

The Art of Unlearning and Relearning in a World of Constant Change

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The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn..

Alvin Toffler

Change is difficult. Most of us know this on a personal level when we try to change a habit or improve a relationship. We change, then we relapse to old behaviour, and we try again. The same pattern is true of responding to change or leading change on an organizational level: we must crack open the hard shell of habit and throw away the pieces of how we've always done things.

We can develop new ways of learning. There are steps we can take to deal with change.

Understand what's different, and what isn't

In the whirlwind of media attention on the current economy, you may be confused about what this means for your organization. For sure, the funding landscape has changed dramatically. But, ask questions about what's really going on, assess the new landscape, and seek out positive solutions, such as sourcing funding that is still available.

Talk with others about the change. Compare notes on what you have observed and reflect on what this means for your organization. What are others in your sector reading and/or writing about the new reality?

Acknowledge the losses

Most of us need help to deal with the pain of loss and with our uncertainty about the future. Up to 75% of organizational change efforts fail primarily because leaders don't take into account the deep feelings of grief and anger that people have about changing the way they do things.

Talk openly and respectfully with staff, board and volunteers about what is gone. Don't be afraid to admit your own uncertainty about the future.

Expect ups and downs in the transition process

As an organization transitions through change, the process we experience is complex. We may feel confused and anxious about the future. Will our organization survive intact? Where will we find support? It is during this uncomfortable phase that innovative solutions may reveal themselves as we test out new ways of doing things. But there is no straight path and there is no time limit on how long the transition will take. Allow yourself and others to express mixed feelings. Each

person will react in a unique way, so don't impose a timeline on grieving.

Embrace ambiguity

Wise people understand that there is no one right way to reach a goal. Rather than restricting our thinking to "either/or," we can learn to incorporate multiple viewpoints. Instead of declaring, "We tried that before and it didn't work", how about examining which aspects of former strategies might work in the current situation? This perspective is called "yes, and", as opposed to "yes, but."

To appreciate different viewpoints we must be actively curious and go beyond our usual sources of advice. How do people in other sectors handle these same concerns? Peruse the newsstand for publications you wouldn't normally read for clues about how other organizations are handling change.

Create safe learning environments that support risk-taking

When it doesn't feel safe to speak up, we fight back by standing firm in our opinions and actions. When we are anxious or depressed, our mind and body go into retreat mode in order to protect ourselves. In this state we can't focus on learning something new.

Unlearning and relearning require risk-taking and experimentation. Test out your new ideas with colleagues in a spirit of discovery, and encourage others to do the same.

Make new learning stick

New behaviours need continual reinforcement and support in order to take hold. Find strategies to reinforce new learning that will prevent you and others from falling back to the status quo. If it's too easy to do things the old way, the new way will never have a chance. Remove the old tools and resources and make new knowledge freely available and easy to share.

It's clear that unlearning and relearning require us to continually adapt to change. At the same time, we need to maintain our integrity, our values and our sense of purpose. By strengthening our vision and developing our people, we can let go of the old and welcome the new.

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