

## On learning and unlearning

Learning, life-long learning, amassing new knowledge, creating insight, adding value, boosting brains.....all talks of increase, adding on, creating a plus, more rather than less. Yet perhaps we first need to talk about 'unlearning'. Unlearning the conditioned nature of ourselves. Unlearning what normal conceptions are around learning. Unlearning who and what we think we are capable of. Unlearning attachment to our roles....roles like 'helper', 'manager', 'leader', 'emerging leader', 'corporate director', 'CEO', 'researcher', 'policy advisor', 'HR advisor' and so forth. It's not that roles are a problem in themselves: but when we become wedded to a role, it becomes a prison - both for the role holder, and for those we serve. Helpers need the helpless. Managers need people to manager. Leaders need people to lead. When we over-identify with our roles, they reduce us to their boundaries, confine us and limit our potential for choice. We, and others, develop fixed expectations according to our roles, about how we are supposed to act, what we are supposed to do and how others are supposed to treat us. We become entrenched; confluent with our roles. And especially as professionals, we don't allow our whole selves to show up to the workplace; we become the role and forget our soul at the door.

We are conditioned beings. From the moment we come into the world, we are impressed upon by everyone and everything around us. In fact, it can be argued that we never were a blank slate; because the world and our culture was already deeply embedded into who we were born into. Our conditioning continues throughout life, colouring the way we view the world, providing us with a particular analytical framework and dispensing concepts which shape, mould, determine, organize, fashion and actualize our experiences. We are what we think we are; we think ourselves into being.

Conditioning also comprises the conclusions we formed about ourselves as children, which became the many fixed beliefs we carry around about who we are and who we have the potential to become. And so most learning programmes are designed to produce more knowledge and to pile more information into us. More, more, more. Yet what we really require is self-insight and a deep dive into our multi-faceted and conditioned selves, in order to unmask the limiting self-beliefs, and to unlearn that which might be preventing us from leading fuller, richer and more authentic lives. We don't need to create a new version of ourselves; we need to excavate, unlearn and remember who we really are.

When we spend time thinking about who or what we don't want to be, we inadvertently reduce ourselves to the smaller version of our being. We are comfortable with that which we already know, as we fix our eyes to the ground and dare not imagine our own greatness. Unlearning our smallness is not a recipe for arrogance or navel-gazing; rather, when we unlearn fixed attitudes and broaden our mind set, we must stand in the tension of our own unknowing, mixed with awe at our own potentiality. We learn to walk in our own legacy with humility, recognizing that we are holding the pen which will write our accomplishments into life.

Many organisations keep staff small; skills are left unused, creativity is thwarted and competences go unacknowledged and remain dormant. Exceptionalism is feared as business as usual is conducted, and those who colour outside the lines are expected, forced even, to crayon within pre-defined boundaries only. We wonder why cultures stagnate. We hear 'that's how we do it around here' ...and we fall in line or drop out.

Learning organisations must first unlearn. They must value the courageous ones who question business as usual and ask why and why not? Unlearn first, in order to undo the ties of complacency and to unleash new energies. Plant ideas in new soil and allow them to germinate. Be happy when colleagues overtake you. Unlearn preconceived ideas about who can and can't lead, shifting power away from defunct habit energies, into newly imagined horizons. Unlearn, imagine, wonder, question, fail, then learn.....and trust....and start again. Refuse to dwell in stagnant waters.....