

4

Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

‘The only relevant learning in a company is the learning done by those people who have the power to act.’

Arie de Geus
Strategist, Royal Dutch Shell 1951–1980

The Arie de Geus quote above can be read in at least two ways. First, that the only relevant learning is done by the leaders in the company – those at the top of the hierarchy who can influence the company as a result of their learning. The second way is that those who are doing the relevant learning in the company (preferably everyone but certainly those people working in areas critical to the organization’s success) must grasp the power to act in order to *make* their learning matter. If they do not, their companies will lose the living knowledge contained in that learning, and this will diminish the organization’s ability to adapt and survive.

Leadership and learning are inextricably linked. A leader is someone who inspires others to commit to the achievement of a common purpose. By definition, the purpose is not yet achieved, and its fulfilment involves a journey into uncertainty. There will be setbacks, challenges and obstacles that have never before been encountered. Hence, there will be novel stimuli requiring novel responses. People on the journey will be paying attention to new and different things, experiencing high levels of emotion, attempting to make sense using newly emerging constructs and acting in different ways. A true journey of leadership involves a great deal of learning and, hence, potentially high levels of discomfort and uncertainty. The effectiveness of that journey is in part determined by how the leader manages

that discomfort, ensuring that learning is faced and potential blind spots minimized.

So far we have looked at the responsibilities leaders have to us, their stakeholders, to learn and overcome their blind spots. Now, however, we shift the emphasis onto the responsibilities all of us have to become leaders and how our fear of learning and our blind spots often stop us from taking on those responsibilities.

Organizations are full of people who disagree with the way in which the organization is run and make that disagreement known in terms of cynicism, passive resistance and lack of commitment. Over time, these people have developed a sense of what is not working in their organizations but have not developed the will to turn those insights into action. Perhaps they feel helpless and overwhelmed by the complexity and strength of the powers ranged against them. Often they have tried in the past and failed. Often they are preoccupied and busy with their jobs and home lives and simply lack the energy to take on the system. Sometimes it boils down to the fact that people are quite simply scared to act on their insights. As one individual said once on a leadership programme ‘yes, but I have a mortgage and kids to feed’. This man chose to live his life on two different planes. On one plane he articulated what he felt and believed – that the bullying in his organization was wrong – invariably this came out in the form of cynicism and anger. On the other plane of his existence, he acted in direct contravention to what he felt and believed – succumbing to and colluding with the bullying culture. He claimed that he lived like this in order to pay the mortgage and feed the kids, and, if so, maybe this was a worthy sacrifice. Or maybe he did it because he did not wish to risk making a stand. What was clear was that he had opted for security and had sacrificed his desire to live a life more in line with his values. However, he could not face the fact that this was his choice. In order to avoid the sense of personal responsibility, he blamed the leaders in his organization for his own choice and his own behaviour. He blamed ‘them’. Whatever his reasons, he had made his choice – and his choice was for security rather than engaging with what his head and heart were telling him – that this way of living was wrong. Yet, there are too many intelligent, creative, passionate people living like this. They have settled into unwilling (or unwitting) compliance. Slowly, over time, they have unquestioningly conformed and eventually even colluded with

their organizational cultures, enacting the values and enforcing them like everyone else. They do not interpret it like this – their blind spots protect them from facing the choices they have made, enabling them to blame others for the frustrations they feel.

After a while, people become inured to the collusion and used to the comfort and safety. For many, decades pass without ever taking personal risks with their behaviour; they become compliant; the experience of ‘learning’ and changing becomes a memory associated with the idealism of youth. This is one of the most common leadership blind spots in organizations – the idea that you cannot take leadership, that the system won’t change and that it is all somebody else’s fault. The most common leadership blind spot is the belief that ‘I am not a leader and I can’t do anything to change things around here’.

If our organizations are to change and adapt, we need people to take leadership at all levels. This means that people will have to start to believe in themselves again. They will have to connect their hearts and minds with their will. They will have to refuse to enact the existing culture, decide what they stand for and then step out into the unknown and start to change things – in other words, ‘lead and learn’. The decision not to lead is, in part, a decision not to learn; the decision not to learn is, in part, a decision not to take leadership – not to take a stand on something close to one’s heart. In other words, it is incumbent on all people who ‘know’ something integral to the organization’s success to develop the courage to become leaders. The acquisition of relevant learning requires leadership to make it matter. Leadership is, at least in part, to do with the transition from knowing, believing and caring to taking action. The old saying that we get the leaders we deserve has a lot of merit in it. If we are not prepared to take action to make our learning matter, this leaves the arena free for a few to grasp the agenda and adapt it to their needs – consciously or unconsciously. An organization with an ample supply of leaders is less likely to fall foul of a few senior people’s learning blind spots. But leaders on the ground will not emerge unless we face the blind spots that stop us from taking leadership – blind spots rooted in beliefs that we are not responsible for our own behaviour and in our fears of failure, pain and loss.

This chapter then is focused on what we have to *do* in order to expand and accelerate our own personal learning and leadership – whether we are in formal leadership roles or not. The assumption behind this is that the main blind spot in organizations is the fear we have of taking up leadership and of instigating both personal and organizational change.

Let's look at an example.

Ruth

Ruth had been with a large government department for over ten years. She had joined at 25 after leaving her first job in corporate banking, which she had found unpleasantly competitive and materialistic. She had succeeded in getting through a rigorous selection process and was proud to be offered a responsible role helping to write government policy in an important strategic area.

Over time, however, her enthusiasm had dwindled. Whilst the people on the ground were clearly engaged and committed to helping address some of society's most difficult and perplexing problems, those in higher echelons seemed only interested in pursuing their careers. And doing well in the job did not appear connected to doing well in terms of your career. There were a group of like-minded people who always seemed to get promoted – you could spot them very easily. They tended to stay in post for no longer than two years. They regarded their tenure as an opportunity to tick off measurable achievements – so they put in place achievable targets that did not address the underlying complexities of the problems they faced. This would often result in skewing the system by pulling people off long-term delicate projects and putting them on short-term task forces to address relatively minor issues.

They would also make decisions which portrayed a lack of understanding of the issues. Obviously, being in the post for a relatively short period of time, they would not have the depth of knowledge and experience necessary to understand the

intricate complexities and political sensitivities of the problems. Sometimes they would make decisions that would undermine years spent in building trust with external partners. When anything did go wrong, they would not take personal responsibility, but would often blame junior staff unjustifiably.

Sometimes, detailed reports would be commissioned that clearly highlighted the issues and made excellent recommendations. It would be no surprise to find these reports sent back to the authors with instructions to 'change the conclusions' in order to make them personally and politically acceptable. She herself had authored one of these reports and sat in on a briefing meeting with a Minister. She had not been allowed to speak during the meeting, even whilst her manager was talking to the Minister and clearly giving him an inaccurate and partial account of the findings.

People on the ground, with real experience and knowledge of the problems, were not listened to. The whole system, it seemed to Ruth, was used by people to fulfil their personal ambitions. The unspoken assumptions were: 'look good; avoid bad press; cover yourself; blame others'. Over time, Ruth became disillusioned and cynical. She found herself complying with the culture. She, too, covered herself whenever she made a decision – sending out e-mails and notes in order to show she had consulted with everyone before even a minor decision was made. Reports were sent to be checked by direct reports, so if anything went wrong they could be blamed. She half-censored her research reports, knowing what would be politically acceptable and what would be sent back. As a result, she did not even believe in her own reports. She did the minimum to get by and put all her energies into her interests outside work. Whenever she talked to anyone about working for the department, she was scathing and cynical; but she never did anything to change it. She complied with the culture simply because she was comfortable and secure and did not want to take any personal risks.

However, recently she had been asked to attend a leadership course with a well-known business school. There she had been

confronted with the choices she had made and with her passivity in relation to the organization's culture. Whilst she hadn't liked it very much, she had been forced to acknowledge her own complicity in this culture. She had been challenged to make small changes in her behaviour in order to change the landscape and take small steps of leadership. She had been reminded that she was still young and had a lot to offer the organization.

Since then, Ruth had begun to change things in small but significant ways. She started to build her own network of like-minded people who regularly got together to share their experiences of implementing change. She had stopped censoring her own reports and submissions. On one occasion, when she had been challenged by her boss for being 'negative', she defended her stance by claiming that she wanted to address the deeper issues rather than pretending the problems did not exist or were easy to manage. This took courage and her manager was not pleased with her approach. However, she did notice that he had taken account of her views and she recently overheard him using her arguments when talking to a senior government official. She started to take a greater interest in her direct reports and found that this interest was rewarded by greater efficiencies, more cooperation and a more pleasant working environment. The relationships she built via her ever-increasing network provided her with more intelligence regarding what was going on in other parts of the organization. People started to come to her for information and for introductions to people in other departments. Strangely, Ruth began to enjoy her work again and feel a new sense of empowerment. In fact, for the first time in many years, she began to think about applying for promotion. She was beginning to feel she could make a difference to this organization.

Ruth's journey has been one of both learning and leadership; she would not have been able to take leadership had she not learned and changed. She had to overcome her protective blind spot, which helped her avoid taking responsibility for her own behaviour. This was not a pleasant experience. However, she was courageous enough to turn that learning into small steps of leadership. This, in turn, led

to further learning, which encouraged her to take even bigger steps of leadership. Like anyone who starts this journey of learning and leadership, you discover that it never stops, making life interesting, challenging and exciting once again.

It is easier for us to develop our leadership and learning capabilities if we are constantly taking small steps rather than spending ten years in the comfort zone rationalizing our passivity via blind spots and defensive thinking. In fact, people often continue in the comfort zone for ages – doing things they have always done and thinking things they have always thought. Instead of growing and expanding their living knowledge over ten years, they end up mining their existing living knowledge until its relevance is all but exhausted. Eventually, reality intrudes in the form of a crisis. For too many, the learning that ensues is painful and bitter, leaving scars that never heal.

In times of change we have to ‘learn to learn’ continuously – constantly taking small steps outside our comfort zone, constantly addressing blind spots and constantly growing and expanding the complexity of our living knowledge.

But what does it mean to expand the complexity of our living knowledge? In essence it means increasing the complexity of our thinking, the subtlety of our emotional responses and the range and flexibility of our behavioural repertoire. Ruth increased her cognitive complexity when she changed the constructs she held about herself – recognizing that she had been avoiding personal responsibility because of her fears and need for security. She increased her emotional complexity when she changed her dominant cynical stance and became more hopeful and positive about her future and her desire to change things. She expanded her behavioural complexity when she returned to the job and started to implement new and changed behaviours.

Let’s explore these notions in more detail.

Cognitive Complexity

Cognitive complexity refers to the range, extent and connectedness of the constructs, ideas and beliefs that we employ to understand reality:

‘Cognitively complex individuals are able to look at people or situations from a number of different viewpoints, whereas cognitively simple individuals use few viewpoints, or dimensions, when describing people and events.’¹

Constructs are simply the ‘notions’ or concepts we develop to map the world around us. For example, we have a construct of a chair – what it looks like and what its function is. We also have a construct of ‘democracy’ – what it is and how it works. Constructs can reflect tangible ‘things’ in the world or they may reflect more abstract ideas.

Our schemas are the systems of interconnected constructs we use to understand a phenomenon. For example, we have a schema of ‘furniture’, into which our construct of ‘chair’ fits. The furniture schema may be defined as ‘movable objects within a building designed to make it suitable for living or working in’. We then have a number of categories within this schema – e.g. bedroom furniture, living room furniture. Within these categories we will store our concept of ‘chair’. We extend our cognitive complexity when we develop new constructs or schemas, or change our constructs or schemas so that they more accurately reflect the world in which we live.

The easiest way of developing our cognitive complexity is by listening and talking to people from different cultures, experiences, values and professional backgrounds.

Behavioural Complexity

We also need to develop a more intricate and complex web of behavioural strategies to cope with the complexities and uncertainties

¹ Goodwin, V. L. and Ziegler, L. (1998) ‘A test of relationships in a model of organizational cognitive complexity.’ *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, **19**, 371–386. See also Kelly, G. A. (1955) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: Norton. Driver, M. J. and Streufert, S. (1969) ‘Integrative Complexity: An Approach to Individuals and Groups as Information-processing Systems’. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **14**, 272.

inherent in our interactions with people. Behavioural complexity refers to the range of behaviours and strategies that people develop in order to achieve their goals. A senior executive might be blunt and direct with an American colleague, for example, but he might be more subtle and indirect with a Japanese colleague – reflecting different behavioural norms in those countries. Whilst a strategy of ‘driving through change’ might work in one context, in another context, a more consensual and gradual approach needs to be adopted. Behaviourally complex individuals develop a variety of styles to deal with the wide range of contexts they deal with.²

Emotional Complexity

Emotional complexity refers to the depth and range of sensitivities and psychological strategies that an individual develops to help notice, appreciate and manage their own emotions and the emotions of others. We are constantly developing our emotional complexity throughout our childhood and into early adulthood, but there is often less incentive to develop emotional complexity throughout our adult life. For example, a child who has just lost a tennis match might fling down his racquet and burst into tears. The adults around him may sympathize and accept that this response is part of childhood. However, it is clearly not an appropriate response for an adult. Hence, the coach or parents of the child will gently and insistently teach the child to change his emotional and behavioural response to losing. Eventually, the child learns that it is not ‘sporting’ to sulk or be rude to his opponent. He learns to control his emotions, congratulate his opponent and ‘act’ a sporting resignation. But he also learns to channel the emotional tension that flows from the disappointment into a greater determination to practise and perfect his game.

The child has a loving and supportive community to direct him in his emotional development, but once into adulthood we often lose this community. We do not have people around us to tell us quite

² Goleman, D. (2000) ‘Leadership That Gets Results’. *Harvard Business Review*, March–April.

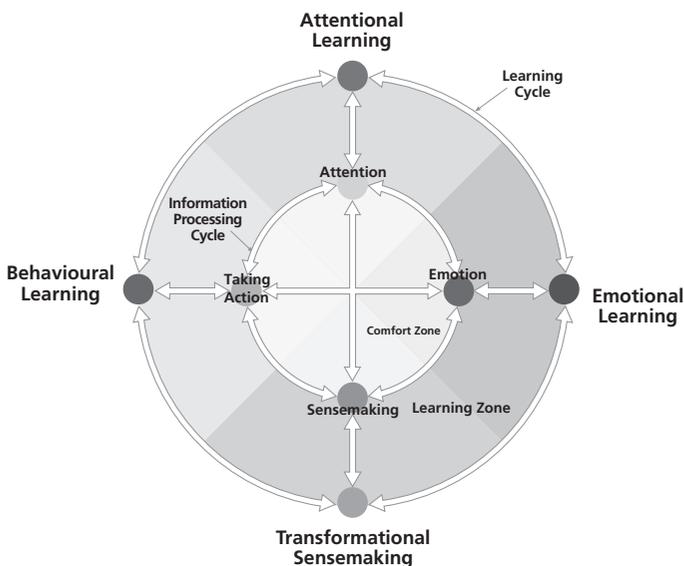


Figure 4.1 Information processing and learning.

directly that it is not appropriate to shout at our direct reports, that it is unacceptable to sulk, withdraw, become sarcastic and negative when things don't go our way. Once into adulthood, our emotional development often slows down. It depends on us receiving good quality feedback and being totally honest with ourselves.

So how do we expand our cognitive, emotional and behavioural complexity? If we go back to our learning cycle, we can see that as we move outside of the comfort zone, so the space taken up by attention, emotion, sensemaking and action expands. In other words, our attention span increases, we start to notice and respond more to our emotions, we make sense of events in deeper, more collaborative, more complex ways and we expand our behavioural repertoire – increasing the range of skills and behaviours in everyday use.

The eight learning practices that follow are based upon these principles. Developing the complexity of our living knowledge involves putting these practices into action day by day, minute by minute. It involves us forcing ourselves outside our comfort zone, confronting blind spots and moving more and more into the learning zone. And

as we do this, we begin to notice that we are having an impact on the people around us. We start to exercise leadership. No longer moaning by the coffee machine, complaining that the world is not like we want it to be, we are out there making a difference!

Hence, the learning cycle described above is perhaps more accurately described as *the leadership learning cycle*. And the eight practices below are characteristic both of leaders who learn and of learners who lead – translating their emotional and cognitive learning into action.

The Eight Learning Practices

1. *Direct attention* – This practice encourages you to broaden attention to include cues you would normally miss and to focus your attention on what is truly important to you and the stakeholders in your learning.
2. *Harness emotions* – This involves noticing your emotions and interpreting them effectively in order to increase the quality of your decisions. It entails managing the impact that emotions have on your sensemaking and behaviour.
3. *Overcome defensiveness* – This practice enables you to become aware of your defensive patterns and overcome them in order to face difficult truths.
4. *Deepen sensemaking* – This involves making sense of events in ways that are more inclusive, more complex, more systemic and more comprehensive.
5. *Engage creativity* – Creativity is about daring to be different, taking risks, seeing the world in different ways, questioning taboos and making new connections.
6. *Reality check* – This ensures that we check our beliefs against external measures of reality in order to avoid the temptations of denial and fantasy.
7. *Change behaviour* – This is the ultimate ‘leadership’ practice. It encourages people to take action and expand the range of

behaviours and skills that they are able to employ and feel comfortable with.

8. *Nurture integrity* – Integrity entails tuning into the different forces that are driving your behaviour and making decisions that are ‘right’ as opposed to ‘convenient’. It ensures that your behaviour, values and deepest beliefs are in alignment.

When we act on these practices we begin to overcome our blind spots and start to develop the complexity of our living knowledge. This, in turn, helps us to cope with and manage the increased levels of complexity in the environment. Our minds, bodies and emotions ‘mature’ to cope with the additional demands placed upon them by our increasingly complex social and organizational context.

Problems with the Learning Practices

Considering these advantages of undertaking the learning practices, one might have thought them easy to implement. However, they are deeply counter-intuitive. It can appear a waste of time focusing our attention on seemingly irrelevant issues. It is often regarded as ‘touchy-feely’ to concentrate on emotions. Too much time spent in sensemaking can be frustrating, leading to ‘analysis paralysis’. Listening to others with different views and values is frustrating and uncomfortable. Venturing outside the comfort zone is seen as too risky. Learning different ways of approaching tasks can feel uncomfortable and ineffective.

There is no point reading about the practices unless we are prepared to face the fact that implementing them will not be easy. More than anything it will involve personal discipline. We have been told for too long that we have to instil leadership in organizations, inspire innovation and creativity, empower people, trust them, encourage teamwork, build a learning organization, listen to people, consult and involve them, but . . . it doesn’t happen! And it doesn’t happen because of old learning (self-defeating beliefs and attitudes) and a fear of completing the learning cycle – i.e. taking action based on what we know is right. We rationalize this lack of learning and leadership by telling ourselves:

- we tried before and it did not work;
- there is too much to do already;
- it's too risky to challenge the status quo;
- there's too much at stake – I have a career to protect;
- I'm not a leader;
- this organization will never change;
- I'm too busy.

But let's be clear, not only are we fooling ourselves, we are letting others down! Our organizations and our communities need people of influence and insight to take leadership – now more than ever. We can no longer rationalize our collusion with outdated organizational cultures by telling ourselves that taking action will be too difficult and will not help us achieve our goals.

We all have three choices in life:

- we can learn but refuse to complete the learning cycle by not acting on our learning;
- we can avoid learning and leading altogether until 'reality' comes crashing down on us like a massive tidal wave;
- we can learn and ensure we complete our learning cycles by making our learning matter – taking action and leadership.

This is why leadership and learning cannot be separated. No-one likes living their lives according to a set of values and practices they do not agree with – whether it's for mortgage and kids or not. Everyone wants to live their lives holistically – doing what they believe in and believing in what they do. It's just that it often requires leadership to say what everyone is thinking and to be prepared to cope with the consequences and the complexity!

The rest of this book will examine the learning practices in more detail, providing thoughts and suggestions as to how to apply them. This is inevitably only a start, and our hope is that the book will stimulate further ideas and tools. The last chapter offers a range of practical exercises which can easily be applied in the workplace.

The eight practices outlined in the following chapters are aimed at different people:

- leaders who want to leave a legacy and make a difference;
- people who care but who maybe don't quite know how to turn their caring into action (budding leaders);
- all of us who feel that we have capacities and talents that are underutilized and who would like to live our lives more holistically – believing in what we do, and doing what we believe in.

In essence, these practices are for learning leaders who want to make their learning matter.