

# GET IT TOGETHER

## *It's time corporations put group learning back on the agenda*

*by Laura Villacrusis-Weaver, an Associate with the Refinery Leadership Partners Inc.*

When we were small children, every moment spent with another person was a chance to learn. When we entered school, learning as part of a group became something we did during set hours of the day. Then we entered the workforce and many of us just plain forgot how effective learning from others can be.

“Learns well with others” rarely appears in a job description.

When was the last time you saw learning on a meeting agenda? We all work side by side with people who know things we don't and people who need to know the things we do, so why is learning in a group at work something that happens – if it happens at all – mostly by accident?

Except in cases where we know we need external help (being trained for a new role, for example) learning from others has become one of those childish things many of us have put away.

Time to take it out again.

That early impulse to absorb knowledge from people around us doesn't disappear so much as get buried as we move into adulthood. Tap into it on the job and the results can be astounding. In fact, from working with different organizations, I've observed that some of the most dramatic learning experiences for leaders happen in groups. Learning is a complex process that fundamentally occurs at the individual level, but groups can be a powerful catalyst for that individual process.



We hear a lot about meeting effectiveness – setting and following agendas, playing key roles – but whether all the people in the room are learning anything from the experience is given far less weight than it deserves, if any at all. I know that most organizations value learning for their leaders, yet group learning is something that’s often taken for granted. If we put leaders in a room together they will automatically learn from each other, right?

Um, maybe.

When I was working within a large high-tech company, strategic planning was a long, complex process that involved several activities that produced many versions of plans and objectives. In the interest of saving time, it was easy to skip over talking about what we were learning, but we eventually managed to introduce action learning as a formal part of the process.

Instead of making the process longer, to the surprise of many in the group, learning made it more efficient.

The good news is that integrating group learning into your corporate culture doesn’t generally require a fundamental shift.

A prescribed infrastructure that supports the development of a learning community is a wonderful (and, sadly, rare) thing, but fostering group learning can also begin as simply as adding the word “learning” to your next meeting agenda. Really.

Everyday learning opportunities include management meetings, leadership workshops and project post-mortems. Virtually any situation that involves collaboration is a chance to learn from one another.

At the high-tech company, we dedicated one hour at the end of each day to put our planning hats away and have a conversation about what we were learning – not just about what we were planning, but about the process, ourselves, each other and the organization. We asked questions. A lot of questions.

What’s working? What’s frustrating? What did I not say? What are our expectations of each other? What do we want to create together? What will success look like? As I mentioned above, these conversations helped us move forward faster. Why? Because over time we found ourselves speaking and listening more openly, and that made a huge difference in how effective each planning session was.

Leaders are bright people, and they’re good at finding ways to learn on their own. But when they seek out opportunities to learn from one another, the power they generate can light up an entire company.

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