



Use collective thinking to co-create generative learning

This 21st century survival tactic exponentially increases the speed and breadth of learning at the top of the tree.

By **Barbara Walsh**

As the world hurtles on its rapid trajectory of disruption and change, companies of necessity are having to adapt and transform. The complexity of business increases daily, and individual heroic leaders simply cannot deliver what modern organisational systems require. The call for collaborative leadership teams that operate at more than the sum of their parts has never been louder.

Along with this comes increasing awareness of the need to change how we develop our existing and future leaders, recognising that the leadership

tasked with ensuring the survival of the organisation through these disillusioned and demanding times has itself to evolve differently.

This requires drawing the distinction between developing leaders as individuals and developing leadership collectively. Traditionally, leader development has focused primarily on the individual. The problem is that as leaders become more specialised in their knowledge, they become more isolated from one another. Rather than learning from one another and valuing differences, they tend to compete and defend their position.

Leadership cannot exist outside of multi-person relationships, and therefore it does not reside inside individual leaders. What is needed is the ability to reason together, not defend turf. Leaders have to learn to collaborate across functional siloes and geographical territories, involving stakeholder groups, and partnering across their business ecosystems in co-creating the future.

Rather than take individual leaders away from their

work for development, it now makes more sense to take leadership development to the collective leadership in the midst of their most important work. This is done through Systemic Team Coaching, a multi-faceted approach to developing highly collaborative, agile and dynamic leadership teams. In this way, learning takes place timeously and generatively, directly at the coal-face as the team co-creates solutions to meet (often conflicting) stakeholder needs, in alignment with organisational strategy rather than individual objectives. The ability of leadership to continually co-create and apply this collective thinking is crucial to organisational success in the 21st century.

One means of generating co-created thinking and learning, especially in larger groups, is through Fishbowl Discussions, which will be demonstrated at the *HR Future SolutionsFest* this year. An Open Fishbowl is a simple and powerful way to generate rich working conversations, and provides a forum for participants to grapple with highly complex issues in a short period of time. This technique is highly effective for developing depth and reflection rather than simply didactic content, and releases the inherent creativity and collaboration of participants as they contribute towards reaching a shared understanding.

Fishbowls are an ideal way of engaging the voices of a wider stakeholder population than is otherwise usually possible. The Fishbowl process aims to increase the understanding of the different perspectives on an issue or proposal, and to allow participants to quickly make connections and recognise links that may not have been obvious. Most Fishbowls consist of one to two hours of high-impact conversation – although they may be extended to one or two days where the context requires more time.

Essentially, the 'Bowl' is an inner group of participants (Fish) engaging in a process of dialogue, which is observed by a larger outer group (Observers), who have the opportunity to ask questions and provide input. Although Fishbowl Conversations can be run in different ways, generally between four and ten chairs (depending on the size of the group) are placed in the centre of the room to form the 'Bowl'. The Fish group occupy these inner chairs, leaving one or two empty. The remaining chairs are placed in a circle around them for the Observer group.

The context for the conversation is briefly set by the Sponsor. The Facilitator or Facilitation Team (for larger groups) initiate the conversation in the Fish group. After 10 - 15 minutes, participants from the Observer group can join the conversation by taking up one of the empty seats in the Bowl. If all chairs are occupied, new participants can join the Bowl by tapping one of the existing Fish on the shoulder, who then gives up their seat and joins the Observer group. Participants then rotate in and out of the Bowl, allowing for a variety of thoughts, opinions

and questions to be voiced. As the conversation develops, the group begins to function as a whole rather than engaging at cross-purposes, and a synergy develops. This opens the way for boundaries to be crossed, intentions to be linked, and a collective, generative conversation to emerge.

During the course of the conversation, the Facilitation Team documents the discussion to ensure that key points are captured. Sometimes we include a graphic facilitator, who captures the conversation through illustrations on a huge sheet of paper. This adds a fun dimension, and the visual element enables further links to be drawn between parts of the conversation.

The basic rules are simple:

- Conversation may only take place within the Bowl itself – not within the Observer group or between the Fish and Observer groups;
- Listen and watch: no interruptions. Only one person speaks at a time, and all voices in the Bowl get their opportunity;
- All opinions are treated with respect, and each new opinion is received positively;
- Respect the integrity of the process; and
- Fish can leave the bowl when ever they want.

As organisations gear up to meet the challenges of today's highly complex, competitive, and rapidly changing environment, the old mechanistic method of learning seems inadequate. The new paradigm of learning is an organic and evolving model which extends throughout the organisation, and that emphasises horizontal communication, flexible structure, collective and continuous learning, and adaptability.

More than ever before, the ability to collectively learn fast will determine the success of the organisation, and many companies are beginning to adopt the mindset that learning is in fact their business. ■

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