How2 develop peer learning in your organisation

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Introduction

Peer learning is where people with similar levels of authority (not necessarily similar levels of skill or experience) share their knowledge with each other and learn from each other quite naturally as an extension of normal day-to-day activities.

Peers can be described as 'those with the same professional or academic background' or even 'those who do the same tasks' but, in this case, we are referring to Peers as 'those equal in authority'.

The reason is that authentic Peer Learning can only take place where people of a similar status are open to learning from each other and to passing on their know-how as a contribution in return. This requires an initial recognition of the factor called 'unique experience' at an individual level or, at the very least, the differences between people and their experiences, so that issues of superior / inferior positions can be overcome at the outset.

Even where Peer Learning is based on very similar levels of capability, it must be encouraged from the perspective of individual value that goes beyond who is better, brighter and more capable than others. 'Vive La Difference' in other words!

This Byte describes how true Peer Learning can be facilitated and generated either informally or formally by organisational managers.

Main

Peer Learning is actually what occurs naturally in a business every single day.

Peer Learning is happening automatically whenever people work together or face the challenge of achieving goals together. It is going on all of the time and even when people make their mistakes, others are learning through observation, constantly.

Unfortunately, most of us come from a didactic educational background (being told what to think, not how to think) and are part of a society that still regards those people who know something as being better than those that don't.

This means that the powerful aspect of 'observation' generally deteriorates to issues of survival, rather than learning. People will use their observations to deal with internal politics or how to survive mistakes, rather than benefit from the rich learning experience of others, which is always present, even in failure.

The main reason that people do not learn from their Peers is based on issues of misguided personal PRIDE.

They have been taught in the main to only learn from their 'superiors' or 'teachers' and that acceptance of a Peer's ability to help them to develop implies a weakness or admission of failure on their part. Even worse, they fear they are handing over 'unfair advantage' to their Peer, helping to promote the other person in the eyes of the managers, at their own personal cost.

This may seem to be over simplifying matters but think back to how encouraged you were at school around admitting or saying that you didn't know or understand something. Now magnify that a thousand times and you can see how the whole issue of corporate survival and 'getting up the career ladder' makes Peer Learning a perceived threat and is often subtly perceived as a personal statement of either stupidity or lack of talent.

The first thing to do, before trying to get any Peer Learning activities going is to examine the managers' behaviour and communication style to see if the notion is being validated or invalidated by how they address their people and encourage them to exchange experience even when a major mistake or failure has occurred.

Creating a context for Peer Learning

When industry historically operated with more established mentor / apprentice procedures, the issue of 'on the job learning' was

obviously better facilitated than it is now generally speaking. Before cost and time pressures eroded a great deal of apprenticeship and succession planning, it was likely to engender a greater acceptance of the need to learn and continuously improve oneself by referring to others in the company.

However, this was not really extended to Peer Learning and even in those more disciplined times, the approach tended to confirm the superior and inferior relationships between people. In fact, we can still labour under the false impression that we want to be in management because we can then 'do what we want' or 'tell others what to do without having anyone tell us ', which of course is absolutely unreal, as any top manager will confirm.

If you set a strong enough context for Peer Learning, you will see astounding 'movement' taking place even if you have not standardised or regulated the process in any way.

To set a Peer Learning context, you should firstly:

- Address the managers before you approach the organisation, starting with the very top, if at all possible
- Enrol managers' support in Peer Learning by having a discussion or set of discussions that you facilitate
- During the meeting, draw out the positive interest in supporting Peer Learning and ask each person to surface barriers they think are inherent within the culture as it stands
- Create confirmation of their support of the initiative, even if it's just to verbally agree it's an important idea to take forward

When you are ready to talk to the people you want involved in the initiative, you should also have a discussion (or number of discussions, dependant on the volume of people to get initially involved) and then repeat the above points from 'enrolment' to 'confirmation'.

When drawing out the barriers they believe are in the way of activating Peer Learning, try to move beyond the obvious (I don't have the time) to the more subtle issues (I don't know who I could learn from or what I could learn in a Peer context).

Make notes of all the points without trying to resolve any issues and then finish by having everyone do a simple exercise by handing out the following questions that they should answer and hand back before they leave the meeting (otherwise you will be chasing people to return it!)

Tell people that their answers will be kept confidential and the process is a discreet way of them guiding you. The objective is around how best to support them to support Peer Learning and vice versa.

Ask for any final comments when they have done their answers and then thank them for giving you their time and for involving themselves personally in the process.

To launch an informal Peer Learning process

Simply use the answers people have given you to 'map' out where the contributions are to be received and who from.

You should get an interesting picture that has everyone learning something and most people teaching something.

Next arrange for a sort of 'dating agency', which allows people to set up an initial discussion around the points people have said they wish to learn. You can use the company Intranet for this or you can ask people to arrange the meetings between themselves.

In either case, the offer should come from the person who has been asked to pass on some knowledge.

Initial meetings should last no longer than half an hour and should consist mainly of the learner asking questions of the person they have stated they want to learn something from.

The meetings should be one to one ideally but if you have several people asking for the same thing from someone, you can arrange a group session but these should last for an hour instead of thirty minutes.

Let the people arrange between themselves the follow-up conversations. You will find it happens naturally and spontaneously, even by people contacting their peer to see how it went or to tell them how it went.

Hold another meeting for the group about a month after the first meeting has been 'mapped' and scheduled, in order to get

feedback about how it's working.

Remember to validate all points of view and to acknowledge people for BOTH requesting and delivering learning. It is important that people begin to be recognised by their desire to learn as much as the desire to teach.

This cycle can be repeated as often as you wish, making sure to leave time for the latest dialogues to happen.

To launch a formal Peer Learning Process

This approach still begins with the initial introductory meetings and self-expression of needs and contributions to be made, linked to informal meetings between people (as above).

The difference is around incorporating the process into current or traditional HR management and development activities, such as:

- Appraisals
- Training and development programmes
- Rewards
- Career development
- Succession Planning

By including Peer Learning as a validation in the above categories (for both learners and teachers) you will align personal development with a knowledge sharing culture that is supported by management activities.

Conclusion

The most important aspect of all relates to your personal position around the issue of Peer Learning.

If you are not embodying it yourself or are anything less than inspired about the difference this will make to the business and to people at an individual and team level, you will encounter inertia, cynicism and nervousness.

Remember that people have a natural and positive desire to learn from each other and to contribute their knowledge to others and if this is not present, it is because they have interpreted what the company and their managers want incorrectly.

Be aware that people are generally 'their own best teacher' and your job is to open the channels available to them.

Ensure that people know that 'not knowing' something and being aware of it is probably even more valuable than knowing something and not being aware of it.

Finally, understand that the core of Peer Learning is COMMUNICATION OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. If people are facilitated and encouraged to share their experience they will transfer the best form of know-how possible and will naturally and authentically learn from each other outside of personal concerns and pride.

In the end, this single aspect is what makes people truly satisfied in their work.

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