



Cultural Barriers to effective Organisational Learning

Organisational and management theories deviate in many ways, but one thing almost all of them have in common: systematic change and development within organisations starts with performance measures to gauge status and progress towards the desired state.

Although organisational metrics typically suffer from historical perspectives and orientation on results instead of result-producing drivers, even more important is the impact they have on organisational learning.

Sometimes these reports are referred to as cockpit charts to describe a reduced and concentrated picture of vital indicators that need to be constantly controlled and monitored for successful business practices. Unlike pilots that control mechanical and electronic devices with an essentially deterministic nature, leaders rely on humans to interpret, analyse and act on critical information. Setting these processes up as cybernetic cycles determines the organisation's ability to learn.

For organisational learning to take place, clear definitions what to achieve, full transparency of the current performance level and open, honest communication are a prerequisite.

While few organisations really have a clear and consistent breakdown of their strategic targets into operational measures even fewer share this information with all employees. Needless to say, that the essential and fruitful exchange between departments and team members that constitute the basis for creative dispute is not taking place.

And why are organisations facing massive resistance from employees and managers alike when they plan to introduce TQM-like systems?

It is not the idea of measuring per se, not even the sometimes blurry interpretation, but **it is the social dynamics developing around those metrics.**

Poorly designed systems on the one hand and manipulative usage on the other hand are provoking opposition and undermining managers' credibility.

If we look at other countries, like Scandinavia or North America, we see that they love being gauged and more openly admit failures. They appreciate a clear scoreboard which activates their professional ambition rather than driving shame into their faces. Why is it, that particularly Germans seem so sensitive to feedback and score-boarding, a prerequisite for self induced change?

First and foremost, we have been trained to think that way. Our whole educational system is (still) designed to reward a "no mistakes" and not an "improvement" culture. **We have learned to avoid mistakes, because it makes you the center of attention. Finger-pointing is used by others around you that compensate for their own imperfection with intolerance towards failure of others.**

Second, the value of overcoming and improving an unfavourable situation ("the good news") is much less attractive to report than admitting challenges. Therefore all power and influence will be applied to conceal the truth or at least paint a rosy picture, rather than confronting yourself with unpleasant facts, even if it is very obvious already to all involved.

Third, and ironically this is a consequence of the former two aspects, people start to develop a natural suspicion and scepticism towards praised achievements and so called "best practices", which in turn is the basis for the NIH ("not invented here") syndrome.

It is not difficult to imagine, that real learning is stifled in such an environment. Brain research and psychological studies have over and over proven, that **active learning can only take place in a non-threatening, respectful environment.**

To change your measuring systems, you need to change the usage of it and ask yourself, **who are the heros and who gets promoted in your company? – The best performers or the most ambitious learners?**

The answer is both of course, but for different reasons: the learner for taking risk and driving constant improvement and the high performers for sharing their knowledge and coaching others to become more successful.

Because superior performance is rarely the result of a few superstars, but the highest possible performance of all team members, credit should be given to those who embrace and nurture the process of learning, instead of being better, let alone, perfect!

And that is probably the hardest thing to accept for us Germans.