

4 working magic

Breaching the Learning That Limits

Learning tends to be a value-laden term. It is easy to assume that all learning, whether personal or collective, is positive and to be valued. We seldom consider that learning might be detrimental, that we might wittingly or unwittingly learn the wrong or limiting things. And even when this possibility is considered we tend to place it in the lap of a small, peculiar minority, and thereby omit ourselves. After all, rational man (or woman) could not possibly learn something that might be limiting to his future! Well, we want to explode the myth and suggest that we have not only learned 'good' things but also, as people and communities, we have learned personal and shared limitations. We have often learned so well and are so well practiced in these limitations that we are unconscious of them, skilled, so to speak, in our limiting expertise!

We speak not just of explicit or formal learning but in particular of tacit or informal learning. Tacit knowledge, the outcome of tacit learning, has been defined as being a combination of those *"mental models, beliefs, and perceptions so ingrained that we take them for granted, and therefore we cannot easily articulate them"* (Nonaka, 1991). If such knowledge is so deeply embedded or ingrained within us, and around us in our culture, then how are we ever to break free? How, then, might we breach such limits?

The learning that limits

It may seem odd for us to suggest that there are deeply embedded levels of learning that frequently serve to limit results. The difference is not just that we may learn well or badly, or that we may learn the 'wrong' vs. the 'right' things. The difference is that we may have learned very well, so well that it prevents new learning. Deeply embedded habits, whether personal, interpersonal, shared within a team or company culture, or the habits of inter-company business, frequently prevent or limit new ways. Much of this 'established learning' is informal or tacit, understood yet seldom articulated, operating as it were in the background, yet impacting foreground results. The very point of this learning is that it is so well established, it has, so to speak, been so very well-learned, that it is invisible. We lack conscious awareness of its presence and influence, it is taken-for-granted, and we are the more often resigned before it: *"Well that's just how people are."* or *"It's just the way it is here."*

It is our intention to illustrate some of the elements of this learning. In doing so we will reveal some of the darker side of enterprises, the more invisible elements, that often serve to inhibit performance. Such elements are but part of a greater whole, and attempting to deal with any element in isolation can lead to heightened frustration. It is as well to look for the composite whole, for the interconnection of the various elements and how they work and weave together in an interconnected 'mess' (Ackoff, 1994) or 'pattern' (Price and Shaw, 1998). Second, there is the temptation to understand the various elements as though in the abstract, to gain a general sense of it more than a particular sense of it. We believe there is greater appreciation, greater awareness when what we illustrate is translated to the particulars of the reader's own situation. The trick is: Can we take a mirror to the darker sides of ourselves and our own companies without eliciting denial, resignation or defensive routines? The great opportunity that presents itself when we do is that we can then expand our capacity to shift some of it. If we were simply to see learning as adding to the store of what already exists, when much of what already exists is itself limiting to performance then it would be like adding a new superstructure onto limiting foundations. The new building is not likely to last. We might find ourselves either steeped in a veritable flood of initiatives to very little effect, or taking a strategic initiative to find it soon reached the buffers. We sometimes need to step back in order to go forward.

When what we are already good at and skilled in is limiting to performance then it may be said that we are skilled in our incompetence, that is, we are skilled in ways that limit us in achieving the results that we desire. The more astute among us may already be accessing some of the ways in which we are so skilled. When we are highly skilled it may be said that we are 'unconsciously competent', that is, we become so good that our competence is ingrained, habitual, taken-for-granted, so much a part of us that we are no longer conscious of it. Take, for example, our skills at walking, talking, listening, driving and so on. To 'see' that competence of which we are unconscious one must unconceal it, viz. raise awareness.

To speak of 'competence' suggests that our unconscious skill level is aligned with a particular result. However, as the world changes what was once deemed 'competence' may switch to 'incompetence'. Finely attuned and developed skills in the old ways may not be aligned with the new. We may have overly generalised the application of an area of skilled competence such that it doesn't work in the particulars of a new or different situation. Or what we once deemed a competence, learned in an earlier time, never really was. In such circumstances we can see that some of that in which we may be highly skilled becomes what Argyris (1990) has termed skilled incompetence, in that it no longer works. It is easy to see this when we speak of redundant skills. It is not much use being adept at making slide rules when the world has changed to hand-held electronic calculators and lap top computers. Such an example deals with formal or explicit skills, skills that are the more visible and patently obvious. What of our more informal skills or tacit learning? How many of these are still widely operant and either potentially or operationally limiting to results?

We extend an unusual invitation: It is to see how, through our skilled capacity, our prior learning, we personally and collectively operate to limit results and that we do so largely unknowingly, that is, unaware of our own skilled incompetence. In extending this invitation it is not our intent to make anyone wrong but, rather, to explore and perhaps access and confront some of that which we have learned and become skilled in that serves to limit results. In raising our awareness and proceeding to unlearn, to let go, we increase our capacity to achieve those results that currently lay beyond our grasp. We move to the boundaries of the next horizon by cutting the bonds that keep us rooted in past horizons. Much of the literature does not deal with the unlearning side of learning, even though there is some reluctant recognition of the situation to which we refer: *"nor does learning always produce increases effectiveness or improved performance, as the learning of faulty skills or self-destructive habits makes all to clear."* (Cook and Yanow, 1993) We go further: **Much of our normal well-intentioned everyday tacit learning is very limiting to results!** This is not unaligned with Senge's realisation after having written the Fifth Discipline: *"Organisations work the way they work because of how we work."* (Senge, 1992) We argue that the way we work is largely tacitly learned and that many of us have learned a lot of unworkability!

Space permits but a brief exposition of some of this tacit learning. The point is that we are not speaking of the extreme learning of, say, the paranoid person or company, but rather the everyday learning that can be so limiting to results. One 'solution' has been to dehumanise the workplace, to sanitise it, to operate with maximum possible specification - manual mania and procedure proliferation - so as to minimise the effects that such learned incompetence may produce. The more enlightened and challenging approach is to work with it and through it so that people and teams *develop*, that is reach whole new levels of potential. The more successful companies of the future may be less those who can get around this sort of learning in the sense of bypass or limit its effects, and more those who can get through it and beyond it to a wholly different level of tacit or informal dynamics. To reveal that which operates at the tacit level the key question one might ask is: *What is the nature of that learning, at the personal, interpersonal, organisational and inter-organisational level that serves to sabotage or limit a different level of result?*

Much of Argyris' work has been in the area of **defensive routines**, whether at the personal or organisational level. He proceeds to describe many of these routines, to outline their origin and to reveal many of their consequences. The challenge of at least some of his work has been to appreciate how some of us who are most learned either are or become the worst learners (Argyris, 1991). In his words: *"Every company faces a dilemma: the smartest people find it the hardest to learn"*. He argues that people tend to create organisational environments consistent with their defensive routines, that *"we tend to act in ways that avoid threatening issues by making them undiscussable and by making the undiscussability of the subjects also undiscussable"*. Furthermore, it is not that we operate in ignorance of this, we tacitly know it, we know what is and is not discussible with whom and when, and we know that to dare to breach an undiscussable can be highly injurious to one's career! To survive is to go along with such defensive routines despite the fact that they often lead to errors by design and serve to promote mediocre performance. Such skilled actions he argues take but milliseconds. We bypass that which might be upsetting and cover up the bypass. We do this not only within our business experience but in our normal everyday experience.

Where Argyris speaks of guiding principles that guide and shape defensive routines others speak of **'unconscious commitments'**, matters to which we are unconsciously committed and to which our behaviours are aligned. At a deep level much of our acculturation impresses upon us the twin commitments of 'looking good' and 'being right'. Looking good means that much of our behaviours are concerned with saving

face and not putting ourselves at risk in terms of our image in the world. We often seek to look good even if it is at the expense of others, and we often seek to avoid those situations in which we might start to look bad, whether in our own eyes or in the eyes of others. One consequence of this is fear of failure (and the learning that failure can bring). 'Being right' refers to that unconscious commitment whereby we perceive that the most significant gift we have to bestow upon others is our righteousness in a matter. The difficulty with either of these commitments is that they tend to inhibit exploration and promote a competitive win-lose dynamic. For example, the I'm Right/You're Wrong dynamic described at length by DeBono (DeBono, 1990). Such dynamics operate not independently of defensive routines.

Such principles or commitments are but a tacit appreciation of some of the **unwritten rules**, the social norms, or politics, that pervade an organisation. Peter Scott-Morgan describes such rules as "*The Unwritten Rules of The Game*" (Scott-Morgan, 1994), those codes and understandings that we abide by in order to survive and hopefully prosper in any form of organisation. The point is that some of these rules are inherently limiting to a different level of result. The key is not just to see the rules but to dig deeper and to see what it is that underpins such rules. An example of an emergent unwritten rule that has, in particular, emerged during periods of downsizing is the rule of busy-ness. At a superficial level this rule informs us that in order to survive we need to be, or at least look to be, busy. We may complain about the busy-ness and its consequences in terms of family life etc., and we may cogently argue for the ineffectiveness of such busy-ness. Yet, somehow, busy we will be. Busy-ness and working long or excessive hours becomes for many the one sure sign of commitment, and, of course, we need to look committed. Yet what is it that we are committed to, or is that we are just caught up in working long and perhaps ever-longer hours?

At a deeper level some of what underpins such rules are the **paradigms** that we operate within. Paradigms are like the collective mindset that not only shape the content of thought but how we think. Paradigms have been much written about in recent years, yet to see our paradigms, to see how they may be limiting to performance, and then to actually shift them in a timely manner to something that releases greater performance seems to be beyond the capacity of many. We tend to suffer from paradigm blindness or paralysis, given to one way of thinking and no more, so well-learned are we in the matter. Thus it is that it is mostly people at the periphery who initiate innovations beyond the established paradigm. Our paradigms promote **perceptual and thinking habits**. Such habits serve to promote great efficiency in terms of speed of response when we react unthinkingly out of habit, yet some of our habits may not be effective. Speed of response maybe great and yet the contribution limiting. We confuse efficiency with effectiveness.

One such paradigm that may be limiting is the paradigm we bring with us to the whole subject of learning and the way of being of a learner. Reconceptualisation can do much to release perhaps different levels and processes of learning. Similarly the paradigm we bring with us when thinking of organisations which we tend to view in very bounded, entitative ways offers the comfort of a customary and widely shared view but can be limiting to alternative perspectives which may open up greater possibility. Viewing organisations differently can lead to new openings in inter-organisational matters.

Last, but not least, our **language and conversation** packages the world a certain way, such packaging is communicated through the socialisation processes of national and organisational cultures. There is a relationship between language and what and how we see 'things' in the world. It has been said that "*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (Wittgenstein, 1974). For example, much of our language promotes cause and effect thinking between entities as though independent of each other. We have made great progress, some argue, by such means of reductionist thinking. Yet it promotes a mechanistic view of organisations and linear ways of thinking. One aspect of language is the use of metaphor. Their use in management writing can be generative and "liberating" in orientation (Grant and Oswick, 1996), however metaphors can also constrain the breadth of our thoughts and understanding. It may be argued that in an increasingly complex dynamic world that the parts cannot be separated from the whole, that we need new language and new metaphors so that we may better understand how things come together in an interdependent way, to influence and be influenced by a whole connection of things. Such is the language of systems thinking and the perhaps stranger language of complexity theory.

Language plays its part within a wider context of conversation. For whatever reasons we often create or are cast into **conversations for self-limitation**. You can see these apply at the personal, interpersonal, team, company or inter-company level. As Richard Bach suggests: *When we argue for our limitations then, sure*

enough, they're ours! (Bach, 1977). Much of the conversational dynamic within companies and teams, dynamics in which we may be deeply scripted, serves to limit results. After all we all know what can't happen within our own companies and organisations!

To conclude, what we have sought to illustrate in this section is but some of the learning that tends to be deeply embedded in people and organisations such that it limits results. In more common language it may point to some of the *'inertia's that exist at every organisational level'*. Another way of perceiving this learning is to suggest that we each of us have our **wiring**, a wiring that we have developed through processes of acculturation and experience. That wiring is embedded in the heads of people, our behaviours, and in the cultural artefacts of organisations (for example, in their policies, procedures, identity and ways of doing things). With such wiring we not only participate in the world but we **bring forth our worlds**, that is the wiring shapes the very worlds that we see and relate to. We often want a different level of result without any shift in wiring and pursue some surface learning to this effect. When this runs out of steam we move onto the next fashion or fad of the moment whilst seeking to avoid that deeper, more challenging, level of learning that can serve to release that which more fundamentally limits. The dynamic combination of all of that learning that serves to limit is pretty robust!

How do we breakout of that learning that limits?

If the learning that limits performance is pretty robust how can we breach and break through such limits?

Particularly where:

- Such learning is tacit and shared within the wider culture as well as within and between organisations
- Such learning means quite profound personal and interpersonal change - changes in the 'way we work', in our own personal and interpersonal workabilities
- Any such learning suggests a shift in the dynamics of the whole interconnected web?

We perhaps need to first see some differences in learning by sharing some distinctions. The first distinction is that coined by Argyris, the difference between single and double-loop learning. Single loop learning occurs when there is no change in the settings, standards or cognition's of the operating agent. He or she may act but will do so only with greater and greater refinement within an established body of cognition's, or within a given framework of understanding. It is the typical learning of skill acquisition and error correction. Double-loop learning is when such cognition's or appreciative frameworks themselves shift. It is that learning that is the more developmental and strategic, posing questions and seeking answers to effectiveness and not just efficiency. Hawkins (1994) takes these distinctions further and proposes a third, that of triple-loop learning which is double-loop extended to pose questions and seek answers as to purpose or *raison d'être*. It is not *"just about personal insight and reframing our experience, but involves a fundamental 'metanoia', a turning around of where we look from, a shaking of the foundation of our beliefs and perspectives"*; an exploration of *"the fundamental perspectives through which we view the world and the paradigms which shape our understanding"*.

Though expressed as discrete distinctions Argyris and Schon counsel caution *"we speak of these categories as discrete when they are actually parts of a continuum"* and *"In place of the binary distinction we have a more continuous concept of depth of learning."* Whilst retaining the distinctions we'd like to simultaneously keep the notion of a continuum from 'surface' to 'deep' learning. With 'surface' referring to a change in what people and organisations *do* within a fairly straightforward and limited set of alternatives, and 'deep' referring to not only doing different but *being* different, a change in cognition's. Similar distinctions have been captured by Bartunek and Moch (1987) following the work of Bateson and their levels of learning are illustrated in table one:

Table one: Levels of learning

Level of learning	Features
First-order learning	Includes the tacit reinforcement of present understanding and behaviour.
Second-order learning	Includes the conscious modification of understanding and behaviour in a particular direction.
Third-order learning	Includes learning to be aware of your own patterns of understanding and behaviour and thereby more able to change those patterns as you see fit.

Such distinctions suggest that to shift the learning that limits requires either double or triple loop learning. Whether the language of 'loops' or of 'levels', what's key is to appreciate that there are different orders or natures of learning which require different approaches.

The idea of deuterio learning, of that 'learning to learn' which occurs when an agent reflects upon a prior context of learning and applies that learning to a larger class of episodes (Argyris and Schon, 1978), suggests that there is learning upon learning. In moving from one context to a higher class of episodes one can see the 'obvious', namely that current learning is in part based on prior learning. Another way of saying this is to suggest that learning is nested. To perform the task of reading a book one must first be able to read a sentence and to read a sentence one must first be able to read a word. But to read rather than 'bark the print' or parrot a word or sentence the reading is first nested in an appreciation of language and the implicit rules of grammar. Much of such language learning, particularly of grammar, is highly tacit and learned at a very early age. The reading of a book is therefore nested or built upon prior learning.

It can be argued that many things are so nested, nested within a prior appreciation or understanding. Thus 'total quality' can be said to be nested in a prior understanding and that perhaps for many that prior understanding is not there, with the results that many companies perhaps do the equivalent of barking or parroting quality rather than being a quality company. Perhaps with this understanding we can the better understand why people like Deming suggest TQ requires a revolution (Deming, 1986). Part of that revolution we suggest is some unlearning that's necessary when the prior appreciation is unaligned. Put more simply: When we can't get there from here!

In a similar way the learning that limits has been tacitly learned and is deeply held. Just adding to this store in a cumulative fashion is not likely to lead to much difference in result. You just can't get there from here, or, you can't get there with all this accumulated baggage of prior appreciation. The basis upon which any new learning might be nested is limiting to result. The fundamental skills and practices of much of the sort of things that we have mentioned in the previous section provide no basis for significant development. One must first and perhaps simultaneously unlearn as one learns. To breach and breakthrough takes awareness and a different order of learning so as to burst the boundaries of such prior appreciation. Of course, the domain of focus is the already existing cognitions that have been so well-learned and are so deeply-rooted and that so often serve to very effectively limit performance. This new learning can perhaps be appropriately described as transformational.

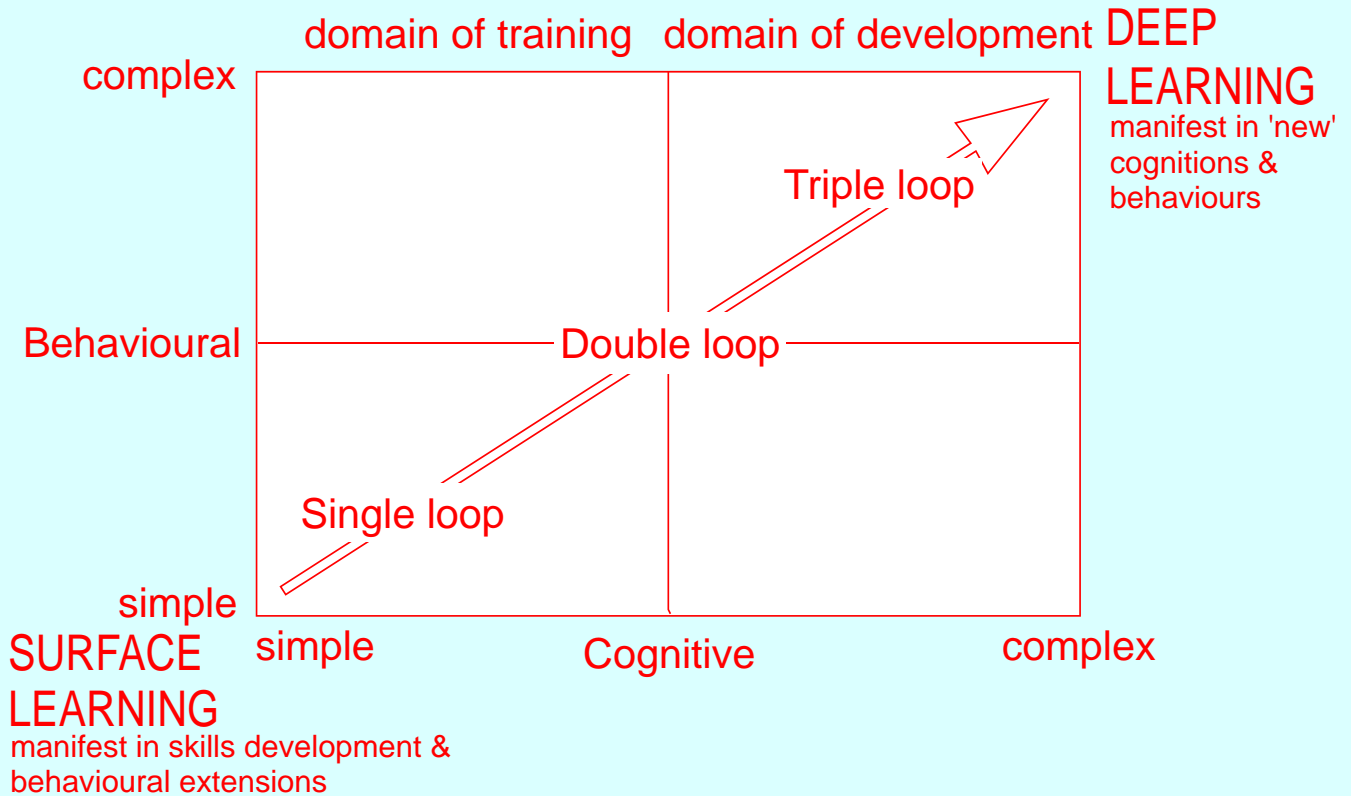
How does all of this translate into the world of practice?

Why do people and companies undertake developmental initiatives? Assuming it is not out of habit one may assume that the intention is to create a different level of result, whether of quantity, quality, timeliness, responsiveness, or value. Whatever the desirable result what might we then ask:

- Do such results require any change in behaviours?
- If so, can these behaviours be built onto what already exists viz. are they a natural extension of existing cognition's or do they need to be nested on some change in cognition's? (assuming its not sufficient that behaviours are just 'barked!').
- If changed cognition's are required are these in turn nested upon a change in deeper-level cognition's and relational shifts?

In short we may need to ask ourselves the depth of learning that is required in the specific context. For those who might wish to argue that they have not got the time just imagine the cost, not just in time, of so many failed initiatives and programmes. Figure one summarises some of these strategic questions which we suggest are considered when undertaking organisational or inter-organisational learning.

Figure 1: Which Level of Learning?



So what?

In conclusion, performance will be profoundly limited if informal tacit learning is not addressed. Furthermore, this form of learning cannot be separated out from formal explicit learning, they are interdependent upon each other.

We have sought to raise awareness of differences in learning and knowledge that can serve to limit rather than enable results. If we have highlighted anything then what we hope we have shared is firstly, that the biggest barriers to new learning are often tacit and our awareness of these tacit barriers is often limited. Secondly, that embedded patterns of learning are held within social relationships and cultural artefacts which are mostly hidden and these act to reinforce inertia to change. Thirdly, that the frameworks of learning that we use are typically geared towards transferring explicit knowledge and that many initiatives limit themselves to change through the use of 'how to do tools'. Fourthly, that those involved in designing development activities need to be aware of the type of change activities that they wish to initiate and the appropriate level or depth of learning required to deliver the results desired.

(adapted and extracted from Batchelor & Shaw, 1998)

For references, please seek the original source Batchelor, J & Shaw, R (1998) *Learning Expertise that Limits Performance and the Dilemmas & Challenges for Supply Development* 7th Ipsera conference, April, 1998

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