

Learning to Become a Process-Managed Enterprise: Or Why Allstar Teams are Clumsy

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The successful adoption of business process management (BPM) and its use as a new source of competitive advantage requires individual, team, and organizational learning. After all, BPM isn't something a company can go out and buy – It's a way of doing business. How does a company learn this new way of competing for the future?

Peter Senge, a senior professor of behavioral policy science at MIT and author of *The Fifth Discipline*, is a leading exponent of the concept of the *learning organization*. Senge describes four core disciplines – in addition to the fifth discipline of *systems thinking* – that are required to build such an organization: *personal mastery*, *working with mental models*, *building shared vision*, and *team learning*.¹ These disciplines have yet to be written into the personnel manuals of today's corporations, but are vital to building a process-managed enterprise.

Teams and organizations can learn, just as individuals can, but the learning process is more complex. Personal mastery is a prerequisite for team learning, just as team learning is a prerequisite for organizational learning, but learning challenges abound in all three domains: individual, team, and organizational.

The process of individual adult learning is a compound challenge because learning new ways of doing work requires “unlearning” existing, ingrained thinking and work patterns. Learning is often a painful experience as it disturbs existing, deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and generalizations (*mental models*) people use to get through the day, at home and at work. The pain level can be so significant that adults practice defensive procedures in learning situations that threaten their existing mental models.

Successful corporations of the 21st century will systematically manage their mental models. The discipline of working with mental models is a vital enabler of change, the kind of change needed for corporate transformations. Individuals are not simply updating or adding to their current knowledge. Instead, they are fundamentally altering the way they think about problems, and altering the way they view their world. Companies will no doubt need to take specific steps to help individuals think “outside the box” of existing mental models. A first step is to embrace the field of creative thinking. A classic book on creative thinking is Roger von Oech's book, *A Whack on the Side of the Head*. This classic takes a refreshing look at the ten mental blocks that keep us from being creative.

Team learning, in contrast to individual learning, must be given special attention. Teams often have built-in learning dysfunctions as a result of the individual behavior of team members. Senge asks, “How can a team of committed managers with individual IQs above 120 have a collective IQ of 63?” On the other hand, successful teams know how to do team learning, and the collective intelligence of the team exceeds the mean of the individual IQs.

Sports teams exemplify team learning, where total team performance is greater than the sum of the performances of the individual players. That is why teams “jell” during the season to create something extraordinary. But when the allstar teams are formed at the end of the season, the collections of individual stars from different teams produce less than optimal teams. Allstar teams are often clumsy. They have had too little time for team learning. Companies should keep in mind the concept of team learning for they will be putting together multi-company allstar teams as they build winning end-to-end business processes.

Finally, in the world according to Senge, a vision of the future is needed, a sense of where the company is going and what it is trying to build. But few concepts are more elusive than that of corporate “vision.” A *shared vision* is not a handful of pearls of wisdom handed down from an enlightened CEO. Shared vision boils up out of individual insights. How are individual insights to be captured, except in a collaborative learning environment? Isn’t the discovery of shared vision a part of the learning process, just as process discovery is a part of process management? Isn’t it, in fact, the end result and the purpose of learning at all levels of the organization? A shared vision provides common direction and focus, and motivates personal, team, and organizational learning. A genuine shared vision, as opposed to vague corporate vision statements, enables all workers to keep their eyes on the prize, and encourages all participants in a value chain to work toward common goals.

Here is a surprising fact about what has been said up to this point in this discussion of learning – most of it was written during the 1990s, as companies were grappling with internal reengineering projects in which command and control issues were confined to an individual company.ⁱⁱ Companies then were merely trying to manage the “white space” in their internal organization charts. Today’s companies must manage the white space in entire value chains. Value-chain leadership requires cultivation of a shared vision in all participants. Because multiple value-chain participants must collaborate to deliver value, they must all participate in process analysis and design – and achieve team learning. Only with the visibility provided by process management systems can end-to-end processes be understood, anomalies spotted, redundancy eradicated, and inefficiencies eliminated.

When corporations react to threats from global competition by forming partnerships and alliances and set out to transform processes accordingly, failure can be expected unless the five disciplines characteristic of a learning organization are understood and mastered. The often-quoted 70- to 80-percent failure rate of early reengineering efforts indicates that process innovation and improvement are not trivial undertakings. If deep cultural and learning transformations cannot be accomplished, process reengineering will likely prove a waste of time. *Corporations that do not treat the learning as seriously as they do the technology of process management will stand to lose the competitive edge to those who understand the importance of learning.*

Learning how to deliver ever more compelling value to customers is the ultimate goal of process management. Over a decade ago, in the *Harvard Business Review*, Arie DeGeus of Royal Dutch/Shell described *the* critical factor for reaching that goal: “We understand that the only competitive advantage the company of the future will have is its ability to learn faster than its competitors.”ⁱⁱⁱ Let the learning begin.

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ⁱ Senge, Peter M., *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Doubleday/Currency. 1990.

ⁱⁱ Fingar, Peter, *The Blueprint for Business Objects*, Prentice Hall, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ DeGeus, Arie, “Planning as Learning,” *Harvard Business Review*, p. 74, March-April 1988.