

The strategy classroom

Tony Manning

If you want to raise your organization's "strategic IQ", there's no better place to do it than in your own workplace.

Forecasters have been warning for years that the world faced a growing skills deficit. Hardly anyone listened. Now the problem is upon us. And nowhere is it more serious than in South Africa.

Almost every sector of the economy lacks trained and experienced people. Engineers, accountants, artisans, doctors, and nurses are all in short supply. Too few are being produced by our educational institutions. Many have emigrated, and continue to do so. Recruiters are desperately trying to bring them back and to import foreigners (though immigration hurdles make that a long and costly process). Government recently announced the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) to try and turn the tide.

Most critically, SA lacks managers. Without them, little can happen. All those other skilled people depend on them for strategy, direction, coordination, support, and much else. Managers are the "pivotal people" who make things work. Yet efforts to develop them are sadly deficient.

Enrollments at business schools are way up and both MBA programmes and executive short courses are jammed. Many other institutions offer management training, and they, too, are doing a roaring trade. And judging by the boom in business book publishing, and the astonishing expansion of management sections in bookstores, there's plenty of interest in the topic.

So what else can be done?

In my view, too much time, effort, and money is invested in external developmental activities, and too little inside. Organizations send people away to be trained, instead of doing it themselves.

This is not to say that outside programmes aren't useful; of course they are. In fact, they are invaluable. They expose people to cutting edge thinking, other executives grappling with similar issues, and a range of challenges they might never see in their own organizations.

But consider the learning opportunities that organizations themselves offer.

First, there's "real work" – the challenges that must be dealt with daily. Aren't these potentially the best case studies of all? And isn't it a fact that people are sent away in the hope that they might come back and solve these very problems?

Then, there's the opportunity to learn from colleagues – and the intellectual capital within almost any organization is astonishing. So the group's store of knowledge is added to, shaped, and challenged. Sacred cows are tested. New ideas are quickly shared.

At the same time, individuals learn *about* each other. They get to see not only the strengths and weaknesses of those around them, but also discover what turns people on or off, what beliefs underpin their behaviour, and what dreams and ambitions they might have. (In a country where diversity is such a big issue, this alone is potentially worth a fortune!)

Finally, whatever is learned outside must be brought inside, and there's always a problem in selling and applying it. But what's learned inside is inside, which makes application a lot easier and more likely.

For all of these reasons, the workplace is undoubtedly the ultimate arena for management development. But it only fulfils that role when an organization's leaders grasp this fact and see themselves as teachers.

Think about it like this. All bosses frame the space in which their people work by framing the conversation that takes place there. They contribute a lot by sharing their own knowledge and experience. They add even more by encouraging people to share knowledge with each other and to search for new knowledge, and by keeping conversations focused on critical topics and issues. And all this happens while people are doing what they get paid for.

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