

Learning Aversion

BY STEVE SIMPSON CSP

I've been looking at some of the literature recently on change management, and I have got to say that the much of what I have read seems to have been said before. For example, at an organisational level, leaders need to ensure:

- There is executive ownership
- People understand the imperative of the change
- Roles and responsibilities are defined
- Communication strategies are in place
- and so on

Much of the literature is dedicated to personal attributes necessary for effective change. These include:

- Acceptance that change is a fact of life
- The personal commitment to lifelong learning
- Developing and maintaining a strong network and support team
- and so on

So far as I am concerned, it is self evident that change brings with it new ways of doing things. And in most cases, 'new ways of doing things' requires people to learn new things. So the way I see it, people's attitudes to learning effects change in two main ways:

- If people don't like learning, they are likely to resist proposed changes. It's more comfortable to sit with the known, rather than to learn something new and *risk being seen by others as less capable of learning*
- All other things being equal, if people like learning, they will embrace proposed changes, as changes present a new opportunity to learn

Learning at Hamilton Island

I recently spoke at a conference on the beautiful Hamilton Island in Queensland. My wife and I were having lunch at a café and enjoying the beautiful surrounds near the marina.

Near us was a larger table around at which six people were seated. One person was doing all the talking. I realised these were staff employed on one of the cruise boats moored at the marina. The person doing the talking was going through routines and instructions for the benefit of the other staff prior to a cruise.

I couldn't help notice the body language being displayed by the five people who were listening. Four were obviously engaged and listening attentively. One person however, was not even looking at the person who was talking, and frankly, seemed aloof and uninterested.

It seemed to me this person was displaying an 'aversion to learning', which in my experience is not uncommon!

I'd guess psychologists would be able to provide many good reasons why individuals display an aversion to learning. Many people have had atrocious experiences in school which tend to turn them off formal learning for life. These people associate learning with an unpleasant experience, and therefore avoid the experience if at all possible.

Irrespective of our experiences in our younger years, most of us have suffered through tedious and 'been there—done that' training sessions and conferences. In this context, people are well justified in being cynical

about structured learning experiences of this type.

Over and above poor experiences in different learning contexts, there is also a *power* issue when it comes to learning. As a listener, we give 'power' to the person doing the talking—and this can be threatening to some individuals. For some people, too much listening demonstrates submissiveness which therefore threatens the perceived authority they have over others.

These two forces—unsatisfactory previous learning experiences, and yielding power to the 'teacher'—combine to create a strong aversion to learning in many individuals. And it's clear for all to see.

Of course, this trait in individuals can also be reflected in teams or entire organisations, particularly if the leader or senior people display an aversion to learning. And herein lies the risk—as it tends to be older and more experienced people who are most prone to display an aversion to learning.

These's often a paradox here of course; learning averse leaders can decide on change strategies and subsequently be confounded as to why these changes have not worked, oblivious to the fact it is their own behaviours that have caused these outcomes.

Aversion Techniques

Sometimes, aversion to learning can be disguised. The most common technique for hiding learning aversion is 'busy-ness'. That is, people express a desire to be involved in a learning experience, but have to excuse themselves due to an overcrowded diary.

Not that long ago, I saw the most senior people in a company use this technique, which doesn't auger well for that company.

Now when it comes to change, I'd hazard a guess that an aversion to learning is one of the most potent forces that acts against change. If we believe that change brings with it a need to listen and learn, then a collective aversions to learning will ensure proposed changes won't happen or, at best, will achieve limited success.

Perhaps this is something worth discussing over a coffee...



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