



The Legacy of Learning Teams

Fred Harburg

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When I was an 8-year-old Cub Scout, I had a den mother who emphasized that when we learned as a unit, we not only grew smarter as individuals but also pulled together as a pack. For example, one of the things we all learned to do was pound weird berry-shaped patterns into little pieces of mashed-up leather with steel tools and wooden mallets — clearly evidence of our remarkable mastery.

My den mother made learning a very engaging social activity. The members of my pack gained an increased sense of acceptance and inclusion from our collective efforts to learn the skills of scouting. Years later, I am still impressed by the dynamic that occurs when an intact team gets together for a learning session.

It has been said that when there is a contest between a strong individual and a strong culture, the culture always wins in the end. When individuals go to “one off” or open-enrollment seminars, they eventually return to the environment and culture from which they came.

The consequences of this solo learning are often negative. When our individual learners return to the culture from which they came, there is often little or no social support for the new ideas and skills that were learned at the session. The cultural tides sweep across the fresh prints of the intrepid learner and take them out to sea with the regularity of the organizational rhythms that define “how we do things around here.” It’s enough to make the learner feel like a stranger in a strange land.

In contrast to solo learning, I have taken part in some impressive team-learning events. The training can be significantly customized and highly relevant to the needs and circumstances in which the team is operating. Team members can help reinforce the learning before and after the session by providing a contextual framework of relevance in which the ideas, skills and resolutions live. Learning partnerships can be formed that will last for months, or even years, to provide a strong sense of support, accountability, inclusion, engagement and commitment.

Team-based training also develops a “corporate memory” that can be much larger and stronger than any individual member’s learning capacity. Teams are not only learning, they are forming a network of interdependence and increasing the social fabric of the organization. For all of these reasons and others, my den mother was right: Team learning can cultivate a new culture and a collective force for change and advancement.

There are occasions when this model obviously makes no sense. When one person needs very specialized training that would be irrelevant for others, it should clearly be a solo event. There may be budgetary or time considerations that make an intact approach irrational as well. Yet, even in these cases, it is important for the manager to become involved by establishing some sense of expectation and partnership with the individual learner to provide organizational context for the learning.

The more difficult call occurs when the training involves deep insight into personal awareness and impact. In this type of training, the decision maker needs to weigh the contribution versus the drawbacks of a team approach. On the positive side is the opportunity for those with whom the learner works to provide observations and support. Being at the session together allows for instant clarification, checking for understanding and enhanced insight in real time. When handled properly, the benefits of this can be profound.

On the dark side is the requirement for the trainer and the learner to have significant skill and maturity to handle this situation. This is not for amateurs: When this element is mismanaged, the fallout can be devastating. For this reason, many learners faced with this situation simply do not disclose much during a team training experience, or at least they calculate very carefully what they will say and how much they will make known.

Team learning has a significant payoff. My den mother knew what she was talking about. But before you send every team to training, you need to make sure they focus the mallets on the leather and not on each other. ■

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