

Knowledge Transfer as a Learning Experience

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You can learn Barack Obama's job only by doing it: there is no way in which you can learn how to do it ahead of actually being in the job. Obama would probably say that his experience as an organiser in Chicago, working to support the aspirations of ethnic and other disadvantaged groups whom the authorities disregarded was a valuable training ground for politics. But when you get a new job, the people, the context, the expectations and the aims are never quite the same. To do a good job you need to understand and come to terms with its essentials as fast as is possible.

There are only two sources of learning in new jobs:

1. the first is how people in comparable situations handle the issues
2. and the second is learning as rapidly as possible from your own experience in the job.

Learning from others is harder where there are few people about who play similar roles, or they are harder to tap; and in circumstances of rapid development or change it is even more essential. Knowledge Transfer is a new and rapidly developing role, and people with extensive experience are indeed hard to find.

Learning from one's own experience has close similarities to learning in other fields: 'like cookery, burglary or sex, you need to do it, reflect upon how it went, and then do it again' (1). Focused experiments, short learning cycles and thoughtful reflections make for good learning, and Knowledge Transfer is restlessly experimenting with new approaches - from which to learn.

In my research - into the skills of managing creative people (1), we heard that leaders learn their skills mainly from each other - bosses, peers, friends etc. For that reason, for several years now we have been pulling together small groups of people who do similar jobs but in different organisations, inviting them to meet together regularly, to table their toughest problems and opportunities and to draw on the experience, thoughts and ideas of everyone round the table - a sort of cross between Action Learning, Alcoholics Anonymous and Awaydays.

As a result, they develop and put into effect better solutions sometimes than they had imagined possible; they develop their capabilities, add maturity in handling major issues, and often come out of it in need of promotion. They value the time to reflect and the opportunity to meet and have discussions with peers in a confidential environment; and they draw strength and support from each other.

The people in these groups have been mainly from hi-tech and private sector organisations in sectors going through rapid change. More recently we have put

together some groups for technology and knowledge transfer officers and business development officer in universities and these seem too to have helped to develop their capabilities and add to their perspectives.

If you're interested in participating in one of these groups, please contact me.

Reference

(1) "Releasing Creativity: how leaders develop creative potential in their teams", John Whatmore, Kogan Page, 1999.

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