

Learning Begins With Forgetting

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Abstract

Organizations often boast of their innovative abilities—using this as a mark of distinction to “rally the troops” or promote their external image. Yet, far too many change initiatives do not succeed or else fall short of their expectations. This essay describes a possible reason why so many organizational change initiatives do not accomplish their intended results. It also challenges the reader to consider the psychological aspects of change and why people “resist” change, rather than focusing exclusively on the tasks and mechanics.

Several years ago a popular brand of soft drink was cleverly billed as “The Un-Cola.” I like that, but, now that I think about it, I'm not really sure what it means. It reminds me a bit of what a Buddhist monk might refer to as a *koan*. If that's what it is, perhaps “thinking about it” is my problem.

As you may know (and I'm sure to oversimplify), a koan is a statement that at first blush seems irrational but, with a little help from meditation and a dash of mysticism, can make of lot of, er... non-sense. Another way of looking at it, we might be willing to accept that such a statement is irrational but, at least on some plane, possesses an element of truth. Logic will allow most of us, for example, to work through the assertion that “You can never put your hand into the same stream twice,” but logic gets in the way when the Buddhist master counters, “You can't even put your hand into the same stream once.” I'm tempted at this point to say “go figure” but that too would be a logical, left-brained activity if taken literally.

This brings me to another application for the “Un” prefix that also seems to defy logic. One that's perhaps a bit closer to where we live. What I'm referring to is the little-acknowledged and even less practiced concept of *unlearning*. Logic would insist that if learning is progressive then unlearning is quite the opposite. . .and logic would be wrong.

A simple analogy comes to mind: the puzzle mazes often found in children's activity books. In moving from the starting point to the pot of gold (or other compelling destination), there are many paths and branches in the maze that lead to a cul-de-sac but only one that leads to the gold. Getting to the goal requires backtracking if the wrong path is chosen. It's not simply a matter of veering to the left or to the right and forging on; progress toward the goal requires an about face. Furthermore—and this is the more subtle aspect of this analogy—the psychological willingness to change directions will remain undeterred, regardless of where the path leads, as long as it *appears* progress is being made.

In like manner, if learning is essentially a means to an end, then some degree of unlearning, beginning with the willingness to challenge certain beliefs and assumptions, will be necessary if we discover we're on the wrong path in our quest for the goal. But, unlike the simple maze, in real-life situations, it's not so easy to know if we are heading in the wrong direction. It's even more difficult to accept the possibility that that which we hold dear about achieving success may not serve us so well in the future.

In his 1990 bestseller, Peter Senge built an impressive case for what he and others before him have termed the *learning organization*—which, in Senge's words, is “an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future.” Senge alludes to the notion of organizational unlearning in his discussion of mental models, though somewhat obliquely within the framework of promoting systems thinking.

More recently Tom Peters, a controversial management guru who's known to change his management philosophy at least one step ahead of the prevailing winds, decreed in his 1997 book on innovation that “organizational forgetting” is now more important than organizational learning. Even with his propensity for drama and overstatement, I tend to align with Peters in this regard.

The same goes for using the concept of self-organizing systems to describe the behavior of business systems. If there's any validity in applying this model to organizational change, then it is fundamentally important that the system in question be *open* to change. Openness is a basic requirement of self-organizing systems and it is closely tied to unlearning as well. Systems safely ensconced in impervious shells seldom change of their own accord. Success, experience, sacrosanct beliefs . . . all serve to harden the shell.

More than we are prepared to admit, I'm convinced, we are much like the members of the Bourbon dynasty who, it is said, neither learned nothing nor forgot nothing. But, I'd even go a step further and say they learned nothing *because* they forgot nothing. Furthermore, in the spirit of the Buddhist koan, I would suggest that we have got to remember to forget—which suggests something more than passively waiting for the neurons in our brains to dissociate themselves.

Like changing paths in a maze, if an organization is truly desirous of “expanding its capacity to create its future,” a change in course may be necessary from time to time that requires the organization to essentially unlearn what it knows about being a success. I would go even further and assert, for the same reason, that it is dangerous to attempt to recreate the formula for success of this particular CEO or that particular company—a touchy subject, I know, since it affects the subject matter of most business books and magazines. Certainly there's a lot to be learned from experience, wherever the source, but the danger lies in the fact that the maze itself changes from one set of circumstances to the next. Goals may not change but the path to success is in a constant state of flux.

Finally, if learning truly does begin with forgetting, then there's a message here that concerns knowledge brokers in particular. To those involved in the training and organization development arena, learning is a job description rather than some lofty ideal of organizational behavior. If this is your reality, how might you change what you do before, during, and after a particular training event if some degree of unlearning is needed before effective learning can occur? Does that

“hard core” audience, for example, simply need another “icebreaker” or would it make more sense to help them discover for *themselves* why the status quo is an endangered species? Also, should we persist in tabulating smiles on “smile sheets” if and when a “discomfort index” might be more telling? Unlearning, after all, often begets pain. I would suggest that maybe, just maybe, the very profession that espouses the virtues of learning is overdue for a bit of unlearning itself. But brace yourself, as your dentist might say in characteristic understatement, “This might sting a little.”

About the Author

Lon Roberts, Ph.D. is the president of Roberts & Roberts Associates, an international consulting and training firm based in Plano, Texas. He is the author of numerous publications and training programs, as well as four books, his latest titled *SPC for Right-Brain Thinkers: Process Control for Non-Statisticians* (ASQ Quality Press, 2005). Dr. Roberts is noted for providing “rapid-solution” consultation to teams, team leaders, process owners, and executives. He also conducts workshops in the areas of SPC, process reengineering, project management, problem solving and decision making, and quality excellence. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma and B.S. and M.S. degrees from Oklahoma State University.

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