

What have you Unlearnt today?

By: Elaine Rumboll

Psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy was quoted by Alvin Toffler in 'Future Shock' (1970), as saying: 'Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read; he will be the man who has not learnt how to learn'.

Through the decades, this insight (wrongly attributed to Alvin Toffler) has been expanded to 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write but rather those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn'. This reinforces the fact that where the rate of change is happening faster than our ability to respond to it, the ability to dismantle what you know and the agility around making new connections is critical.

I refer to the practice of taking apart what you know as 'Unlearning'. By this I mean the moment in which one stops mid direction, realising that the path ahead needs to be changed. That it is not more learning that is required but rather the capability and practice of undoing what one knows in order to create new opportunities to relearn. Relating this to the current focus in business education on learning and learning organisations, the emphasis is shifted into teaching how to unlearn. This talks to the paradox that the majority of business failures happen as a result of holding onto learning practices that are seldom questioned or reviewed.

Rich Mulholland has termed this blinkered and uncritical reliance on legacy practices as 'legacide'. For it is often these practices that, when left unchecked, cause businesses to implode. Perhaps the easiest way to explain 'Unlearning' is through understanding habitual practices. Take, for example, a self-taught musician. She may have picked up a manner of singing, for example, which puts strain on the voice and doesn't allow her to reach the notes which she is capable of. Unlearning that behaviour would require conscious adjustment the minute the behaviour is recognised. Another example is 'email apnea': the propensity we have to hold our breath when checking emails. This actually activates the sympathetic nervous system and puts us into a flight or fight mode. Focusing instead on breathing through one's nose and holding ones breath triggers the parasympathetic nervous system which induces rest and relaxation. This ability to self correct is – in simple terms – 'Unlearning'.

So what is Unlearning in practice? In my view it is the capacity to put four processes in place: self awareness; curiosity; conscious forgetting and self trust.

In order to 'Unlearn', one needs to develop a strong sense of self awareness. One of the ways to do this is to focus attention, thus heightening the understanding of possibilities around us, and often leading to a clearer perspective and a greater openness to new opportunities in the market.

'Unlearning' cannot take place without the development of a healthy curiosity. Being curious requires that we are disrupted from our traditional way of seeing things. Curiosity emerges when there is a referent with a different piece of knowledge or way of seeing things that is incongruent with our own mental model of the world.

Take the example of human bones. Most people believe the number of bones in our bodies remains constant over time. What if I were to tell you that there were 350 bones in a child's body and 206 in an adult's body? The starting point is the decision between disbelief and curiosity. If you were not open to a different way of seeing this, your response would be to dismiss the statement out of hand. If you were curious however, you would question this statement.

Curiosity is a critical tool in the leadership armoury as it helps one suspend judgement, improve decision-making processes and assists leaders to truly understand the value of different perspectives. (The answer – by the way – is because bones fuse over time in the body).

Conscious forgetting is closely aligned to these processes and is a vital element of self-corrective behaviour. Conscious forgetting is not, however, the antidote to the endless possibilities and the eternal becoming inherent in the sheer possibility of the creative imagination. It is the art of working hard to make possible and the alignment of self to action, through the clarification of attentive focus on what we think, feel, say, do and envision. For when we are aligned with our thoughts, feelings, actions and words we learn how to trust ourselves. Self trust allows us to be grounded enough to face change and helps us to be secure and secured when a behavioural shift is required.

'Unlearning' buttresses the sustainability, authenticity and meaningful purpose of leadership. It transforms capability into capacity. ■



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