



Mindfulness and Executive Education

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Abstract

Executive education is experiencing huge growth, yet continues to be consumed and delivered in ways that may not maximize the potential benefits of helping participants take in new frameworks, attitudes and skills that are essential to adapting to the transformations occurring in our organizations. This article overviews the ways in which all of the stakeholders in executive development courses can get significantly greater value from their investments. It starts before the program begins, discusses ways of learning while at the program, and attends to the transition from the program back to work.

Introducing the Dilemma

U.S. corporations invested an estimated \$16 billion in 1996 in training and educating their managers, a 14 percent increase from 1995 (Reingold, p. 67). An estimated \$3 billion went to universities and the rest to in-house programs and consultants (Reingold, p. 67). The programs may run from a few hours to ten weeks and occur at prestigious institutions like Stanford, Harvard, MIT, INSEAD and Wharton, at any of a plethora of smaller, highly focused institutions or within a corporation.

Executives who attend such programs hope for new skills, a shift in how they think about work problems and new understanding. The investment made in executive development is only viewed as justified if it produces behaviors and attitudes that increase effectiveness at work. Achieving such a positive outcome requires a mindfulness of factors often overlooked by participants, sponsors and educators. Companies underattend who should go (“round up the usual suspects”); senior executives blithely view “development” as a “good thing” and

think no further; many participants sleepwalk into a program, putting off all preparation for it until the last minute, adopting a “consumer” or even a “show me” attitude (as distinct from a “participant attitude”) as if active collaboration were unnecessary or even inappropriate.

Langer’s research (1989, 1997) demonstrated that the more mindfulness there is about a few simple things, the greater the learning, the more flexibly is stored, and the easier it is to access the learning and apply it to a variety of fast-changing contexts. With the elderly, mindfulness even impacts longevity and quality of life. The difference stems from a heightened awareness of a small number of pivotal issues, a willingness to faithfully do a set of exercises, active engagement in the learning process and constantly attending to what creates genuine insight.

We contend that an executive needs to be mindful of a number of issues when entering, going through and exiting an educational program. A constructive learning orientation may not naturally occur, but it can be created. In this paper we lay out what we think is essential to enhance learning at executive courses. We begin with selecting a program. We then suggest what participants need to attend to during the program, regardless of whether or not the course explicitly invites reflection on these issues. We conclude with a section on returning home, often the weakest link in the learning process.

We are writing primarily to potential and actual participants. However, we think many of the issues we raise have strong implications for the providers of executive education as well, those who design, market, deliver and follow up on programs. We draw upon a combined experience of over 60 years of designing and teaching in executive education programs.

Selecting a Program

Organizations sponsor managers for executive education courses for a wide range of reasons. Corporations use it as a way to confer status, to place people into a particular category system. “We’re sending you to Harvard’s Advanced Management Program” can mean: “We have big plans for you.” It can also mean: “We now expect great things from you.” In contrast, some organizations send people to a program as a reward, as thanks for service rendered and without any new expectations. For others, attendance amounts to a consolation prize for not being promoted or a way to get them out of the company, “It will help you get a better job when we cut you loose in six months.”

Likewise, participants attach various meanings to the act of going, meanings that may or may not dovetail with the corporation’s ascribed meaning. Some may find it an annoyance to be tolerated. For instance, it is not unusual for a participant to announce, “My boss came here two years ago and had a great time and felt this would be good for me.” This could be code for: “I feel obliged to like it too,” or maybe: “I’ll make sure I have a miserable time, just to spite my boss.”

We have discovered that participants learn best when the employer, the supervisor and the participant see the program as a means of addressing some major developmental need of the company and of the particular manager. Those who come understanding that the learning is to benefit themselves and their relevant stakeholders link the learnings to the interactions between themselves and their context. This stance requires explicit, thoughtful conversations well in advance of selecting or attending an executive education program. Often all parties, sponsors, participants and key stakeholders, collude in avoiding just that

work, the work most likely to yield a higher return on the money, time and energy being committed to sending a participant to executive education.

For all concerned, the decision *not* to attend a program is as important as the one to actually go. A manager must feel free to say, “No! I don’t want to go” (for whatever reason), to be able to fully say “yes” to a learning opportunity. The reasons for not attending might be anything from “I’ve been away from my family too much lately,” to “I don’t think I want to be out of the office right now, given all that’s going on,” to “I think this program is more appropriate for someone else” or “Another program would fit me much better.”

Too often, the choice of sending someone to executive education comes down to who should go. Frequently, the more useful question to ask is *how many* people to send. The more that the purpose of education revolves around organizational change or development, the more helpful to send two or three colleagues to the same course at the same time. Together, they develop a critical mass of new insight that can counteract the inertia of normal practices or procedures on their return. There are numerous ways to arrange for multiple attendees. One of the best programs that we work in brings in the boss for the final two-and-a-half days of a three-week program. This affords the participant the opportunity to plan with their boss just how to take the learning back to the work setting. The time together also creates a reality check for the newly inspired direct report prior to his or her full return home.

Most important of all though is countering the “You can only learn when you are away” syndrome. The very existence of external educational programs and academies suggest that meaningful learning only occurs away from the office. This is natural, given the turbulence of everyday workplace functioning. It is, however,

neither true nor conducive to learning. Most of the significant and career-shaping learning actually done by individuals occurs in the workplace itself. We seldom acknowledge this reality. We mostly go away to learn because it is too hard to do that learning at the office.

The danger inherent in this view is that people see learning at the academy as resulting from some feature of that external environment rather than the learning posture the academy managed to tap within each participant. That same learning could have occurred in the work setting given the cultivation of a different orientation toward learning. Participants give too much credence to what comes from outside the workplace and tend to undervalue their own role in learning, especially the inner preparation they do to be open to new ideas, the willingness to listen to the experiences of others so that it can be processed in a useful way and the nourishing of seeds previously planted so they can come to life. (One detailed example of collaborative learning from “there” appears in Shea and Berg, *JABS*, 1987.)

Perhaps the most significant contribution of going away is that it interrupts the work-based processes that block learning, the endless focus on being productive, the suppression of the emotions that are inherent in the discovery process and the fear of making mistakes that upon discovery are treated punitively.

We suggest that for organizations to become learning systems (Senge, 1990) the competitive strivings, the focus on performance and the demand to take only risks that have a good chance of succeeding must be put on hold from time to time. Only when they are kept in check is it possible to create an environment that fosters learning, one that heightens a collaborative spirit and

rewards the making of mistakes without fear of judgment or blame. Participants accrue the greatest value from executive education when they discover how to become better learners in the back-home setting.

Preparing and Being There

1. *The Nature of the Search for Knowledge*

A key question for all learning is: Does the participant want knowledge to address specific issues or broad principles that help the thinking through of problems from a more abstract stance? This old debate has led many scholars to decide that they want to develop and work only with theories that can be readily applied and to only consider practices well grounded in theory.

For the executive attending a course, the debate usually centers on whether it is best to get “learning focused on specific concerns” or “an understanding of broad principles that requires more of me to make the appropriate translations into action.” While every program contains a mixture of both, the design is often highly tilted in one direction or the other. Whatever the mix, the most successful learning occurs when participants explore theory from the perspective of how best to use it and when they explore specific practices or examples for their theoretical and general robustness.

Adults absorb more when they a) feel the need to learn; b) experience the material (as in living it as opposed to receiving it); c) are surprised. These truisms should inform the selection of programs and how one prepares to participate in the course. Two useful questions to ask are “What do I think I know about this subject?” and “What do I not know?” Then, participate in the course open to surprises, both of the sort of discovering that “I actually have abilities that I was

not aware of,” as well as of the sort of discovering that “there are areas where I’ve been simply unaware of the extent of my ignorance.” These issues can be brought into awareness by an instrument like a 360-degree feedback instrument, precourse interviews of key stakeholders or a thoughtful conversation initiated by a sponsor who asks the attendee to report back with a “what surprised you” list.

The participant’s orientation toward being surprised matters. Taking the risk to think specifically about what you want can heighten your ability to be surprised. Restated, looking for surprises greatly increases the likelihood of finding them. During the program, a participant might devise ways as seen in the following table to test his or her diagnosis of what is known and what is not known. (See Table 1 below for a taxonomy of surprises and their implications for learning.)

Table 1—Surprises

		Surprise	
		Yes	No
Nature of	Favorable	A Disconfirming of diagnosis, confirming of ability	B Confirming of diagnosis of ability
Outcome	Unfavorable	C Disconfirming of diagnosis, identification of “ignorance”	D Confirming of diagnosis of “ignorance”

Our counsel is to seek surprise, of whatever sort, by noting your own point of view and testing to see if it is shared by others. Clarity of one’s own opinion makes discovering a surprise more likely. Participants learn most when they experiment with roles, speak out, consciously pursue leadership or followership

positions and actively collect data about others' reactions to their statements and actions.

2. *Work-Life Balance*

Given the pulls on our lives these days, virtually all participants in executive education courses report great difficulty keeping work, personal and family life in balance. A week or two away from the office, desirable though it may be, is also time made unavailable to the family. Often, especially in management courses, there is a request for help to get their lives back into balance. The irony, of course, is that the request occurs during a course that itself contributes to the problem—participants are away from home yet again.

Departure for a course involves decoupling from family and community commitments and this deserves attention, both in terms of timing and how the lives of others will be affected. An assumption exists that executives are free to pack a bag and take to the road whenever the boss chooses, but what happens to the family? If there is a spouse at home available to the children, the question is how will this impact him or her. Many spouses now have professional lives as complex as those of participants.

Participants who have discussed these issues fully with the family, who have chosen a time to be absent that takes into account the demands of family life, and who agree to add supports to the family for the period of their absence, prove best able psychologically to ready themselves to learn. In our senior programs, this seems to be a liberty available more to men than to women—a fact that speaks to complex gender dynamics in the workplace and the society that still needs to evolve further.

Attending a course, indeed even the possibility of doing so, provides an opportunity to reflect on one's work/life balance. Merely being gone from the workplace, from home and from one's own community, provides a vantage point to examine one's life balance. Nonetheless, programs vary widely in their orientation, spoken and actual, toward reflection of any kind. Some program schedules are designed to fill every moment. Others build in time for reflection and some even specifically include an opportunity to reflect on one's self and one's life journey. This offers something special that most executives cherish, even though they would not say so in organizations that would treat such reflection as soft and irrelevant to the bottom line.

In our experience having life balance is absolutely essential to the bottom line. Prolonged underattention to parts of the self leads to stunted personal growth, narrowing of perspective, stress and internal disorientation for individuals and for collectives (e.g., workgroups and organizations as a whole). This condition can have significant organizational consequences, especially for those who would lead. We are not suggesting that every executive course should focus on life balance or taking a trip to a personal mountain top to get a lofty perspective on the self. The point is that courses vary markedly in terms of giving participants the chance to see differently, including seeing one's life from a new parapet.

Whether or not this is part of the program, we encourage all participants to keep a personal journal when they are away. Write upon rising and again before retiring about whatever comes to mind concerning one's private life and those who inhabit it. Upon return, participants are often surprised by the value of the reflection they have systematically done without conscious awareness of what insights were being opened up through their writing.

3. The Character of the Work Setting

A key question to be asked, especially if the program lasts several weeks, is “What will the workplace be like while I am gone, either because of my absence or because conditions are changing so fast that when I return things won’t be recognizable?” A familiar joke during course introductions is “by the way, if my boss calls, ask who it is.” For many, life at work is so turbulent that leaving for an extended period means that upon return there may be a new boss, a reorganized department or new owners of the company. The most usual reason for a participant to withdraw is not illness or family crisis, but the sudden announcement of a merger or takeover that makes returning imperative, either to protect one’s interests or the department’s. In fact, three participants of a multiple week program for senior executives vanished during a fifteen-minute coffee break. They had received word that their organization was in the midst of being taken over and had immediately headed back to California.

A key issue, then, is how to leave the work behind. One cannot fully engage the learning being offered until the workplace has been psychologically left behind. It is always hard, especially as the work piles up. However, the more distance one can get, the greater the chance to reflect on that workplace in a refreshing way. Authorizing others to take up the void left by the participant’s departure, letting go of what’s actively on one’s plate at least temporarily and creating a personal image of “how the place could function fine without me” are very useful. All this can create another kind of anxiety. “What if they get on fine without me? What if the person I authorized to do my job does it better than me?” Participants would benefit from recognizing that these fears, although rarely spoken aloud, are common and perfectly understandable.

Not infrequently, executives fantasize at the last minute about not actually attending. Such a thought might be packaged in an excuse like “I’m feeling swamped,” or “the amount of work that will pile up is too overwhelming for me to genuinely disengage.” We suggest that participants should indulge the fantasy about not going and milk it for insight about what is actually being left behind. Disengaging from work is so hard that any process that can flush out what keeps one so tied to the workplace has use. Exploring these ties or hindrances to disengagement enables the participant to address them in a more coherent, constructive way and thereby to become freer of them.

Participants can plan for their absence from work by thoughtfully, and even collaboratively, assigning roles and tasks to others and doing so with an eye on the development of those “left behind.” Similarly, participants can ask peers, bosses and subordinates to note what they experienced in the participant’s absence, what changed, who took up which parts of his or her formal or informal role, when others wished that the participant were there and when were they glad the participant was gone. This sets in place the expectation of a productive two-way conversation upon the participant’s return.

4. Embracing One’s Ignorance

The biggest shift entering a learning experience centers on exiting the performing mind set. At work the expectation is that one will function competently and use the talents that have already been developed. This means focusing on doing tasks well, being successful and operating from one’s base of knowledge. Genuine learning requires the opposite. It involves taking risks that will likely lead to failure, functioning out of one’s comfort zone and letting go of the idea of performing

competently. If one is succeeding at the challenges being thrown at them during an executive program, this means they are operating within the bounds of what they already know and hence new learning is not occurring. Only those who are failing are fully engaging their ignorance and entering the emotional space where learning is possible.

Switching into a condition of ignorance is not easy or immediately appealing. For most adults it requires unlearning and the letting go of practices that once served them well. This is painful, requires one to be willing to feel regressed for a period and stirs anxiety that must be managed. This is no small feat and necessitates preparation. Those who understand the necessity and value of this journey have an easier time with it. Those who have never thought about it may well be half way or more through the course before they catch on to the condition they must be in to learn. By then, half of the opportunities have passed. Hence, participants should, prior to selecting and attending an executive education course ask, “What have been the conditions under which I, as an adult, have done my most significant learning and what conditions had to be in place for me to take in those essential lessons?” Mostly, this is answered by saying, “When I encountered something highly unpredictable, when I was lost, when I could take risks and tolerate the pain linked to my mistakes and when I was surrounded by people supportive of my learning who were willing to tolerate my being incompetent for a period.” Again, getting there requires quite a journey. People appropriately approach programs with an air of intentionality because there are lessons they ought to learn. That intentionality needs to be matched by an openness to the unexpected that catches one by surprise.

5. Mapping Out the Relevant Stakeholders

Every person and job exists within a context. The context consists of several key stakeholders each of whom has an investment in that person, the construction of the function and the execution of the job. In the most basic sense, a manager has several authority figures whom rely on him or her to perform an array of functions, numerous peers with whom she or he is interdependent and many subordinates who need guidance, resources and a way to remain connected to the primary purposes of the enterprise. The manager's departments or divisions lie amidst an array of other units. An action taken by one, such as to alter priorities or to introduce a technological innovation, etc., may alter the rate at which critical information, material or resources are passed off to others. Alternatively, it may change what is being conveyed so that it creates a major perturbation in the other unit's capacity to function.

In addition to these internal stakeholders, there are external ones of equal importance: suppliers, customers, regulators, vendors, competitors, communities, etc. A manager drafting even the most cursory mapping of the relevant stakeholders will quickly conclude that learning which alters one's own behavior entails modification of a web of relationships. Put simply, attending an executive course means making a commitment to being a change agent, which requires learning about how to manage a host of organizational perturbations not normally associated with whatever formal topic was designated in the executive seminar brochure.

Participants enrich their educational experiences by constantly adopting a stakeholder approach. Prior to the program, participants can seek input from stakeholders about what they would hope the participant would bring back from

a given executive education program. During the program,

- a) a participant might think of a handful of players (individuals or groups) key to one's success and think about how they would be reflecting on the case material and what they might hope that the program participant would carry out from it back into his or her relationship with the participant;
- b) attend class sessions with the mindset of at least one stakeholder other than him or herself;
- c) organize notes at the end of the day by stakeholder;
- d) observe how other people in the class occupy positions or take stances similar to those of key stakeholders and become as connected as possible with how they think;
- e) play roles or pursue lines of arguments as if the participant were one of his or her key stakeholders in order to gain an increased sense of the stakeholder's world.

6. Understanding the Nature of Group Representativeness

Mostly, people come to courses as individuals and conceive of learning as an individual phenomenon. That is both understandable and regrettable. First, everyone represents a host of groupings that may or may not be in our shared awareness. This is most obvious during public introductions of participants. Consider what goes through the minds of others when a person says, "Hi, I'm Joe Shawalski, vice president of marketing at Phone, Inc. I live in New Jersey with my partner of ten years. I have no children and spend most of my spare time lobbying for the political rights of people living with AIDS." His name might invoke some to think, "Be careful of Polish jokes when speaking with this guy," making his ethnicity visible. Others will move immediately to how they feel about the way marketers have interrupted their dinners at home to pound them about this or that one time only offer. Still others will go to their reactions to gay men,

think of a friend who has died of AIDS or will focus on their own reactions to this deadly virus. When Joe introduced himself, others clearly viewed him through the lenses of groupings and associations with those groupings, lenses that they and he carry as ways to see and sort society as a whole.

This representational status can prove quite unwelcome. For example, in a class where there are few women it is not unusual for a man to say, "Let's hear the woman's perspective," and wait for one of the females to respond. The women are being asked to treat their own opinions as representational of all women unless they say, "I don't want to be a spokesperson for others because the range of opinions among women is as wide as those among men."

Participants also carry the spoken or implicit expectation that they will represent their home groups in certain ways. They are expected to be good ambassadors for their company and might be given messages such as, "Don't do anything to embarrass us," or "put on a good show," or "see if you can get some new clients while you're there," or "check out the competition." In this sense, organizations explicitly cast participants in the middle, in between their home groups that have a set of investments of their own, and the new, temporary course group they are joining.

The potential for unique personal development increases when a person leaves behind, physically or referentially, their back-home groups. Leaving behind everyday assumptions that guide one's thinking, makes it possible to identify with them anew, to see them from a different vantage point and to visit them through the eyes of different people. Paradoxically, becoming aware of these multiple identifications provides a way for a participant to escape their grip.

Any learning an individual does is also group learning because the collective is enhanced by any insights its parts may develop. When a finance person learns about managing interpersonal conflict and when human relations specialists learn about finance, their respective workgroups have also been engaged in learning so long as the participant can translate the insights into actions that are meaningful for their colleagues.

The universal nature of representativeness puts all participants in the middle during a program. As they import their own ignorance into the course, they are also carrying the ignorance of their back-home work unit with them. They ask for their ignorance to be taken away so they can export back to their home organizations the insights that were previously lacking in those settings. Sometimes being openly in the middle in this way can be helpful. Other times it is stressful. For example, saying, “We don’t know how to handle situations like ... in my company, does anyone have experience with handling this?” is an identification of putting one in the middle in a low-key and non-problematic way. Having a boss exclaim, “Now you’ve been to Harvard, you should have the answer to this,” puts one in the middle in an anxiety producing way. Mindfulness of this middleness enables participants as well as those back home to consider how best to utilize this aspect of the executive education experience when selecting and attending programs.

Summary

On arrival at a course we ask, “What am I bringing with me? What will I choose not to bring with me? What am I unable to leave behind?” Worthy of bringing are our curiosity, our intellectual adventurousness, our ignorance, our hopefulness, our

willingness to engage and our fragmented selves. Worth leaving behind are our cynicism, our job, our focus on performance, our arrogance and our need to prove ourselves. Some characteristics we cannot leave behind are our group identities, the cumulative impact of our experiences, our essence, our blind spots, our despairs and our biases. Participants should mindfully choose what they bring and what they leave behind. Additionally, participants should mindfully consider how to best utilize what they have no choice but to bring along.

Returning Home

The last slice of the executive education experience we want to examine is the transition from the off-site learning setting back to work. At times, the emotions stirred by a program, especially if one has been to the mountaintop, are so intense that those who have been dealing with the mundane during their absence react negatively or decide to wait until the fresh blush of new energies has dissipated. Other times, one feels that the knowledge acquired is so new that to speak about it before more fully metabolizing it would risk making it trivial. We offer the following advice based on our experience in helping participants deal with reentry and from interviews with people after they have returned home.

1. *Prune or Weed Before Planting*

People rarely come to developmental sessions with significant slack in their lives. When they return, it is worse due to the pile up of work during their absence. Often participants are so excited about the new ideas they begin making lists of “to do’s.” We suggest that participants should begin with some lists of “not to do’s.” As Drucker has written, “Priorities are easy; posteriorities—what jobs *not*

to tackle—are tough,” (Peters, 1979). In the same vein as Robert Graves advice, “the wastebasket [is] ... a writer’s best friend,” giving up some ideas makes it possible to focus on what is actually doable. The experience of being away can give perspective to which activities are value adding and which are not. If you have mindfully delegated your tasks while away, there may be a chance to permanently assign some tasks to others that would be mutually developmental.

It is easy to avoid hard choices while thinking about reentry. We encourage both serious pruning back home and putting some of the ideas on the back burner. We all know what happens with lengthy New Year’s resolution lists. Shorter lists of carry-aways increase the likelihood of application back home.

2 Look Back to Look Ahead

As the end of a program approaches, participant attention moves toward going home and the work awaiting them. Often people leave early, either out of anxiety about what is laying in wait for them or to avoid the painful aspects of ending important and newly formed relationships. We have found it critical to work against the all too frequent flight into action plans until after people have looked back and consolidated some of their thoughts and feelings about the experience itself. This can be done by the community jointly building a log of their shared experiences. This helps members recall what happened over the previous few days.

A variant of looking back involves harvesting some of the insights that others have about how a participant has taken up his or her various roles during the program. When one is in a learning community for a week or more, they cannot help but reveal a great deal about their style, persona, etc. A gift that

participants can give one another is to share some of these observations: how did someone take up their voice in large-group sessions versus small groups, what were the roles in the formal program versus the informal life of the event, etc.

3. Look Ahead to Look Back

It is extremely powerful at the end of a program to travel forward a few months in time (Gilmore and Shea, 1997) and think through the story that will be told about how you applied learnings from the program. What ideas were introduced when? Who supported you and who resisted you? What worked and what did not? By creating a “history of the future,” you can then come back to the present and make more informed choices about what to commit to. This can be done individually but is even more powerful when interacting with colleagues from the session in an interview format with one person asking questions and the set groundrule that all the answers have to be in the past tense, as if they have actually happened.

4. Plan for the Trip

Returning home requires mindfulness, no less so than leaving home. The world of executive education and the world of day to day differ dramatically. To simply gather up one’s belongings and stuff course materials into FedEx boxes will not bridge the divide, nor will vague promises to yourself about getting around to application “sometime next week.” The transition home, the translation of learnings garnered while away, amounts to real work, worthy of real attention. Failure to attend mindfully to this work means greatly diminishing the benefit of any program to participants and their organizations alike.

At the very least, participants should not leave a program without basing several specific actions on their executive education experience and committing to complete those actions within the first two weeks back home. The size of the actions matter less than their existence and the participant's commitment to carry them out.

Participants seeking more fuel for the trip might enter into personal contracts based on fulfilling their near-term action plans. Restated, participants can make consequences of personal importance contingent on completing action plans. For example, a boss agrees to turn his corner office over to a direct report for a week if he does not complete his action plan or a chair of surgery agrees to give the keys to her new Porsche to a resident for a weekend if she does not complete her action plan. Such arrangements made with a trusted colleague or a befriended program peer broadcast the promise to act as deeper and more personal, even profoundly or disturbingly so.

5. Tour Your Native Land

Most simply, close the loop with those who participated in your leaving. If gratitude is in order, then express it. Also, note that they may have learned something by your absence. Explore what they have discovered.

For the more adventuresome, consider that an effective developmental experience often makes both the familiar strange and the strange familiar. A great benefit is that one can slow down particular situations and analyze them in far greater detail than would be possible given the pace of activity at work. It can be a powerful learning experience to adopt an observer or anthropologist stance for a period of time rather than immediately moving back into an action mode. One

creative executive, realizing that his unit had not collapsed during his three-week absence (with some wounding of his pride), faxed instructions to several direct reports that he wanted them to continue covering his responsibilities for an additional week. He used this week to observe, interview and plan how he might best marry up insights from the session with the real situation at work. At the end of his first week back, he had a meeting with his people to share his reflections and renegotiate with them their tasks, based on what everyone had learned during his absence.

6. Create Pull Versus Push

Create ways to motivate the back-home organization to pull the learnings and insights from you rather than your pushing them into the organization. Colleagues, and especially subordinates, of a returning executive may hunker down, expecting that they are in for a manic phase of new jargon and ideas. They usually have experience about how long this phase lasts before a return to the baseline. It can be useful to think about your usual pattern and deliberately be different. If a participant often returns fired up, then she or he might do well to experiment with coming back low key, e.g., concentrate on creating conditions where others might ask before the participant feels driven to tell.

Homer's account of the Trojan Horse provides an instructive analogy. Ulysses plants key soldiers (powerful ideas) in the belly of the wooden horse (some intriguing and/or significant issue) and the size and rumors induce the Trojans to breach their walls (the back-home resistance) and pull the horse into the city. Once inside, the lead cadre of Greeks are able to seize Troy and open the gates for reinforcements to join them. The lessons of this analogy are to think of a

very limited initial foray that has a strong chance of success perhaps because it is linked to an important issue for the organization. After the success, you can revisit the larger set of ideas and bring them in.

Often the resistance lives not in others but in ourselves. We can easily conspire to undercut our own change. Inoculating ourselves against our own undercutting includes linking new ideas and frameworks to work that is already underway or must soon be underway. Restated, do not make new work in order to try a new idea; use a new idea to better carry out required work.

7. Buffer Ideas Until They Are Strong

The process of digesting an idea or a concept is not instantaneous. Your colleagues know you well and are hypersensitive to changes that feel like they are “not you”—as if you have been invaded by some alien, un-metabolized idea. There is a wonderful cartoon of a recently returned executive from a training session kicking off a meeting with his team. The caption reads: “Back from an executive training seminar, Ed tries out a newly learned technique: ‘Before we begin, I’d like everyone to relax by crowing like a rooster. Phil, you start off.’”

We also suggest finding environments where it is safe to fail rather than taking on the hottest, riskiest issue right away. Find places to try an idea in one’s voluntary roles. We know that when we learn any new skills, there is a period of regression. For example, after lessons in golf or tennis, you often lose to people that you beat easily before. You have to go through a period of reduced competence, sticking with the new skill to reach the next plateau. If you cannot tolerate that period, you often revert back to the old behaviors and not only do

you not develop, but you also become more cynical about the possibility of change.

Furthermore, participants should attend to buffering or insulating themselves from a loss of energy to pursue application of an idea or technique acquired while “away;” a loss is made more likely by swimming alone. Participants should consider who might prove most interested in a given idea or technique. How might the participant support someone else’s understanding or appreciation of an idea or technique? How might he or she come to support the participant’s use of the idea or technique?

8. *Teach to Learn*

One of the most effective ways to learn new ideas is to teach them. That said, it is easy to think that others learn when you tell them the answers you have recently discovered. That, however, is not learning, nor is it leadership. The primary task of the educator is to create contexts where others can make their own discoveries.

Conclusion

At a good executive education program, participants encounter educators who adopt a developmental approach to learning, who encourage risk taking and even stumbling, who create a supportive environment, asking participants to reflect at each point on what they were grasping and what was eluding them. When participants create similar contexts back home, they enable themselves and others to learn. Then, participants have driven new insights to such a deep personal level that they will never be forgotten. The participants have also

furthered their learning about learning and do not segregate learning as an activity that you have to leave work to perform. Such participants have grown more mindful about themselves, their organizations, and the development of both.

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