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Entering Management

Become a Learning Leader

In the middle of one of my typical, very hectic days at eePulse, I took a call from someone who reminded me what it means to be a Learning Leader. Our discussion rekindled knowledge that had been in my long-term memory, and when this 'old' information started mingling with my current business efforts, it really helped me focus some of my own recent research.

Our conversation involved our thoughts on whether Americans were great teachers; about how US-based companies invented total quality management, quality circles, just-in-time inventory, and more and then passed on (or 'taught') these tools to other countries.

Upon reflecting on this call, I asked myself: "is it really so desirable to be a great teacher?" Perhaps it is much better to become a superb learner. In fact, I have been using the term 'learning leader' in my own work, and our conversation convinced me that this approach may be even more important than I originally thought. Perhaps learning to be a learning leader is the 'secret' to success for all senior business executives and people interested in career growth.

For the last eight years, I've been working with clients who collect frequent (e.g. weekly, monthly) and anonymous (ensuring frankness and honesty) data from their employees. Instead of the ritualistic annual employee survey, these employees engage in a frequent conversation with their managers. The conversations centre on what employees know that management does not know. Questions such as the following are used to start the dialogue:

- What ideas do you have for improvement?
- What best practice do you see that can be used for our overall learning?
- Tell us what we need to do in order to make our organisation change more successful.
- Please report what types of problems you think our customers are experiencing so that we can improve.
- What unexpected problems are you encountering in implementing our new strategy?
- What are your reactions to our new branding process?

The results of these questions are information, and only when management acts upon the data do we see improvement. In fact, in one organisation with whom I recently worked, they had a calculated \$17 million return on investment from having managers respond to employee comments (group of 24,000 employees, with data collected over a 10-month period of time). These managers moved from being 'teachers' to being learning leaders. They opened themselves to listening and acting upon information obtained from their employees.

Of course, not all leaders are learning leaders, and perhaps some can never evolve this far (yes, I think it's an evolution for most senior executives). Unfortunately, some leaders believe in their own teaching skills so much they forget to listen and learn. These leaders are not willing to consider the possibility that their employees actually know something that the teacher does not yet know.

I meet these executives often. I vividly recall a recent conversation where the leader told me he knew that he would learn nothing from his employees because he alone knew what was right for his company. As I think back to that conversation,

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I merge it with my brief phone call, and as a result, I began to worry about the senior executive's company.

Teaching is not enough - being a learning leader is critical for success. As someone who has been teaching college students for more than 15 years, I can say even in that role learning is key. And as someone who moved from a full-time academic job to a CEO role, learning has been absolutely critical for my own growth and our company's success. Learning - not teaching - is important for sustained growth, innovation, and continuous moving forward.

Now think about your own career. Formal education is only a small part of our lives and careers. Growth in our life and career involves continuous learning. Listen to your employees, your peers, and your customers. Listen and learn; those are the keys to your own long-term career success, to your organisation 'winning', and to any country's long-term growth.

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