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CAREER & WORKPLACE

Opinion: How to make your workday a learning experience



The very impulse to problem-solve is what gets in the way of learning at work, writes Julie Pham.

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We think about school as a place we learn and the workplace as where we apply what we learned. Lifelong learning might even refer to taking classes and reading

books and participating in hobbies that “teach” us new content.

Since we spend most of our waking hours at work, what if employers encouraged people to continue their learning at work? And not just thorough training from experts but from one another? What if employees were asked to tap into their personal expertise and experiences and share it with their colleagues?

If we only see work as a place where we give, then employees are being extracted for their knowledge and labor. When we view work as a place where we are all sharing and mutually learning, employees can thrive and their expertise and knowledge can grow alongside their colleagues.



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It requires allowing people to practice curiosity at work. This means giving people time and space to self-reflect to admit when they don’t know, ask for help and support, share parts of their personal selves, be interested in others, listen to understand instead of to respond, and ask questions to clarify – and not fear others will be threatened by their questions.

Leaders have to examine their own practices, which may result in committing to some behavioral change. Many people tell me they value curiosity and yet their own expectations reveal otherwise.

The very impulse to “problem solve” is what gets in the way of learning. The logic goes, “We’ve identified a problem. Let’s figure out how to solve the problem. Once we fix this problem, we can congratulate ourselves and then go find the next problem we need to fix.” This cycle of find the problem, fix the problem, find another problem doesn’t allow for people to pause and ask, “What is this problem teaching us?”

The value of an employee is reduced to their ability to find and fix problems.

Trainers are brought in to give expertise to employees and to find and fix problems more efficiently.

Because we want to feel valued, we try to find other similar problems to fix instead of pursuing unfamiliar challenges. My team thinks of our role as building organizational capacity for colleagues to learn from one another, communicate and share.

Sometimes people expect us to give them a solution. They have a problem, they think they hired us to provide a solution when what we do is help kick-start a practice of looking to one another for different possible answers.

One of my costly regrets in my first year of business was bringing in a consultant to solve something for me instead of reinvesting the money into my team. The consultant didn’t actually teach us how to do the work ourselves. Practicing curiosity is like meditation, it looks easy yet it’s really difficult. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Do you need an absolute answer? Mutual learning requires teams to get comfortable with ambiguity and not have any clear-cut, right or wrong answers. This is especially hard for teams whose self-worth is about being solution-providers and problem-solvers.

Are you willing to hold each other accountable? Because it is a practice, it requires team members to hold each other

accountable when one of them inevitably doesn't listen or acts with judgment instead of curiosity or rushes to get a result instead of pausing to hear different perspectives. One of the most effective and challenging ways to learn from one another is by giving each other feedback. People tell me they want this and yet it's hard to keep each other accountable, even when they set aside time for it.

Can you pause? Work can feel so urgent and pressing that there is no time to learn. When have you rushed to reach a conclusion to meet an arbitrary deadline? Can you differentiate between "this is good enough for us to move forward and learn something" and "there will be serious consequences if we don't pause and think through this." If it's the latter, the discussion itself should be a learning opportunity. I often get asked, "How do we make sure this isn't a one-and-done?" I tell them they have to keep making time to learn from each other, apart from just doing the work expected of them.

How much discomfort are you willing to risk? Learning can be uncomfortable, and many people might complain about that discomfort as they experience it. Even when I set people's expectations in the beginning, some are bound to be vocally angry as their beliefs are challenged, which sometimes has to happen for them to learn.

Can you admit when you don't know the answer and invite other people to share? It requires the leaders to say I don't know, which can be antithetical to what leaders think. Some companies have adopted a "reverse mentor" program where executives get mentored by people junior in their careers.

Perhaps you answered these questions in the affirmative and you are already a learning organization. If you're not there yet, remember it's hard for everyone, especially now.

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