

Challenge Quest, LLC

Teams of a New Generation

Defining the 21st Century Experiential Training Agenda

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Summary

Times have changed, and those changes have exposed the weakness of old paradigms. Sustainable success will require that people inside organizations become adept at learning and changing in response to a dynamic environment. To do otherwise will certainly mean difficulty, if not demise. The implications for organizations and the consultants who work with them are many. Not the least of these is the ability to develop a workforce capable of excelling with the demands of the emerging world. Experiential educators can have a significant contribution to make if they understand the true developmental requirements of the age. This article has a three-fold purpose: (1) provide a description of the emerging demands of the 21st Century team; (2) identify critical thinking "meta-skills" that will equip team members to excel in a collaborative environment; and (3) describe how the experiential educator can begin to assert an effective influence on the workforce.

The Emerging Demands on the 21st Century Team

There was a time when teams were made up of individuals carrying out assigned tasks together. In these teams, the members worked in close proximity to one another because their basic shared work involved some kind of raw material. The interdependence of the team members was observable and tangible. The action of one person had immediate and concrete consequences for others. Since the work was already defined, efficiency was of the utmost importance. Consequently, stability or a lack of variance was critical. Such teams generally

came from one part of the organization, with one senior leader providing one set of expectations. The team was held together through a set of rules, procedures, and codes defined by the single voice of authority.

In today's world, the majority of teams are called to work under very different circumstances with very different priorities and outcomes. In today's workplace, many teams do not work in close proximity to one another. They come from many different parts of the company, or even the world, as they gather to develop a vision of their work and a solution to their challenges. Consequently, the interdependence of these teams is less tangible and observable. This is due to the fact that the raw material of much of the team's work is information or knowledge. Rarely are teams assigned to a single, defined task, but rather are challenged to solve complex problems with many different tasks, using many different specialties from many different parts of the organization. This results in multiple voices of authority providing their own sets of expectations, priorities, and values. New generation teams are held together by a shared vision of a desired end result and principles and values that determine how the team should pursue that shared vision.

In the end, not only has the workplace changed, but the very nature of teamwork itself has changed. No longer do teams work in a stable environment with defined work. Most often they work in a rapidly changing environment in which the work must first be defined and then carried out. In addition, teams do not have long-term life spans. As more and more organizations move toward project-based work, workers will belong to multiple teams or change teams frequently.

The demands placed on teams and the individuals who make up those teams have changed. These demands now include forming quickly, accessing the collective intelligence, maintaining flexibility, and facilitating their own development. The underlying capability enabling the successful team today is learning. This type of learning creates awareness of personal assumptions and challenges mental models. It equips team members to be flexible and appropriately innovative because of the purposeful use of differences and an ever-broadening perspective (Robinson & Rose, 2004). In order to be capable of such learning, individuals and teams must be able to step back from their roles, their actions, their experiences, and their relationships in order to understand the cause of certain events and actions. Only by understanding why and how events or actions came to be can teams learn from their experience and thus replicate success or eliminate mistakes. Ultimately, this is not just a matter of technique or process. This requires a deeper level of development. The following are some of the critical development tasks that are a part of the 21st Century learning agenda.

Critical Developmental Tasks

Separate Self from Others

The first development task is to *separate self from others*. Many times people are so intertwined with other people that they cannot step back from the relationships and determine on their own what they should do. They are convinced that their own progress or success is dependent on someone else changing or doing something. Systems thinking helps us understand that, although there is interdependence, my real power is in changing myself rather than focusing on others. I must be able to see myself outside of a relationship so that I can determine my own actions. As long as I believe that someone else must change in order for me to succeed or grow, I am stuck trying to change someone

I do not have the power to change in the first place.

Experiential programming is uniquely designed to develop this capability within team members because of the use of experiential learning activities (structured experiences). Structured experiences accelerate the manifestation of team dynamics, but do so in a limited container of time and context so that those dynamics can be reflected on.

Example

I use an activity I call Yurt Rope to teach this principle to teams. In the activity, the entire group steps inside a large rope circle. Group members place the rope on their lower backs just above their hips. Everyone then leans back on the rope until the team is balanced against the tension in the rope. I start with some observations about systems as a set of interdependent relationships where a change in one place influences the whole system. I shift my weight and watch the entire group react to regain its balance. After some more discussion, I offer a task that will teach the main point of this exercise. As I am leaning on the rope, I tell the group to make me stand up straight. Nearly every time, members' first response is to start pulling hard on the rope, trying to make me stand up. The more they pull, the more I lean back and resist. After a few moments of this tug-o-war, they realize they are not getting anywhere. At some point, someone speaks up and suggests that they just let go of the rope. They muse, "If there is no pressure on the rope, he will either stand up or fall down."

Now they have an awakening. As long as they focus on trying to change me, they are continually frustrated by my resistance. However, when they separate themselves from me and focus on themselves, they realize that by changing themselves they can influence me. Their real power is to define and change themselves, rather than trying to change me.

Separate Self from Experience

The second developmental task is to *separate self from experience*. Too many people see their experiences as a series of events and tend to look for simplistic relationships between things. People who see

the world this way tend not to understand their contribution to what is happening. Critical reflection teaches people to step back and view their experiences as a whole. By doing so, they will be able see the connection of things across time and they will be able to see their own contribution to the situation. They have experiences; experiences do not have them. The significant result of this capability is that individuals realize how they contribute to the outcomes they are experiencing with the team. When I recognize my patterns of behavior, I become free to ask the question, "What can I do differently than what I always do to affect a different outcome?"

Example

I was working with a corporate group on a low element ropes course circuit. The circuit was made up of eleven elements fashioned with an outer ring and several elements that crisscrossed the center. In the very center was a teeter-totter platform. The team was struggling a good deal trying to get the platform balanced and keep it balanced. After several minutes, I noticed one of the members step off of the platform and sit down on the side. Seeing this as a potential opening, I went over and asked him how he thought they were doing. "This is the way it always is," he said. I responded, "How so?" "They will keep going at each other until everyone is exhausted and then they will be ready to listen." I asked him, "Is this what you tend to do?" He answered, "Yes, I sit on the side and wait them out." Now came the learning opportunity. This gentleman was convinced that he could not make progress because of other people. He was stuck in a role that the system required him to play. Since he could not change the team, he was powerless to change anything. I left him with a question, "I wonder, is there anything you could do that is different from what you always do that could influence a different outcome?" I then left and moved to the other side of the area. In just a few moments, he got up, walked over, stepped on the platform, went to the far end, leaned against a tree and balanced the platform. The team immediately

turned its attention to the remainder of the project and completed it in very good time. This participant had learned to separate himself from his experience. He could see that his pattern of behavior contributed to the pattern of the team as much as did the pattern of any vocal member of the team. Most importantly, he realized that he could take action and influence a different outcome.

Separate Thinking from Feeling

The final developmental task is to *separate thinking from feeling*. All of our actions are influenced by what we think, our mental models and assumptions, as well as by what we are feeling. Too often, we do not pay attention to what is going on inside of us. The result is that we often are reactive in our actions rather than intentional. Another way of thinking about this is that, when I become anxious, I take actions that I may say are trying to help the situation, but in reality they are an attempt to relieve my anxiety. The outcome is that my actions are automated, knee-jerk responses that tend to be my least effective and least creative responses to the situation.

In teams, the result is that, the more individuals react to their anxiety, the more anxiety the team shares collectively. This limits the team's ability to see its situation from new and creative perspectives that could introduce team members to a more effective solution. It also leads to team members who continually rescue others who are in difficult circumstances, rather than support the member in trouble as a solution is discovered. This can lead to a level of dependence and immaturity among the team members.

Example

My favorite method of teaching this capability is to use a climbing wall. As the climber begins to make his or her way up the wall, invariably there comes a point at which he or she needs some assistance in determining the path to the top. The climber is too close, too tied up in the task, to see the big picture. The team can step back and help the climber determine the path to take. However, often this is not the case. Rather than describing the big picture, with all the possible routes and the

choices available to the climber, the team begins to yell out orders: “Put your foot there.” “Move your hand to the right.” The more the climber struggles, the louder and more intense the commands are shouted.

In an attempt to help the climber, the team is in actuality doing the opposite of what it intends. The more team members press the climber and the louder their communication becomes, the more anxious the climber becomes. The more the climber struggles, the more anxious the team gets, resulting in more reactive behavior. What the team members do not realize is that how they are choosing to help is more a reaction to their own discomfort in watching a teammate struggle than an honest attempt to help the climber. In order to really be helpful, team members must recognize the emotion within them, step back from it, and act in a purposeful way—focused on helping the climber succeed. If the team can do so, members will not only help the climber complete the climb, but they will help the climber reason through the best way to climb in the future. The knowledge transfer back to the workplace is that, by supporting a

struggling teammate and helping him or her gain clarity through good questions, that teammate will not only work through the current issue, but will learn to be more effective in the long run.

Conclusion

The demands of today’s workplace require us to define our own identities. This definition requires a higher level of cognitive complexity. The ability to step outside of ourselves, our experiences, and our relationships will allow us to see them more clearly. As our clarity grows, we can intentionally choose actions that will be purposeful and effective rather than reactive and defensive. Experiential programming is uniquely situated to help with this development. Facilitators must realize that they can have a greater long-term influence by using their activities and processing to teach teams to see their own dynamics. Ropes courses, indoor initiatives, and even the real-world experiences of work are learning labs to develop maturity and advanced capabilities.

Reference

Robinson, G., & Rose, M. (2006). *A Leadership Paradox: Influencing Others by Defining Yourself – Revised Edition*. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse.

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