Organisational Unlearning

The Learning Company Conference

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Dr. Peter Hawkins

Bath Consultancy Group

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My talk today is about a big cheese, an overful tea-cup, a bowl of fruit, a magic wand and book. After exploring the importance of organisational and personal unlearning, I will present some case examples of collaboratively creating unlearning as part of organisational and societal culture change.

But let me start with the same story that I began my Plenary address at the very first Learning Company Conference.

1.   The key-note speech

Nasrudin was an intriguing figure in the field of Management consultancy and so the committee of the professional association decided to invite him to speak at the next conference.

He was introduced at length by the chairperson and then he rose to his feet.

"Who here knows what I am going to tell them? " He asked.

The audience who were used to audience participation, all shouted "No!"

"Then you are not ready to hear it." He replied before sitting down.

The committee, who received many complaints from the audience, were outraged. The chairperson said:

"We can not let this scoundrel get the better of us. We must invite him back for the next conference." The committee all agreed with their prestigious chair.

On the day of the conference, all the audience were ready, having heard about the events of the last conference. Nasrudin was introduced, got to his feet and said:

"Who here knows what I am going to tell them?"

"Yes!" shouted out the primed audience.

"Then you do not need me to tell you." said Nasrudin and calmly sat down.

""This is too much. He should be expelled from the association." they were all saying in the coffee break. But the chairperson was stubborn. "No, we must invite this man back next year as the key-note speaker.....we will sort him out."

The big day arrived and as before Nasrudin got up and asked:

"Who here knows what I am going to tell them?"

Half the audience cried out 'yes', the other half 'No'. as they had been briefed by the chair.

"Then let those who know tell those that do not." said Nasrudin and left the conference.

So, let me pause and ask you to answer two simple questions.

1. What did you come to this conference wanting to learn?
2. What does your company, or one you work with, most want to learn?

For many years I have studied the great variety of approaches to personal and collective transformation.

There are two main types of approach, which my own spiritual teacher used to call the "way of the worshipper" and the "way of the warrior".

The worshipper creates an image of what lies in the room of the next stage of his or her development – a vision of the what we might become. The worshipper meditates on this vision, identifies more and more with the image, aligns their deepest motivations towards becoming that to which they aspire.

How many of you work with companies that have visions? How many have new visions every year? Is the relation to the vision one of worship and alignment?

The "way of the worshipper", is important and has its place in personal and organisational development. The danger is that we create the vision as an idol created from our current consciousness and they become idols formed from our materialistic acquisitiveness, rather than images that can aid our evolution and transcendence.

The other path is the "way of the warrior" – Carlos Castenada and the Yaqui Indians, the Zen Samuri or the Sufi Dervishes. They focus not on image of what lies in the room beyond, but focus on what stands in the doorway and blocks the natural movement on? What is the creative enemy that needs to be confronted? What must we unlearn before we can be open to the new type of learning in the next room?

2.   The cup is too full

One day an eminent consultant and author came and asked Nasrudin whether he would be willing to be his mentor.

"There is nothing I can teach you." responded Nasrudin.

"Don't be so modest," replied the eminent consultant, " I am told that you are the best teacher for somebody like myself who is already an expert in their field."

Nasrudin shrugged and invited the consultant for some tea. He carefully laid the table, brought his best china and warmed the pot. When the tea was made he began to pour and kept pouring until the tea was flowing over the edge of the cup and all over the table. Eventually the consultant jumped to his feet and said:

"Stop pouring you fool, can't you see the cup is too full to have any more tea in it?"

"Ah!" said Nasrudin, "I can see that I must empty the cup before I pour any more in, but cups are easier to empty than successful consultants."

New questions

1. What stands in the way of your development and transformation – what do you need to face to let go of, to unlearn?
2. What stands in the way of the transformation of your company, or one you work with, - what does it need to acknowledge, let go of, unlearn?

3. How did you become so clever?

One day the Nasrudin was asked:

"How did you learn to become so clever?"

"It was quite easy," he replied. "I just talked a lot and when I saw people nodding their head in agreement, I wrote down what I had said."

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Please notice that Nasrudin, also noticed when people were not nodding their heads and knew how to forget those utterances, rather than repeat them. The final story comes from Guy Claxton study of how Human learning and unlearning differs from rats.

4. Unlearning to Learn

Imagine a rat placed in a maze. He runs down the alleyway to the choice-point, and then down one of the arms. When he gets to the end of an arm, the experimenter picks him up and puts him back at the start again. After a few goes he discovers a lump of cheese at the end of the fourth arm. He learns that that is where the cheese is, and, being fond of cheese, he comes to choose the fourth arm every time. But after a while the experimenter moves the cheese. What does the rat do? He continues running down the fourth arm for a bit, but eventually starts exploring the other arms again – and if the cheese is there, he will find it. He may show some reluctance, even some annoyance, at having to give up his previously successful expectancy. But cheese is what he cares about, and cheese is what he will find.

The human being, on the other hand, may continue to run down the fourth arm for ever, if he cannot bear to admit that he is wrong, or if he feels ashamed of being 'conned', or if he has come to *believe* that it is *right* to go down the fourth arm.

'Who cares about cheese?', he rationalises,
'It's much prettier down here'.
Or, 'I don't know about any cheese. Cheese is for dopes.
I tell ya – if the fourth arm was good enough for my old man, it's good enough for me.

Guy Claxton (1984) "Live and Learn" Harper and Row: London. p147

I stood here in 1992 to give the plenary address at the first Learning Company Conference. I had been invited as Mike, Tom and John were unable to get the other Peter (of the Fifth Discipline fame). That year was very important for me for I had been half way through writing a book on "The Heart of the Learning Organisation" to be published by Sage, when Peter Senge's book was published. I enjoyed the book but was also disappointed that many of the key issues and questions that I was interested in had not been addressed. I wrote a review of the book detailing seven criticisms and felt very pleased with myself.

My seven criticisms of Peter Senge

1. Trying to transcend the paradigm of mechanism but caught within it.
2. Individual centric: locates learning in individuals.
3. Attention on mental models with little attention to how these are embedded in our emotions and bodies.
4. Does not show how individual learning becomes organisational learning.
5. Organisations seen as discrete entities.
6. New-Darwinian: organisations competing with their environment.
7. Encourages people to eat the recipe.

But then came the moment of nemesis: I suddenly realised that all seven criticisms applied to the book I had half written and worse my book was not even half as well written as Peter Senge's. I put the review and the half-finished manuscript away at the back of one of my filing cabinets, and decided to stay with the questions and the inquiry.

Over the years I have published a number of papers which grapple with these questions, and finally I am trying to pull it together into a book centring on three questions:

1. What is the connection between organisational learning, knowledge management, culture change and strategizing?
2. How do we move beyond Organisational learning becoming another aquisitive, addictive, trophy hunting, band wagoning development process, that promises so much and delivers so little?
3. How do cultures evolve, through unlearning and relearning?

At this eighth learning company conference, there has been a number of key themes, which I want to both echo and develop. John Burgoyne, yesterday eloquently addressed the eleven key critiques of organisational learning, and argued that we should examine the shibboleths that are developing in our field. Several presentations have shown the need to develop an integrate approach between, Organisational learning and knowledge management and I echo Ian Cunningham, who yesterday argued that both approaches fail to facilitate wisdom. Too often organisational learning becomes an initiative driven by the Human Relations department and knowledge management, an initiative driven by the Information Systems department, with a resulting lack of synergy.

I would go further and say that both approaches, even if they are well integrated, often fail to achieve alignment with the organisation's strategy or its process of strategizing. Also, both approaches require fundamental culture change to be truly affective.

Both Professor Burgoyne and many others at this conference have been asking the question: **"What is the critical next stage of development in Organisational Learning?"** My response is that we need to explore and discover the interconnections in the diamond, made up of:

Organisational learning

Culture change   Knowledge management

Strategy
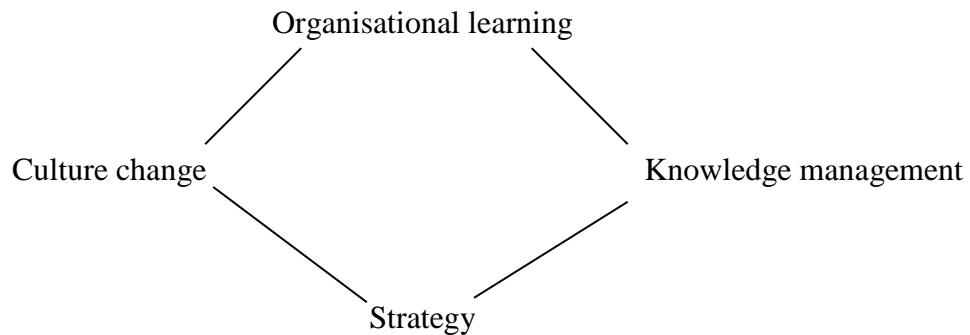
We do not need to spend time developing and refining the points of the diamond, but discovering and polishing what lies at its heart. It is also critical, that we do not reify these approaches and make them into 'things', but see them as constantly evolving processes. The diamond would be better written as:

Organisational learning

Evolving culture   Facilitating shared knowing

Strategizing
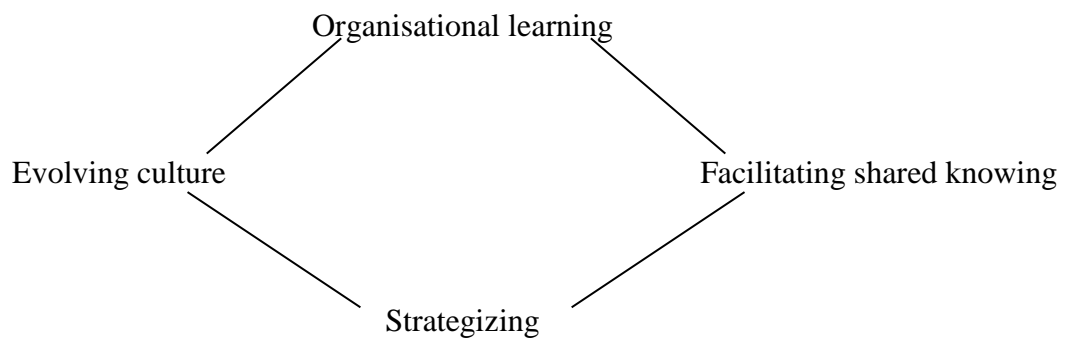
Professor Andrea Wierdsma, has provided some useful suggestions on exploring some of this territory, when he argued yesterday that we must not only facilitate new conversational spaces in organisations but also create "coherent disturbances". I will echo his approach later in this paper, when I describe my own concept of "paradoxical seizure".

As part of my research inquiry into this field, I have been reviewing a good deal of the plethora of the literature on:

- Culture
- Knowledge Management
- Strategy
- Organisational Learning

As well as on the linked areas of:

- Organisational transformation
- Change
- Leadership
- Mergers and Acquisition Integration

Three things kept striking me:

1. All these separate branded approaches are really writing about the same territory.
2. That in every field, so much is promised, many recipes are produced, but little that is sustainable is delivered in comparison.
3. Each area writes about the problems of implementing change. They all agree that the biggest stumbling block is the difficulty of shifting the culture.

Let us look at a few of the quotes on the effectiveness of change:

- 70% of re-engineering efforts ultimately fail (Dr Michael Hammer)
- 2/3 of companies that tried to implement total quality had not seen any significant change (Arthur D Little)
- Many large-scale change initiatives run into difficulty at implementation phase (KPMG Director of Change management)
- Results from large scale change programmes are "seriously underwhelming" (Dr Richard Pascale)

Now let us take just one field that of knowledge management and look at some of the current writer's comments on the failure of implementation.

- 80% of organizations reported that culture either actively or passively hindered knowledge management initiatives (best practice club report)
- "Insufficient attention is paid to tailoring the Knowledge Management strategy to…the particular organization, culture, situation and context (Prof Coulson Thomas)
- "They know all the answers and are not open to new ideas" "They Have a major cultural blockage" (KPMG survey of KM Lagards)
- "people/culture, business processes and technology tools must all be looked at simultaneously" (Elizabeth Lank ICL)
- "Culture Trumps Everything" (Larry Prusack IBM Consulting Group)

My contention is that Knowledge Management is fundamentally flawed at an epistemological level. Many of the practitioners use the Knowledge pyramid:

The Knowledge Hierarchy
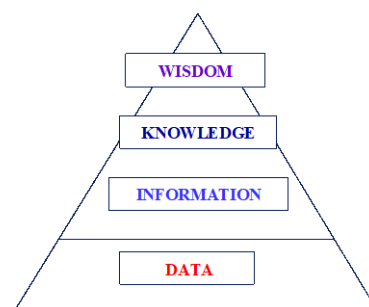
But most of the knowledge management initiatives are about creating, warehousing and accessing data. This is because data is the only thing in the pyramid, all the others are processes, and they are embedded in the organisational culture and difficult to either manage or change.

My proposition is that:

We do not need to learn more and more, or even learn more and more about how to learn. Rather we need to discover how to unlearn individually, organisationally, as societies, and as a total global species.

To support my proposition, I am going to advocate four critical steps and bring witnesses to support the case.

Step one: We need to acknowledge our addiction to: Acquisition, achievement, competition, finding the short-cuts to success and looking for THE answer.

We are taught to answer questions not ask them. Power is linked to expertise.   But expertise is the mental armour that defends us from the emergent. The old mechanistic paradigm has caught us in the addiction to so called 'objective truth', to the power of knowledge and certainty and to expertise. My colleague Robin Coates has pointed out to me, that: "if we believe we know, it is impossible to take a whole systems perspective, for to embrace this paradigm means we have to accept that our own perspective is inevitably partial and relative."

Let me call my first two witnesses, both great Indian teachers who have tried to liberate those trapped in twentieth century western consciousness.

First Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, Spiritual teacher and mentor of David Bohm.

Can you think of something that is not knowable? You can only think of something that you know. But there is an extraordinary perversion taking place in the world at the present time. We think we shall understand if we have more information, more books, more facts, more printed matter.

Obviously, knowledge and learning are an impediment to the understanding of the new, the timeless, the eternal.

With most of us, knowledge and learning have become an addiction and we think that through knowing we shall become creative.

Krisnamurti

Now Hazrat Inayat Khan.

The process of spiritual attainment is through unlearning.

People have made their belief rigid ... they are worse because they have nailed their feet to their belief.

Among a hundred persons who come for spiritual guidance, ninety come out of that tap ... They do not want to give up their own idea, but they want to have it confirmed that the idea they have is right.

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Spiritual attainment, from beginning to end, is unlearning what one has learnt. But how does one unlearn? What one has learnt is in oneself. One can do it by becoming wiser. The more wise one becomes, the more one is able to contradict one's own ideas. The less wisdom one has, the more one hold's to one's ideas. In the wisest person, there is the willingness to submit to others. And the most foolish person is always ready to stand firm to support his own ideas.

Hazrat Inayat Khan.

Step two: We need to unlearn our epistemological assumptions.

Gregory Bateson, the great Anthropologist, Naturalist, Communication expert and joint founder of Cybernetics, pointed out that we all have an epistemology and those that do not recognise that they have one, probably have a bad epistemology. He argued that it is our western epistemological errors that are the root of the major threats that now face mankind.

I call Gregory Bateson:

I shall argue that many of our propositions happen to be false, even though we all share them. The erroneous premises, in fact, work.

On the other hand, the premises work only up to a certain limit, and, at some stage or under certain circumstances, if you are carrying serious epistemological errors, you will find that they do not work any more. At this point you discover to your horror that it is exceedingly difficult to get rid of the error, that it's sticky. It is as if you had touched honey. As with honey, the falsification gets around; and each thing you try to wipe it off on gets sticky, and your hands still remain sticky.

The main Epistemological Errors of our Western Mind, I believe are:

a)   It's us against the environment.

b)   It's us against other men.

c)   It's the individual (or the individual company, or the individual nation) that matters.

d)   We can have unilateral control over the environment and must strive for that control.

e)   We live within an infinitely expanding 'frontier'.

f)   Economic determinism is common sense.

g)   Technology will do it for us.

Bateson

I have built on the work of Gregory Bateson and written about the Nine limiting mind-sets that those of us educated and brought up in western consciousness acquire and then forget that they frame and limit our on-going learning. Our unlearning process needs to start by reversing these beliefs

1. Answer questions do not ask them

2. Answers are right or wrong

3. Don't cheat

4. Think "either-or": for and against (Dualistically)

5. Think "things" (Atomistically)

6. Cause $\longrightarrow$ effect thinking (Linearly)

7. An effect has a single cause

8. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"

9. Learning is located within people

Step three: We need to realise that the current world challenges necessitate collective unlearning.

I call back Gregory Bateson:

"Perhaps we have an even chance of getting through the next twenty years with no disaster more serious than the mere destruction of a nation or group of nations.

I believe that this massive aggregation of threats to man and his ecological systems arises out of errors in our habits of thought at deep and partly unconscious levels.

As therapists and change agents clearly, we have a duty.

First, to achieve clarity in ourselves; and then to look for every sign of clarity in others and to implement them and reinforce them in whatever is sane in them.

And there are patches of sanity still surviving in the world. Much of Oriental philosophy is more sane than anything the West has produced, and some of the inarticulate efforts of our own young people are more sane than the conventions of the establishment."

Bateson.

I call upon my next expert witness, David Bohm:

"As soon as you set up a culture its meanings become repetitive and they begin to get in the way. Nevertheless, we need a culture.

Nobody has solved the problem of how the vision can be constantly renewed. It becomes more static, more of a habit. The thing becomes a disposition which gradually gets fixed. It gets transmitted from one generation to the other as a disposition, and the people who pick it up don't understand it in the same way as the people who had it, because they are merely imitating the disposition and not understanding the meaning from which it came. They may understand part of it, but not as well as those who came before. Each time it is made a little weaker.

It's this repetition through generations which reinforces the habit to go along with the old ways of thinking and all the old social relationships and the old culture. Especially now this problem has to be solved if the civilisations are to survive. In the old days, you could say 'well, a civilisation could die and another one start up' but now with modern technology we may destroy the whole thing. The problem has become more urgent."

Bohm

The problem has indeed become more urgent.

Step four: We need to develop an organisational transformation discipline that links culture change and unlearning.

Our organisational cultures are acquired through the way the organisation responds to the demands of:
- external threats and opportunities
- the need for internal cohesion and collective identity.

In the first phase of an organisation's development these two demands create an organisational culture learning process. However, as the organisation faces later phases of external challenges and internal identity development, new learning becomes more difficult. Companies will always tend to face today's challenges through the spectacles of yesterday's experience. The longer the history of the company, the more that each new phase will require greater attention to unlearning, in order for new learning to be possible.

I have written elsewhere of how Organisational culture needs to be understood at five different levels and unlearning needs to happen at all these levels. Where as traditional change efforts have started at the top level, with new vision and mission statements, campaigns and logos; unlearning often needs to begin from the bottom up.
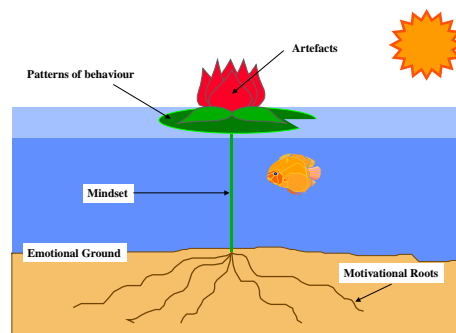
Many organisational leaders and consultants still believe that if you go through the steps:

1. Analysing the new challenges
2. Creating a new mission, vision and strategy.
3. Designing a change programme
4. Cascading the new learning down the organisation

The organisation will learn a new culture. But it is no good pouring new wine into old bottles or trying to create a new culture within old mental models. Culture change needs to begin with unlearning.

So, what is unlearning? Bo Hedberg defines it as:

"Unlearning is the process through which learners discard knowledge."

He goes on to say:

"Very little is known about how organizational unlearning differs from that of individuals."

But his work explores how unlearning can be blocked, particularly by the danger of too much success:

"Organizations which have been poisoned by their own success are often unable to unlearn obsolete knowledge in spite of strong disconfirmations."

March and Olsen (1976), also write state that:

"There are times when organizations should treat their memories as enemies"

I would add to these quotes my own definition that:

"Unlearning is the process by which organisations unlock the evolving of their culture."

There is a danger that we get lost in these abstractions, so I now want to illustrate different examples of unlearning in organisational transformation work carried out by Bath Consultancy.

1. British Aerospace

Let me give an example. In the 1980s, I worked with British Aerospace at Filton. Like many of the large aircraft manufacturing sites around Britain, the culture had been learnt before and in the Second World War. The world of aircraft production in the 1930s and 1940s, was that there was an enormous demand for new and better planes. Companies were successful if they could be ahead of the competition in building the latest plane. The heros were the designers and the engineers and of course the test pilots. Even in the late 1980s most of the managers had been their "man and boy" and most had been brought up in a world of Biggles, Ginger and airfix kits. There was a passion for designing and building innovative whole aeroplanes that unite the sight despite the union/management antagonism. This culture reached its peak in the construction of Concorde, which was not only the flagship product, but the cultural God.

Most sights were also very connected to their local community. Filton was the largest employer in Bristol and a very high percentage of its workforce were local. The opposition were seen as the other British Aerospace sights, rather international competitors, such as Boeing.

Now the challenges in the late 1980's was moving from building the planes with the most high-tech functionality; to competing on price, reliability and effective process through-put. Aeroplane production was happening across multiple sights and multiple countries. Very hard to create streamline processes, when you have to work with the competition and even with quote "Johnny foreigner".

The challenge for Filton was to move out of infatuation with gold-plated technical innovation and become passionate about competing in a commercially different world. But let us look at what happens when you try and create new learning in an old culture.

The company produced a video spelling out the doomsday scenario for Filton if it did not compete on the new terms: cost reduction, reliability, process efficiency, etc. A copy was sent at Christmas to every employee. When we walked the sight, and talked to staff at different levels early the next year, there were three dominant reactions:

1. Fatalism: they have secret plans to close the sight and there is nothing we can do about it.
2. Suspicion: They are painting a bleak picture in order to scare the unions off demanding too much.
3. Denial: Bristol would never let Filton close, it is too important for local employment. We have the best designers and engineers in the world B. Ae would never want to lose that capability.

New learning can not be put into old bottles. To learn a new culture, you first must unlearn the old, by breaking the frames through which new experience will be evaluated.

When Bath Consultancy Group carried out research into why Change initiatives so often fail, the single major factor we found was that:

"Leaders, change agents and consultants tried to cascade a solution, before the majority of the organisation had bought the problem."

We came up with the phrase:

"If they ain't bought the problem, they ain't going to buy the solution."

But you can not teach the problem. Instead people need a direct experience.

Let me describe two direct unlearning experiences at British Aerospace in Filton.

The first moment of unlearning was when we had worked together on trying to break down the functional silos and create more learning and better relationships across departments. His exhortations and our workshops were not changing things. I said to him:

"The problem is you're the only one who is having the sleepless nights about the total functioning of the sights. They are working their socks off, fixing operational problems in their functions. They just hear you and I making more demands. To shift their frame, we have to transfer your sleepless night to them."

At the next executive team meeting he looked them all in the eye and told them that in two weeks time he wanted 50% of their time managing corporate development area. They had one week to come up with how they were going to manage their functions in two and a half days a wee. This was to functional directors who were working excessive overtime fire fighting operational problems. They immediately starting kicking back, with how can I possibly…questions. "That is the challenge we all face" he replied. This broke the previous culture in which problems always came up the multiple levels of management and solutions always came back down.

The second I will call Sleepless in Seattle. This is when the same chief executive worked more collaboratively to shift frames. He went with the main union shop stewards on a learning visit to Boeing. They travelled, hotelled and eat together for several days. This in itself was a previously unheard-of experience. But the most effective unlearning was when the boss, who was the one who always previously had the answers, said:

"I want your help in discovering how we can make Filton better than Seattle, for I do not know how to do it?"

In the ten years of consulting since then we have explored many ways of creating direct unlearning experiences.

2. European Finance Company

We worked for four to five years with one of Europe's largest financial investment companies investing in unlisted companies that are in the process of growing. This was a company that was about to be launched on the stock market, having previously been owned by the major banks. Its presenting concern was how it would be seen once it was in the Ftse 100 list of leading companies. It wanted to be "A most admired company!" What I discovered was that it had already carried out an enormous number of customer, intermediary, captains of industry and staff questionnaires, to receive feedback on how it was perceived. I jokingly suggested that it was probably trying to keep Mori (one of its investee companies) in business. Also, that it suffered from 'surveyitus'. This is similar to taking lots of antibiotics, the more you take the less impact they have.

When I asked the senior executives what they had learnt from the last staff attiotude survey, their replies varied from:

"I am sure I have got it somewhere in my cupboard."

To: "Well it had the usual complaints…I am sure you find the same things in all major companies."

In the terms of the Knowledge Management hierarchy (see above), they had acquired lots of data, but not information that would make a difference, or transformative knowing.

With an internal change team drawn from across the organization, designed customer focused teamwork development events for every team in the company. Instead of questionnaires we got every team to analyse who were their most significant stakeholders, inside and outside the company, and to go and interview them in mixed pairs from the team. On the first day of the event, they often arrived with smart acetates and well analysed and groomed data. We then told them we did not want traditional feedback sessions, instead they were to role play the people they had interviewed and the rest of the team would role-play themselves, asking directly for feedback. At the end of the role play, we asked them to stay in role and imagine they were now in the corridor

away from each other, and to speak out loud what they were saying about the meeting they had just had. "Did they feel listened to? Did they think their comments would make a difference? What did the team think and feel about the feedback they had just heard?"

This was the moment of unlearning as the team displayed all its characteristic ways of defending denying and discounting potential new learning from their stakeholders.

Later in the workshop we would often ask them to come up with the ten best ways they had for insuring that nothing would change. Both mechanisms were ways of eliciting the prison of the old culture, and to encountering what is standing in the doorway blocking the escape into new learning.

3. Paradoxical Seizure and Nelson Mandela

For some of these unlearning mechanisms I have coined the term "paradoxical seizure" a somewhat similar process to systemic family therapy creating a therapeutic double bind for breaking entrenched dysfunctional family patterns. One of my inspirations has been Nelson Mandela.

One of his most well-known creations of paradoxical seizure was at the Rugby world cup final, just after the first democratic elections, when the new flag of South Africa was still only a temporary experiment. Mandela was still seen as the devil incarnate by many Dutch Reform Afrikaners for whom Rugby was also a key religion, and the Springboks, or Bokas, their idols. The "devil" entered the temple of Afrikanerdom Rugby "Ellis Park", wearing the Pope's (Francois Pienar) clothing. He raises his fist in an ANC salute and said VIVA BOKA BOKA. I spoke to many who were there who describe seeing those with them (of course never themselves) go into paradoxical seizure… their circuits were blown….do you cheer or boo. What Mandela had done was to take something that the White South Africans cared passionately about: "The Sprinboks" being the best in the world and getting world recognition. Mandela, with his moment of magic reframed the Sprinboks as being ALL South Africans. His brilliance had migrated the motivational roots of the old culture and dynamically reconnected it to the new culture. From that day on, nobody really could oppose the new flag or the new president. He had got beneath the ingrained defensive mental models and stolen into the hearts of the old opposition.

I have been working in South Africa since just after the unbanning of the ANC when I went with Tom Boydell and Malcolm Leary to speak at the first Learning Company Conference in the new South Africa.

4. Capespan.

My latest work has been with South Africa's two main fruit exporting businesses, Outspan and Unifuco who we have helped to merge and to form Capespan international. Only three years ago both companies were nationally regulated co-operatives rooted in the old South Africa. All fruit exports had to go through these two companies. With deregulation, the farmers could choose their own export agents. Having suffered diminishing returns over the last ten years they thought that this was the chance to win back power. But this was a trap. For over the last ten years fruit, like 99% of all raw materials and fresh produce had gone down in price. Yes, many new Fruit companies were currently interested in buying South African fruit, as the Rand was so cheap, that buying in South Africa and selling in Europe, North America and the Far East is currently very attractive. But this was masking the underlying trend of power moving from the grower to the retailer, and potentially to those who could orchestrate the value chain from the orchard to the consumer.

Deregulation provided a new economic context, but the growers and shareholders in South Africa were using it to play yesterday's game. The danger was that very quickly they would have given away some of their most valuable assets, which were:

- **their intellectual assets**, from having the largest concentration of long time multiple fruit growers in the world, with some of the best research into new cultivars and environmentally friendly fruit production.
- **their brand assets**, with Outspan being one of only three South African brands listed in the World's 300 most valuable brand names.
- **That Capespan was the only Fruit company in the leading Global five, that was owned by the Farmers themselves**.

The challenge was to help the farmers unlearn yesterday's game where the export company was the organisation limiting your returns, and you had to constantly fight against it, to seeing that there were unique short lived, opportunities to become the most influential fruit farmers in the world.,

Some learning from the unlearning front line

1. Start where your client is; care about what matters to them today.
2. Be where your client isn't; care about how they play tomorrow's game
3. Create direct experiences in which the client can catch themselves imprisoned in their cultural frame.
4. Create questions from the future, but linked to a passion from today.
5. When faced with the 3 "D's" of Denial, Defensiveness and Discounting, do not rationally confront, as this will reinforce the resistance, but rather create paradoxical seizure to blow the old circuits so new connections can be made.
6. Find ways of migrating the motivational roots and connecting them to the new.
7. Support internal Leaders and Change agents in how to facilitate, unlearning and transformational culture shifts.

In May 1999 Bath Consultancy Group ran a two-and-a-half-day conference with Bill Torbert from the USA which directly focussed on how to develop such transformational leaders at all levels of the organisation.

Shakespeare and Prospero as Archetypes of Unlearning

As we are in Warwickshire let me end with Shakespeare's poetic portrayal of unlearning. In possibly Shakespeare's last great play; "The Tempest", Prospero is portrayed as the archetypal addict of learning. At the beginning of the play he recounts to his Daughter Miranda, how when he was Duke of Milan he to his:

> "state grew stranger, being transported
> And rapt in secret studies."

Therefore:

> "The government I cast upon my brother.".
> "I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
> To closeness and the bettering of my mind."

There developed a split between Prospero, the academic in his Library and his brother Antonio, engaged in the world of political management. His brother does a deal with the King of Naples to usurp his Brother, who is cast to sea with his daughter in a leaky boat. Even when shipwrecked on an island, Pospero's addiction to learning does not abate. He is as much in pursuit of control as his more worldly Brother. He continues to study the magical arts which he uses to control and command the spirits of the Island: "the witch Sycorax", her son of the earthly Caliban and the spirit of the air Ariel. His learning reaches its nemesis when he uses his arts in raising a storm that shipwrecks all his enemies on the Island shore. He is intent on revenge and in Act Four he tells Ariel:

> "Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour
> Lies at my mercy all mine enemies:"

But then comes the moment of unlearning. Ariel tells Prospero of the state of his enemies and of the tears of the "Good Old Lord Gonzalo", the only minister who had helped Prospero escape. Ariel tells Prospero:

> **Ariel:** "Your charm so strongly works 'em
> That if you now beheld them, your affections
> Would become tender."
> **Prospero**: "Dost thou think so spirit?
> **Ariel**: Mine would Sir, were I human
> **Prospero**: And Mine shall.
> Thou with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick
> Yet with the nobler reason 'gainst my fury
> Do I take part: the rarer action is?
> In virtue than in vengeance.

Ariel departs and Prospero then recounts the achievements of his years of learning that have given him dominion over not only his supposed enemies, but the natural world; This he must now surrender. As you listen to or read this passage, I would invite you to think about: our human relationship to the environment: where our collective learning has taken us; and what we must collectively unlearn.

> "I have bedimm'd
> The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
> And twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
> Set roaring war: To the dread rattling thunder
> Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
> With his own bolt; the strong-bas'd promontory
> Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up
> The pine and cedar: graves at my command
> Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd and let them forth
> By my so potent art. **But** this rough magic
> I here abjure;…I'll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fadoms in the earth,
> And deeper than did ever plummet sound
> I'll drown my book."

But this is not the end. For in the play the actor must also de-role, unlearn his part, and this he can not do alone. So, must the Lecturer, who struts his stuff on the lecture hall podium. The play is co-created by the Playwright, the actors and the audience. It is the audience that must set the playwright and the actor free and so Prospero, Shakespeare and the actor playing the part, all come together in the epilogue, asking to be set free by the audience. So, let me join them in a request to you the audience, to free me from the part, of plenary speaker and expert, that I have just played and also my colleagues who have played the various roles within our drama.:

> Now my charms are all o'erthrown
> And what strength I have's mine own,
> Which is most faint: now tis true,
> I must be here confin'd by you,
> Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
> Since I have my dukedom got,
> And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
> In this bare Island by your spell;
> But release from my bands
> With the help of your good hands:
> Gentle breath of yours my sails
> Must fill, or else my project fails,
> Which was to please. Now I want
> Spirits to enforce, Art to enchant;
> And my ending is despair
> Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and free all faults.
>
> As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
> Let your indulgence set me free.

Thank You.

Peter Hawkins March 1999

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