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BUILDING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION?

Top level managers regularly ask Peter Senge “how do I build a learning organization”. Senge replies that this is the wrong question. He claims that it implies that a president can singlehandedly make changes in an organization’s genetic code. Second it implies that building a learning organization involves a formula rather than an ongoing process. In reality, senior executives have little power to control the complex workings of organizations, especially if they are quite large. Changing an organization is not like driving a car and if you try, results can be damaging.

Managers at top levels try to drive change by issuing new strategic plans, or setting in motion new cost-cutting campaigns, or restructuring their organization. They do this because there is not much else they can really do by themselves. These top-level people are generally too far removed from the ultimate customer, products and employees to understand the connection between strategic planning and strategy implementation.

According to Senge, managers who are also leaders can develop and use guidelines for change. They begin by changing their own way of thinking and interacting with their employees. They can lead by example by encouraging an environment in which new ideas are welcomed and people are supported for learning new skills. True and deep organizational change requires a change in people at all levels, in other words, a change in the culture of the system. Re-boxing people into new squares on a chart is possibly equivalent to re-arranging the outdoor chairs on the good ship Titanic.

Mistakes, however, are made that obstruct the type of change which leads to sustainable competitive advantage. Rank is confused with leadership. Status quo is favored over innovation. Adaptive (learning) organizations recognize that a healthy environment requires leadership at all levels including front line workers, professional staff, supervisors, middle managers and top executives. Line employees take initiative to improve processes; supervisors network to break down silos while executive leaders set the overall climate for change.

What do local leaders and professional networkers need from executive management? They need answers to such questions as where are we trying to go and why. Where have we been and how did we get to where we are at? What makes us unique? Who are we trying to serve? They want clarification and not drop dead dates for project completion when they have no rationale for the project in the first place.

Teams seem to work best at the lowest levels since upper managers think they can do it all alone. After all they made it to the top with hard work and drive and often stepping stones. “Why can’t everyone else do the same as I did” is their mantra. Little do they realize that the e-train is passing them by at warp speed. Most senior managers do not view themselves as learners but as decision makers. After all they are “paid” to make the decisions. Wrong. They are paid to see that others are making the best decisions for the organization and its customers. Learning is essential at all levels. Unfortunately, it is most lacking at the top of many organizations.