

Phil LeNir: Social Learning

Phil LeNir pioneered the use of social learning when he was an engineering manager not because he was some kind of visionary, but because he desperately needed a better solution to management development than he could find in the marketplace.

Born of necessity Phil has become an expert in the practical application of social learning among managers. In this interview he shares his ideas about the topic.

DC: Phil, tell me about how managers learn.

PL: Let me answer by asking you to ponder how you learned to be a manager; think about the processes by which you and your fellow managers are improving.

I can't say exactly what it is that made me into a manager, but I don't think it had a lot to do with lectures or e-learning. You may not change a lot in any given year, but if you compare the you of today with where you were five years ago, you'd recognize you've learned a great deal. Well, how did that happen?

DC: It's hard to put a finger on it besides saying 'experience'.

PL: Dr. John Seely Brown talks about two types of learning. One is Cartesian learning which assumes that knowledge is a substance and pedagogy concerns the best way to transfer this substance from teachers to students. This is an approach that most of us have experienced from a young age. In classic LMS terminology we talk about

learning objects which are transferred to the learner. There is nothing wrong with this for some contexts like learning the alphabet, but when it comes to learning how to manage it doesn't have much to do with Cartesian learning.

The other kind of learning is social learning and it is socially constructed based on conversations about the things we are working on. I believe that most management learning occurs through this process, through discussions with your colleagues that help you make sense of your experiences. That's what is going on when we say we learn from experience.

DC: Do professors have any role in this kind of learning?

PL: Yes, but it's less about downloading facts than it is providing concepts that help managers organize their thinking and talk about their experience.

For example, this discussion we are having today is enriched because an academic has made this helpful distinction between social learning and Cartesian learning. But we won't really learn it by reading about it or listening to a lecture. It's when we take this concept and talk to other managers and think about how learning has occurred in our own lives that it begins to make sense. Then as a manager you move to "and here's how we can use these ideas in our organization."

DC: So how should we help people learn to be better managers?

PL: You don't send managers on a course to learn management, they need to get on with it and learn from experience. But social learning can accelerate their growth as managers.

Here's how it's done. Simply carve out some time, maybe an hour a week, to learn and reflect. This works better if you gather some colleagues who are having similar experiences so you can talk about your reflections and share your experiences.

If you can bring in some outside concepts from the academic world, you'll probably find that brings added value to this discussion of experiences. That's what I did when my team and I needed to improve our management abilities and it worked really well

DC: This sounds a little like action learning.

PL: Yes, action learning is a type of social learning. It has the main elements I'm talking about: a group of managers working in the real world and taking time as a group to reflect on their experiences.

The only trouble with action learning is that you need the right kind of project and that needs to be orchestrated—so it's hard to do on a large scale. I think social learning occurs as a natural part of management and you just want to encourage it with some everyday meetings that allow for reflection and conversation.

DC: What about communities of practice?

PL: Those provide a mechanism to enhance social learning as well. Although I think you find those are often more for technical topics

rather than management. You might find that aircraft engine technicians from different companies can have a great sharing of learning in communities of practice because they have the common context of the engine itself. For managers this is harder to do because the context is so different from place to place; you learn best from people who know the context.

DC: Can social learning go wrong?

PL: I'm not sure if it can really go wrong, but it certainly won't work among managers until you build up a feeling of trust. Unlike more technical subjects, discussions about how we manage touch upon sensitive areas. So make sure you pay attention to the trust issue.

DC: Tell me about your own experience with social learning as a manager.

PL: Normally there are a lot of filters on what you share with your peers. I might say just a little about some subject to a peer and when I get home I'll tell my wife the whole story about what really happened.

With social learning we found that our group of managers was opening up this space of trust. Suddenly it wasn't the engineering manager talking to the production manager; it was Steve talking to Maria.

The sort of honest sharing that came through that discussion enabled a kind of learning that I can't imagine occurring any other way. It was also a lot of fun, we laughed all the time.

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