something demonstrated once. Adults learn by doing. They need to be immersed in situations where they

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make decisions, take action, observe the consequence(s) and debrief what worked well and what didn't. While most timelines are backed into by business drivers, unlearning and relearning takes time and practice. Unrealistic expectations, unless supported by high octane outcomes, can backfire and result in compromised human potential.

3. Provide encouragement: It's not uncommon for people to hit a learning bump and then retreat back to their comfort zone, licking their emotional wounds. Our responsibil-

ity as leaders is to acknowledge the difficulties associated with unlearning and provide encouragement so they re-engage in the learning process.

4. Offer ongoing feedback: Acknowledgement without judgment creates a safe learning environment. Taking a general concept and applying it to a specific situation may be difficult for people who can't envision possibilities. Minimize mistakes by opening the communication channels. Invite team members to ask questions and strategize. The more success they experience early in the process, the greater the likelihood they will master the initial challenges and emerge

a high performer.

Learning, unlearning and relearning is an integral and foundational process to build a culture capable of mastering change. The future holds no promises, only possibilities. Maybe as leaders, this begins by shifting our focus from, “What did you learn today?” to “What did you unlearn today?” ■

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