

The Page



Notes and comments for friends and clients of Lisk Associates

March 2011

Learning From Experience

My grandson, Griffin, recently learned to walk. If we could find someone who had spent all their time in organizations, and none around little kids, that person might think, "I bet Griffin attended a Walking Course For Beginners or he hired a Walking Coach." Because that is how most organizations deal with their training needs.

As most of you have guessed, he did neither of those. Although you could say he got some coaching and encouragement from his parents and older sister, Griffin learned to walk like we all did. He tried something, fell down, and then tried again. He learned from experience.

Griffin got very little instruction and certainly didn't read a Walking For Dummies Manual. He learned from his failures. You probably learned to ride a bike or do a number of other things the same way.

The 70/20/10 Rule

The reason I bring this up is that the way we all learned to do things is not the way most organizations train and develop their people. I recently came across some work by two researchers at the Center For Creative Leadership. It is a model summarized as the 70/20/10 rule and it explains how people actually develop. The model says that

70% of learning comes from real life experiences, tasks and problem solving. Another 20% of learning comes from feedback from others such as coaches, managers and role models. The final 10% comes from formal training.

This is the opposite of how most companies write their development plans, with courses and reading taking up the 70% part and experience counting for 10%.

How Are You Learning?

You may want to reflect on your own learning journey to see if you are being intentional about learning from your own experiences. As someone once said, "You can have ten years' experience or one years' experience ten times."

Develop Your Strengths

To develop your skills for learning from experience, there is good advice from Peter Drucker in a 1999 classic Harvard Business Review article titled *Managing Oneself*. He advocates knowing what your strengths are and developing those. As Drucker says, "It takes more energy to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than to improve from first-rate performance to excellence."

You need feedback to improve. Here is Drucker's

suggestion, "Whenever you make a key decision or take a key action, write down what you expect will happen. Nine or twelve months later, compare the actual results with your expectations. I have been practicing this method for 15 to 20 years now and every time I do, I am surprised."

Get Some Help

You can also enlist your manager or someone else who will support you in your learning. Skilled managers understand that developing the capacity and capability of those who work for them is their main job.

Identify your strengths and what you like to do and then enlist a manager to help you take advantage of experiences in the work place that fit you and will enhance your own learning. Information can create knowledge but challenges create experience.

Strength Becomes Weakness

Like all models, the 70/20/10 model has its limits. As people advance in their careers they take on more complex challenges with longer time frames and wider impacts. Strategic decisions may involve several divisions or even several organizations in different parts of the world.

Committing to new technologies, investing in new

manufacturing processes, or promoting people into leadership positions have ramifications that show up years later. These decisions do NOT lend themselves to learning from experience, because these actions have consequences beyond our learning horizons. Learning from experience then becomes a learning disability.

As Peter Senge says in [The Fifth Discipline](#), page 23, "Herein lies the core learning dilemma that confronts organizations: we learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions." For more on what to do about those decisions, read Peter's book.

Use It Where You Can

The learning from experience model does not apply to all decisions. It can help us in many situations, particularly as we learn to relate and work with others. Feedback on how we conduct ourselves and how we interact with others is available. Take advantage of it. Feedback comes in the form of facts, data and observations, and is not based on judgment or blame.

Now is a good time to rethink your own learning strategy. It is too important to leave it in the hands of someone else.