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Real-Time Learning: How the Best Companies and Leaders Make It Happen

by Lauren Keller Johnson

Real-Time Learning: How the Best Companies and Leaders Make It Happen

Capturing the lessons of experiential learning is crucial to a company's success. But few organizations and leaders know how to do it.

by Lauren Keller Johnson

IMAGINE YOURSELF LEADING A MILITARY operation on the battlefield. Your life and that of your troops are at stake. Do you imagine you'd have the time—let alone the nerve—to stop to consider what you should be learning from the experience, even before the mission is completed?

Yet that's precisely what U.S. Army officers do by engaging in a particularly effective form of on-the-job learning—including the use of after-action reviews that enable leaders to capture the developmental value of their experiences virtually in real time.

The army is deeply invested in the idea of *experiential learning*, or the systematic building of new skills and knowledge in the workplace. (See the sidebar "How the U.S. Army Uses Experiential Learning to Develop Lead-

ers.") The idea is simple: what you learn in the classroom will take you only so far; to succeed as an organizational leader, you must continually learn in the context of your day-to-day responsibilities.

But where the army and a minority of companies excel, most organizations continue to fall flat, allowing the richest opportunities for workplace development to go largely untapped. So why aren't all corporate executives extracting as much developmental value from their workplace experiences as army leaders are? Perhaps when lives aren't at stake, the pressure to learn from experience isn't quite as intense. But business leaders also face numerous barriers to learning—everything from insufficient time to reflect on workplace experiences to a lack of organizational processes (think coaching or incentives) that support or catalyze learning. (See the sidebar "Understanding the Barriers to Learning.")

And there is a cost to these missed opportunities, the experts say. When companies fail to develop their best people through experiential learning, they miss the chance to build up the bench strength required to stay ahead of rivals and ensure smooth succession as top leaders retire. And even the most talented executives and managers can't gain the skills they need to express their full potential.

So how do the few succeed where the majority does not? They confront the obstacles to experiential learning and design effective processes to spur, support, and sustain leaders' professional growth. Yes, it takes time, effort, and patience from the organization, as well as from executives themselves. But with the pace of change accelerating, companies can ill afford not to make the investment.

And as the following ideas suggest, the most effective approaches to experiential learning—the ones that advance people through companies—are shaped as much by individuals as by organizations.

Develop the right mindset

Learning from experience requires certain attributes and values. Research suggests that those who learn best "relish adventure, challenge, and unfamiliar experiences," says University of Southern California business professor Morgan McCall Jr. "They're willing to be uncomfortable, and

Companies don't have to look far to identify obstacles to experiential learning. Take cultural attitudes. "We all have 'hurry sickness,'" says social psychologist and consultant Richard Kimball. "Reflecting on our experiences takes training and practice. But we prefer to 'execute' and 'perform,' and we believe that people who stop to reflect aren't accomplishing anything." Kimball adds: "We live in a heroic culture. We're supposed to have all the answers, not admit that we need to learn or that we need support for our learning."

Other barriers can also block on-the-job learning. "With the barrage of demands hitting managers today," says Alex Ramsey, president of the Dallas-based consulting firm LodeStar Universal, "people don't have time to process their job experiences and integrate new and familiar knowledge. They're putting out fires instead." Adds executive coach Ted Sun, based in Columbus, Ohio: "Many business leaders also feel detached from learning—probably because the formal schooling process is so disconnected from real life."

they feel driven to constantly master the next challenge rather than stay with what they're already good at."

Social psychologist and consultant Richard Kimball says, "The best experiential learners seize learning opportunities that come their way, or they make their own opportunities. They go into new experiences with an open mind about what they'll encounter."

Executives who take control of their own experiential learning stand to reap the biggest benefits.

Companies can help executives cultivate these qualities in several ways. "Relatively simple interventions, like asking on a periodic basis 'What have you learned in the last X period?' can focus people on aspects of their experience that they might not otherwise think about," McCall says. "But the real meat lies in setting clear developmental goals, monitoring progress (and providing feedback as appropriate), and holding people accountable for development as well as performance." And company leaders should always be ready to point out where there are clear connections between experiential learning and organization achievement.

Consider how Dr. Kathy Hamilton reaped the benefits of applying a learning mindset after she became president of EMS USA, a Dallas-based maker of medical and dental equipment, in January 2000. "I knew I had sufficient educational background and product understanding," says the former dentist, "but I needed to develop my sales and marketing skills, and deepen my knowledge of distribution channels."

EMS USA is a subsidiary of a Swiss firm and its core leadership is in Switzerland. Communication between Hamilton and her boss was challenging owing to linguistic and cultural differences, so Hamilton decided to direct her own experiential learning. She received approval from headquarters to hire an executive coach, whom she used as a sounding board and a developmental-experience designer. "My coach helped me develop marketing plans and explore the ramifications of reconfiguring our sales force. She worked with me to quickly process the outcomes of new decisions I was making." Hamilton also took it upon herself to attend sales-training courses and devoured books on selling, marketing, and distribution. By engineering her own learning, she helped boost sales and cut expenses—turning the previously struggling organization into a profitable concern.

HOW THE U.S. ARMY USES EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO DEVELOP LEADERS

In the Army's after-action reviews (AARs), personnel examine what's taking place right as it happens and extract lessons learned at several points during the course of actual operations, rather than waiting until an operation is complete. What's more, leaders submit AAR reports virtually in real time to the Center for Army Lessons Learned, where the information is stored in a massive Web database searchable by other units.

"In our work," says Colonel George Reed, director of command and leadership studies at the U.S. Army War College, "people's lives depend on our being able to identify and learn from mistakes quickly."

The army also reinforces its AAR process with structured learning in an institutional setting. "Over a 20-year military career," Reed says, "our best and brightest leaders can spend a total of four years or more in the classroom." Reed views the operational experience and classroom learning as two of the three pillars of leadership development in the army. "The third pillar," he says, "is self-development—individual responsibility for lifelong learning."

While the particulars of Hamilton's situation may be unique, one core lesson underlying her experience is not. Executives who take control of their own experiential learning—or at least exert influence on its direction—often stand to reap the biggest benefits. Even when the organization is committed to workplace learning, a passive stance may find you focusing on only what the organization already recognizes to be valuable, using an approach that is not necessarily molded to your needs.

Find and exploit the right experiences

In the best of circumstances, corporate learning officers and individual executives work together to decide which workplace experiences offer the most developmental value. This isn't easy, thanks to the variety of experiences available to most leaders. McCall and coauthor George Hollenbeck cite numerous examples of learning opportunities in *Developing Global Executives* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002). These include major line assignments (such as building a business, engineering a turnaround, or orchestrating a merger) and short-term experiences including special projects, a major negotiation, or a stint at

headquarters.

The key, McCall says, is to select assignments that stretch people but don't derail them—"a fine line," he concedes. Kimball agrees: "Optimal learning experiences lie somewhere between boredom and anxiety. You need some familiarity; otherwise, you'd be paralyzed. But you also need foreignness. You have to strike a balance."

To help pinpoint the most learning-rich experiences, companies and executives should look for assignments that directly relate to corporate strategy. To separate the wheat from the chaff, consider these questions: "How can you build your competencies in ways that help the company execute its strategy?" "What business experiences do you need most?" "Who are the leaders you need to work with to gain these experiences?" "What cross-boundary projects can you work on?"

Linking on-the-job learning to strategy catalyzes the learning process, says Lori Leonard, a consultant on strategic human resources projects for Cleveland-based aluminum-products maker Alcoa's transportation group. "We make leadership development part of our business-planning process," Leonard says. "Leaders get excited when they can use their new knowledge and skills to help the company achieve its mission—when there's a direct line of sight between what they're doing on the job and how the company is performing."

As McCall notes, "Companies need to ensure that people see the value of what they're learning. If they don't value it, they won't learn it."

Cultivate the right climate

Companies can't force executives to learn from their workplace experiences. But they can create an environment conducive to experiential learning. Ironically, classroom learning can play an important role here.

For example, each fall, Akron, Ohio-based shipping company Roadway Express conducts weeklong workshops with Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, in which executives focus on leadership skills rather than function-specific competencies. As Terry Gilbert, Roadway's executive vice president of sales and marketing, explains, "Participants then apply what they've learned in their operations and sales teams. The following spring, the next level of operational and sales leaders attends the workshops—and the curriculum is taught by our VPs who attended the earlier training."

Roadway executives also benchmark companies from other industries to learn how they tackle common challenges, such as labor-management relations. Lessons learned are shared during the executive education sessions. Host companies have included Harley-Davidson, Alcoa, Saturn, and the Miller Brewing Company.

Technology also can reinforce a learning climate. At

IBM, for example, the company posts online information about ways to develop specific leadership skills. "With coaching, for instance, the materials lay out what effective coaches do," says Drew Morton, director of management development. "They also provide coaching simulations, ways to practice on the job, and advice from role models on coaching."

Companies must make learning pervasive. Bob Corcoran, chief learning officer at General Electric, says that many managers at GE use every opportunity to learn from experience. "Even at simple operating meetings for a unit," he says, "leaders ask what they're learning. They don't merely accept the numbers they're seeing. Instead, they ask how the numbers came about, what would happen if they made particular changes, and how they can make it better next time."

Finally, the right incentives can help. IBM, for instance, rewards leaders based on how well they advance their employees' professional development. "They know they're expected to develop others," Morton says. "They get assessed on it, and their pay is affected by it."

Guide leaders through the learning cycle

Many companies use coaching and mentoring to help people navigate the learning cycle. For example, Corcoran says that at GE, "people apply concepts they've learned to a real work problem under the guidance of trained facilitators who can help them process what they've experienced." The facilitators ask learners questions such as, "What did you expect to happen in this situation? What did happen? What worked well and what didn't? Why?"

IBM's recently launched PARR program (Prepare, Act, Reflect, Review) has a similar intent. "A leader who needs to strengthen his coaching abilities might study an online module about coaching," Morton explains, "then use what he learned with a few employees on the job. He would then reflect on what he has learned and enter his insights and observations in an online journal." As the final stage in PARR, supervisors review with learners, asking specific questions to assess their learning and offering suggestions for change.

Remember that experiential learning is a cyclical process, advises Betty Vandenbosch, an associate dean and director of the experiential learning program at Case Western's Weatherhead School. "Executives need to go through an experience, think about what happened, theorize cause-and-effect connections, and use their mistakes and successes to apply their knowledge to new situations." *

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