The evidence is mounting that real change does not begin until the organization experiences some real threat of pain that in some way dashes its expectations.
open to the possibility of learning. But even this dejection is not necessarily enough. Individuals can remain in a state of despair permanently. 

Q: How can leaders help their followers maximize their learning while minimizing their pain? 

A: The basic principle is that learning only happens when survival anxiety is greater than learning anxiety. Of course, there are two ways to accomplish that. Either you can increase the survival anxiety by threatening people with loss of jobs or valued rewards, or you can decrease learning anxiety by creating a safer environment for unlearning and new learning. The problem is that the creation of psychological safety is usually very difficult, especially when you're pushing for greater workforce productivity at the same time. Psychological safety is also dramatically missing when a company is downsizing or undergoing a major structural change, such as reorganizing into flatter networks.

Most companies prefer to increase survival anxiety because that's the easier way to go. And that, I think, is where organizations have it absolutely wrong. To the extent that our present managerial practices emphasize the stick over the carrot, companies are building in strong resistance to learning. That's very predictable, because in most organizations managers bully their followers to learn—or else. Then when the latest corporate change program turns out to be just another case of the manager crying wolf, and he gets fired as a result, employees settle into a wait-and-see attitude. If leaders really want workers to learn new things, they have to educate them about economic realities in a way that makes their messages credible. When management gains that credibility, it can create the kind of anxiety that leads to a safe learning environment.

In this respect, it's important to distinguish between forcing people to learn something they can see the need to accept—such as new computer skills—and asking them to learn something that seems questionable to them. There will always be learning anxiety, but if the employee accepts the need to learn, then the process can be greatly facilitated by good training, coaching, group support, feedback, positive incentives, and so on.

Q: In organizations, what creates all the anxiety that gets the learning started?

A: The evidence is mounting that real change does not begin until the organization experiences some real threat of pain that in some way dashes its expectations or hopes. This threat can come from a number of places internally, including from the CEO, or it can come from competitors. Whatever its source, this threat of pain creates high levels of learning anxiety and survival anxiety, ultimately prompting the organization to launch a serious change program. Not surprisingly, it is often the CEO and other executives who feel most threatened by any new learning because it reveals their behavior to be dysfunctional. However, I would like to emphasize that unless leaders become learners themselves—unless they can acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and uncertainties—then transformational learning will never take place. When leaders become genuine learners, they set a good example and help to create a psychologically safe environment for others.

Q: Would you say that learning needs to start at the top then?

A: Not at all. Commitment and change at the top certainly increase the chances for the transformational program to succeed, but if you study cases of major change in organizations, you'll find that learning most often begins with a small group and only gradually spreads across the organization and then up. In fact, it's rather common for individuals or small groups to make major strides in their own learning before the rest of the organization does. When those learners begin to innovate, however, they make other people anxious and envious, so the organization's autoimmune system rejects them. Indeed, individual learning can be a dangerous thing when the organization's value system and culture don't have enough freedom to allow individuals to do what they need to do. In those instances, we shouldn't expect the organization to foster individual creativity, because that's just not possible.

Q: How can innovative learners protect themselves from being sprung by the organization?

A: As we learned from the prisoners of war in Korea, resilience is often the ability to make yourself invisible. In organizations, individual learners lie, cheat, go underground—they do whatever they have to do to remain invisible. And in large organizations, going underground isn't that difficult. There is this wonderful story about the guy who was first proposing the PC project to IBM's senior management. He had to get the board's approval for his project
and was given only five minutes on the agenda at the end of the day. He was unhappy about this until his boss told him how lucky he was: "Because you only have those few minutes, they are going to hear whatever they want to hear, and your project will go through." The implication is that IBM might never have approved the project if senior managers had given the learners in the organizations careful consideration.

By the way, groups are much better than individuals at surviving coercive pressures, as we can see from another Digital story. An engineering group that was working on an accelerated computer chip didn't have support from several key senior managers, who believed that the development costs of the chip were excessive and preferred to allocate funds to other projects. Nevertheless, the group members survived by finding other sources of money inside the organization, and they developed the chip anyway. The group's own survival anxiety was sufficient to overcome all kinds of organizational obstacles.

Individuals and groups within an organization can learn new things that run counter to the organization's culture, and these new things can survive. But the crucial point is that this is not organizational learning, because the organization itself did not learn anything. If the organization as a whole is to learn, top management must coercively impose new beliefs and practices on the entire membership.

Q: What can managers do about employees who resist learning?

A: There are a lot of traps here. Managers have to realize that it's important not to put a value on learning per se because doing that can be dysfunctional. Consider something as ostensibly innocuous as the learning that is supposed to take place at the off-site meetings and Outward Bound programs that many companies now sponsor. These companies force their employees to climb trees all day and then reveal personal stuff to one another at night. It's very strange to think about a bunch of people sitting around the campfire and confessing their problems and their marital pains. These bonding activities seem like a very coercive way to shame somebody into being as open as he can be and then getting him to spill his guts. The idea, obviously, is to create bonds among individuals so they will become a much stronger group, but the camaraderie can come at a cost to the individual, who may prefer to protect his true personality. So yes, the group has learned something. But that learning was coerced, and the resulting new team may be dysfunctional because its members are not necessarily being true to themselves. In fact, there are occasions when individuals do the organization a huge favor by refusing to learn.

Another example of inappropriate learning that comes to mind is 360-degree feedback. In this process, subordinates are supposed to learn to give open and honest feedback to their bosses. But one group of engineers I interviewed had wisely chosen not to tell their boss certain things because they knew he was too fragile to accept that kind of criticism. Instead, they spoke up more during meetings and raised objections to their boss's behavior "in real time." Giving such spontaneous feedback proved to be very effective. The subordinates turned out to know better than the human resources department exactly what they needed to do to get the message across to their boss.


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