Learning Principles You May Not Know

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"I don't want to take this meeting off track, but.. isn't *Stonehenge* amazing? Seriously, who *did* that?"

Some people like structure in what they do. Some don't. Those who don't say structure inhibits flexibility and creativity. Structure doesn't accommodate unplanned requests and urgent matters. Structure is no longer appropriate for our contemporary society described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). They say "structure is no fun." In contrast, those who like structure say it provides consistency and repeatability. It prevents many of the urgent matters and unplanned requests to begin with. It enables scalability. It increases efficiency so you can get your work done and go have fun doing something else.

In the context of the workplace, such as having employee 1on1s and staff meetings, unstructured managers prefer talking over following structured agendas. They prefer having a conversation and letting the discussion go wherever it goes. They avoid following procedures and defining repeatable methods. Their eyes roll when you mention the word *process*. They prefer the unconstrained freedom to get work done however it suits them at the moment.

In contrast, structured managers value repeatability and efficiency. They allow time for conversations too, but with little tolerance for rambling and getting off topic. They typically have a goal, strategy, and plan in mind. They define standard operating procedures, create checklists, and provide templates. They conduct structured interviews and organized meetings. They think in terms of processes and how to promote consistent application of best practices.

Which is better? Structure or no structure? If you find yourself somewhere in the middle, you are like most people. There are clear benefits to both and either extreme is generally dysfunctional. People, organizations, and families need flexibility as well as orderliness.

Yet flexibility is not appropriate in all situations. Few people would advocate for an unstructured military or an unplanned battle. Or an unstructured transportation system, particularly airline travel. Or uncontrolled processes in how food is prepared or financial payments are put into bank accounts. Few would prefer to have their phone calls randomly routed to strangers by an unstructured phone system.

In comparison, when it comes to parenting children, taking care of possessions, dating, living with someone, and most other self-directed responsibilities, many people dismiss the need for structure. They gravitate toward flexibility and away from orderliness. These matters are handled naturally as long as they fit within people's core values.

At the root of many of these self-directed responsibilities are soft skills which are perhaps the most inappropriate to be left to chance. Skills like listening, overcoming differences of opinion, working efficiently, and being a team player are considered critical to success at home and work. They should be called "core skills." Regardless, they are rarely learned through formal learning programs. For example, how many people took listening attentively 101 or managing conflict 201 in school? Even when people do attend seminars on these and other soft skills, few provide the structure found in the development of hard skills.

In contrast, learning hard skills almost always follows a structure. Engineers, lawyers, and surgeons, as examples, don't develop their abilities by "just doing it". Musicians don't learn to play a musical instrument by first playing a complicated score. People don't learn a new language very well without starting with the basics. The same with learning to dance, fly an airplane, or build a house. People don't learn calculus before learning multiplication. There is a reason kids don't go to the 8th grade before going to 1st grade. Most learning begins with the basics and progressively builds on them.

Not having more formal and structured soft-skill learning programs in the workplace is even more astonishing knowing that these attributes are the primary reason people are hired, promoted, and fired. No matter how great people's subject matter expertise, if they can't work collaboratively with others, communicate effectively, gain buy in for their ideas, or overcome differences of opinion, their expertise becomes secondary. The need for soft-skills is even greater for leaders. If leaders can't attract top talent, think strategically, manage performance, or coach their people, they are viewed as virtually incompetent.

Many organizations develop competency models, for both hard and soft skills, to guide their learning and development programs. Competency models give structure to learning by defining key skills needed to achieve the organization's goals. Competency models also provide objective standards for measuring and tracking people's capabilities. These are well known benefits that justify competency models. Yet most competency models stop well short of the structure required to retain and sustain ongoing development of soft skills. Neither do most competency models account for recent neuroscience findings.

If you agree that developing soft skills is an important development area for you, your team, or your family, and that structure would be helpful in developing these skills, craft or look for a structured approach to learning them. As you do, here are key learning principles to keep in mind, whether a parent, teacher, coach, manager, or self-directed learner:

- People's thinking precedes their doing. Attitudes precede behaviors. Mindsets precede abilities. Will precedes skill. There is a big difference between can't and won't.

- Most thinking happens subconsciously. People's biases, instinct, and core values drive their thinking. Desires, fears, passions, and people's self-image form the core of how people think.

- Telling people what to do is the least effective method of teaching and coaching. Telling cheats people out of their ideas, turns their brains off, makes them feel unappreciated, and deprives them of feeling ownership.

- People have different learning preferences. Some prefer reading. Some discussing. Some doing. Some need to see a concept in writing or a diagram before understanding it.

- Studying doesn't fully engage peoples' minds. Reading is often interrupted with distractions. In contrast, practice, role plays, and tests significantly increase retention.

- Interactive learning and sharing ideas with others enhances engagement. The more interactive and experiential, the more engaging a concept will be.

- People need to record their own ideas before sharing with others to offset group think and build self-awareness of what they know and how they think.

- Pictures are powerful. A model or framework can be developed for every skill including intangible ones. Flowcharts and diagrams simplify even the most complex topics.

- Basics precede advanced skills in every discipline. There are core principles that underlie every skill, no matter how simple or advanced they are.

Don't let "that's how we've always done it" prevent you from being disciplined and organized where appropriate, particularly when learning the most important skills of life.

P.S. For an example of a competency model and a structured approach to learning, refer to the step-by-step guide to learning to lead as a coach described in the *SCOPE of Leadership* book series (www.scopeofleadership.com).

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