

How do you gain experience when you don't have any experience?

This is a question causing more anxiety for individuals and businesses than ever before. The question pertains to young worker candidates – who are frustrated by rejection due to “a lack of experience” - and to executives who have not experienced a functional business element – keeping the executive from advancing.

So what can be done to accelerate or create experience for people in the business world? Below are four traditional, as well as cutting-edge methods, of gaining experience with practical knowledge applications.

School of Hard Knocks

The first is the oldest method – the school of hard knocks or just plain old hard work. This is the path taken by most individuals. It is the source of trial and error learning. Basically, the individual is learning what does work while having to live with the mistakes – sometimes creating big losses for their organizations.

The major flaw in this method is the lack of understanding or thought concerning consequences, especially prior to launching the action. Since there are no guidelines or rules during this learning event, the individual is usually “winging it” or operating on instincts. Unfortunately, the instincts are often incomplete due to a lack of awareness or understanding of the complete operational picture and the web of departmental influences.

Workshops and Seminars

The second method of gaining experience is to attend a workshop or seminar. This method assumes the leader of the workshop is knowledgeable and has first hand experience in the subject matter. However, often workshops or seminars are taught by inexperienced trainers who have never actually practiced what they are teaching. Thus, the participant may only receive concepts or theories rather than the insights into the choices to be made and the consequences of a decision.

The key for workshops or seminars to be successful is for the presenter or facilitator to have practical experience in the topic or subject. This experience allows the participant to learn about the different decision-making choices and can provide assistance in learning the highest probabilities of consequences relative to the chosen decision. The leader of the workshop or seminar can make the learning experience truly important or leave the participant wondering how to use the information.

Coaches or Mentors

The third method is using a Coach or Mentor. This is the hottest method being used today. It can be very effective if used properly. The roles of coach and mentor are unique. First, a mentor is someone who can guide an individual through the complex web of corporate culture and the political nuisances within an organization. Corporate culture and its evil twin - Corporate Politics - have derailed more managers and executives than any other corporate issue. The key is to find someone who is knowledgeable and experienced in the organization. They can keep you out of trouble in the political game played by some and help you stay focused on performance and

results. Also, a mentor can provide insight into the dynamics of organizational culture. Without understanding the corporate beliefs, unwritten rules, history, and standards of comparison, a new manager can quickly create small to very large gaps between themselves and the people they need to influence and direct.

A coach, on the other hand, can be internal or external to the organization. The key factor for a successful coach is the application of knowledge in a systematic manner. In other words, a good coach is someone that understands what the organizational goals and objectives are; then develops the individual to accomplish these goals and objectives on a consistent basis. There is an additional value provided by coaches that have varied experience and flexibility in their guidance of the individual. The individual learns how to make the best decisions relative to circumstances and situations. Beware of a coach with certifications and no practical experience in the business world. These coaches can follow learned processes; yet, lack the insight of practical decision-making and the ability to create the awareness of consequences.

Business Simulation

The fourth method is business simulation. This method or learning process has been around for years. Yet, today has more impact and importance than ever before. Why? The primary reason is the coming shortage of qualified or “experienced” managers – particularly in the Generation Xers (30s to 40s). While the Baby Boomers (40s to 60s) generation had a population of over 80 million people, the Generation Xers only had a population of 46 million people. Thus, as the Boomers in organizations retire, their experience and business knowledge goes with them. There are not enough people in the Xer Generation to fill the knowledge gap. This leaves a generation of potential managers and leaders who may not have the experience or knowledge to carry organizations into the future.

Business simulations provide an inexperienced participant the opportunity to learn about the impact of their decisions immediately without any damage to their organization. This immediate feedback teaches the individual about the quality of their decisions and the consequences to an organization’s financial health. Multiple years of key decisions and the consequences can be experienced in a focused session – without placing the organization at risk.

The keys to a successful business simulation are:

- Facilitators must be knowledgeable, experienced and allow the participants to discover links to performance and learn new ways of thinking.
- The simulation must be up to date – using current initiatives and methodologies.
- Real world experiences or examples are needed to show what can be done.
- The use of visual examples is important for learning and recalling information.
- The debrief portion of business simulations is the focal point for self – discovery.

In conclusion, experience cannot be wished, mandated or forced upon people. Having fun while learning and the use of practical “applications” of knowledge leads to fast gains in recognition of options. Recognition of available options leads to improved choices and positive experiences. Remember, people want to improve their decision-making capabilities and have the opportunity to lead others into the future. For optimal success, utilize a combination of these four methods to maximize the level of experience and practical knowledge of next generation leaders.

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