Create a Culture of Learning

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Problem: New insights, ideas, and discoveries are essential to creating a competitive advantage in any marketplace. When efficiency is valued more than outcomes, you know you are suffering from the absence of a discipline of learning.

Opportunity: When you infuse learning into the habits, expectations, and workflows of your teams and employees, you are able to leverage your greatest assets (your people) so they become agents of change, not keepers of compliance.

Resolution: Invest in your teams and employees. Create a culture of learning where norms are questioned, assumptions are busted, and the status quo is constantly challenged.

> " *Any strategy for long-term, sustainable growth amid uncertainty must include creating an organization-wide culture that both prioritizes and rewards curiosity, questioning, and experimentation.*

Growth and learning are two deeply interconnected realities. You can't have one without the other. It's something we discover instinctively as children yet rapidly unlearn as adults. Any strategy for long-term, sustainable growth amid uncertainty must include creating an organization-wide culture that both prioritizes and rewards curiosity, questioning, and experimentation.

The first company I worked for out of college had nearly $600 million in annual revenues and more than two thousand employees. There was a dedicated training department. Each employee had a learning plan, and your participation in that learning plan was part of your annual evaluation and review process. Most of this training was self-directed and at the discretion of the employee. However, as you moved up, the training became more specific and tailored to the employee and the design of the manager.

Those days are all but gone for many companies. If training departments exist, they are likely a shell of what they once were. And the significance they might have once played in the life of an employee looks very different today. As a result, much of the learning falls on the shoulders of active managers and engaged employees.

Curiosity Fuels Learning

I've always been the inquisitive type. I've always had a sense of curiosity about the world around me and had the motivation to discover what I don't yet know. This has caused me to read many books, listen to many podcasts, take online courses, and seek out people who are masters of certain skills or who have attained success in particular areas. This was a proactive process that was self-initiated and self-motivated. And it has served me very well over the years.

Much of what I do today was impossible when I graduated from college. And much of what I thought I would be doing then looks incredibly different today.

No one could have predicted how tools like PowerBI, Tableau, or Google Data Studio would make data visualization and analysis available to business leaders.

No one could have predicted how smartphones would change the way we engage and interact with each other and help us get our work done quickly and more efficiently. No one could have imagined how "the cloud" would enable video-based meetings that eliminated time and space as a limitation to real-time collaboration.

No one could have imagined how social media, blogging, and content marketing would shift the power in the buying cycle from the vendor to the buyer.

A Discipline of Learning

Without developing a discipline of learning, I wouldn't have been able to keep up. The truth is that just about any information you want or knowledge you need is available today through a simple web browser. In our on-demand environment, you can learn almost anything from the comfort of your home. This reality has eliminated any excuse as to why learning shouldn't be part of your professional development plan. But if all of this is left to the average employee to figure out on their own, it's unlikely most will keep up with the pace of change in a way that allows them to meaningfully contribute to the ever-changing landscape of business, markets, and leadership in general.

There are steps leaders and organizations can take to ensure they are investing in a learning plan that releases the full potential of their teams and employees. When everything is shifting, growth is your safest bet. But you can't grow if you aren't also learning. When you are humble enough to learn from yourself or someone else, you are open enough to ask the questions necessary to discover gaps and develop new thinking and approaches.

How to Create a Culture of Learning

This is an active decision and an intentional process. You don't create a culture of learning by accident. And you won't bother with any of this if you're satisfied with the status quo. It's only when you are pushing yourself and your organization beyond its present capacity that learning becomes fuel for the journey ahead. You create a culture of learning when you:

- Hold managers accountable to learning as part of their key outcomes.

- Allocate money for learning (and protecting that budget when evaluating expenses).

- Celebrate failures that lead to new insights about what's possible.

- Create a safe place for new ideas to be shared, new questions to be asked, the status quo to be challenged, and new skills, habits, and workflows to develop.

What Does Learning Look Like?

Learning isn't limited to a formal classroom and doesn't always end with a degree. In fact, some of the leaders in your organization who are least likely to foster a culture of learning are those with degrees,

particularly advanced ones. There is a prevailing sense for many that their learning is done because they have a piece of paper. That is incredibly flawed thinking. However, it is practiced and championed regularly.

Your best leaders aren't people who stopped learning twenty years ago. Your best leaders are people who make learning part of their professional work and walk away every day with a new insight they didn't have before.

Don't let more formal, structured learning environments stymie what you believe to be possible. There are three main categories of learning: peer-based, skills-based learning, and leadership. Here are some examples of what that might look like in your organization.

Peer-Based Learning:

- Host web-based team meetings where best practices are shared through informal case studies grounded in success stories.

- Develop a mentoring process with your high performers and your most promising talent.

- Incorporate group learning experiences through book clubs or participate in online and live events (e.g., seminars, workshops, webinars, etc.).

Skills-Based Learning:

- Build into your management processes the need to develop a learning plan alongside employee goals. Both parties should be accountable for the completion of that plan.

- Bring in experts in the field to conduct research, exhibit their findings, and share their insights.

- Create a budgeted amount per employee for self-directed learning.

Leadership Learning:

- Invest in formal leadership training programs.

- Contract with external coaches for one-on-one experiences with defined outcomes.

- Take a group offsite for intensive learning experiences designed to foster a stronger team environment, develop new connections, and solve interdisciplinary challenges.

Your Competitive Advantage

Sometimes what contributes to our success (or lack of it) can't be measured on an income statement or balance sheet and won't be found in a financial forecast or pipeline opportunity report. The one thing your competitor doesn't have that you do are the people on your payroll. If you'll create a culture of learning, you'll create a team of employees who ask questions, are curious about the world around them, and uncover new insights. Most important, they'll have the courage and capacity to integrate and assimilate those new insights into their work.

If you're having trouble moving your employees or team to develop a propensity to learn, then it's possible you haven't yet achieved a culture of learning. If you have, then perhaps you don't have the right team or employees.

The one who wins, in the end, is rarely the smartest, strongest, nor most equipped. Rather, the one who wins is almost always the one willing to stay in the fight longer than anyone else. And you can't do that unless you have a bias toward learning. Never underestimate the competitive advantage you'll have when your teams and employees believe the world is a puzzle to be solved rather than a series of steps to be completed.

About

Ben Stroup is Chief Growth Architect and President at Velocity Strategy Solutions where he helps leaders design, develop, and deploy smarter business growth strategies. Ben is a futurist, disruptor, and data champion. He leads a team that takes a structured learning approach to business challenges, which allows them to assist leaders in bridging the gap between ideas, innovation, and revenue—taking ideas from mind to market.

Velocity Strategy Solutions is an on-demand, next-generation business strategy and management consulting firm which provides clients with a relentless focus on data, execution, and results that positively impact the bottom line. Velocity delivers integrated people and revenue strategies combined with a disciplined approach to growth architecture that elevates the capacity of leaders, teams, and organizations to succeed and win more.