

Quality Education News

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Issue 54

May 2020



A quarterly publication issued by the South African Quality Institute (SAQI) in the interest of promoting educational excellence.

Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Staying ahead of the curve

Are teachers at the forefront of new knowledge and skills? Do teachers lead and the rest of society follows? Maybe not. There are countless classes around the world where the way in which children are taught today is hardly different to that of fifty years ago. Learners are taught according to the world of talk and chalk. Who needs a smartboard if you have a blackboard?!

For a teacher to have a long shelf-life in the profession, there's a need to stay ahead of the knowledge curve.

To be indispensable, the teacher needs to be like their best students ... always learning. How does one stay motivated to keep on learning through the decades? Erica Anderson (2020: 14-18) suggests four simple mental tools to keep one enthusiastic about never-ending learning. The mental tools are aspiration, self-awareness, curiosity and vulnerability.

Aspiration

When we really want to do something, our focus is on the end-result benefits. The benefits keep us motivated. Too often when there are new learning challenges, we're inclined to focus on the difficulties that we might meet on the way. Researchers have found that shifting one's focus away from the challenges to the benefits, increase our aspiration to do what might seem initially unappealing.

Self-awareness

David Dunning, a Cornell University psychologist, did a case study with college professors inviting them to assess the quality of their work. A staggering 96% of them rated themselves as 'doing above average' work. Almost half of them were wrong – and many extremely so. The self-deception continued when only 6% of them believed that they still had much to learn about being effective teachers.

The desire to learn happens when one is honest about assessing one's possible shortfalls. Introspection helps pinpoint possible growth areas. Self-awareness can also come from analyzing the results of surveys and listening in a receptive way to what others are saying.

Changing your inner narrative

Unsupportive self-talk

I don't need to learn this.
I'm already fine at this.
This is boring.
I'm terrible at this.

Supportive self-talk

→ What would my future look like if I did?
→ Am I really? How do I compare with my peers?
→ I wonder why others find it interesting.
→ I'm making mistakes but I'll get better.

Curiosity

Teachers know that their highest achieving learners are usually those that are the most curious. They don't uncritically listen to the pearls of wisdom cascading from the teachers' mouths. Such learners ask questions; they hunger to know more. They go on to the internet; they read beyond the prescribed class textbooks.

To be enthusiastic about learning, there's a need to ask questions. Ask the 'W' questions...Why? Where? When? What? and Who? Also ask, 'How?' When the expert speaks at a staff development workshop, the curious teacher might query statements that have been made. Read articles and books. Cultivate a mind frame of curiosity about what is seen and heard.

Vulnerability

Teachers like to feel 'on top of their game' – especially in front of their students and peers. They like to be seen as experts in their field. Learning something new can make one feel inadequate. Comments such as these might cross their minds:

"I'll never get this right."

"My colleagues might think I'm an incredibly slow learner."

Albert Bandura, the famous American psychologist, stated that in the learning process there's a need to accept and expect that mistakes will be made. With such a mind-frame, the learner will stay interested, will persist and will achieve a higher level of performance. It's important for the school to create a supportive climate that encourages never-ending learning.

Two realities about learning deserve attention. Firstly: 'It's OK to trip-up on the road to learning. In fact, it's expected.' Secondly: 'It's not OK to stop learning if one wishes to achieve in the 21st century school.'

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Reference

Anderson, E. 2019. Learning to learn. *Harvard Business Review* (Special Winter issue).



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Biases can hinder a school from learning



One of the most respected and trusted car manufacturers in the world is Toyota. The company has an advertising slogan which states, "Everything keeps going right." Toyota employees are drilled about the importance of continuous never-ending improvement. Yet in 2009

Toyota was forced to recall 9 million of their vehicles world-wide. What went wrong?

Toyota staff soul-searched as to what had happened to a company that prided itself on making excellent quality vehicles. The introspection identified a bias that had become part of the company culture. Toyota had become obsessed with being a successful company as the largest car manufacturer in the world. By so doing, Toyota had compromised its' devotion to learning.

Whatever type of organisation it might be, biases can negatively impact on its' attempts to be a place where staff truly learn. If the biases persist, meaningful learning won't happen.

According to research done over a decade across a wide range of industries, Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats (2019: 78-85) identified four debilitating biases:

- 1 Bias towards success
- 2 Bias towards action
- 3 Bias towards fitting in
- 4 Bias towards experts

Bias toward success

Fortunately for the Toyota leadership, it realised the negative consequences of an obsession with being successful. Today, the company has regained its' iconic status as a maker of motor vehicles.

When there's a preoccupation with being successful, failures are hidden or denied. A recent example in South Africa was the denial by Ford in explaining why some of their Kuga cars inexplicably set themselves alight. There was a company-wide fear of admitting to a manufacturing default.

The bias towards success can result in a fixed mind set. Carol Dweck, the psychologist, maintains that a person has one of two basic mind sets. The 'fixed mind set' person believes that intelligence and talents are set. You either have them or you don't. Such a person wants to be seen as successful at all times. Any failure would show incompetence.

In contrast, the growth mind set person seeks challenges and chances to learn. Failure isn't a weakness but rather an opportunity to take further risks, learn more and become more capable.

When a school gets a good reputation, it can fall into the trap of over-reliance on its' past record. Personnel, for example, are appointed or promoted on the basis of what they've done in the

past. An unfortunate principle in staff selection seems to be, 'Tried and tested.' When staff are selected on such a basis, the school might be unaware that education and the society are in a state of never-ending progress. Constant realignment to meet the future needs of society is needed.

Another aspect of the bias towards success is faulty attribution thinking. Such thinking believes that success happens because of cleverness, hard work and skill. However, when things go wrong, it's put down to bad luck. The individual doesn't accept that it could be put down to personal faulty action. Such incorrect attribution thinking means that the person is unlikely to learn from their mistakes.

What can be done to reduce the unrealistic bias towards success? Firstly, destigmatise failure. Accept that there will be times of failure. Secondly, embrace a growth mind set when there is failure. Learn from it. Thirdly, when appointing and promoting staff, look at the willingness of the candidate to be a learner. Finally, when there is a failure, get all the relevant data as to what caused it. Have a non-blaming, non-shaming post-mortem. Don't blame it on bad luck!

Bias towards action

When a penalty kick is being taken in a soccer match, where is the best place for the goalkeeper to stand on the goal line? Logic would suggest that it would be in the centre, equidistant from the goal posts. Research has shown that by standing in the centre, you have a 33.3% chance of stopping the ball.



Nevertheless, goalies stand in that position only 6.3% of the time. Why? Here the psychologists step forward. The explanation is that the goalkeeper feels that it looks better to have dived for the ball off-centre rather than stand in the middle and let the ball fly past. We'd rather do something – even if the failure rate might be higher – rather than do nothing!

The same illogical behaviour seems to apply in schools too. A problem or difficulty occurs. There's an almost knee-jerk immediate reaction from the teachers or the school management team. Action before analysis; reaction before reflection.

This bias towards action can be harmful when trying to make an improvement. Gino gives two reasons (op cit: 81). The one is exhaustion. If the school is always in a frenetic- hectic mode of busyness, people become very tired. Too many things are happening all at once. The quality of the work performance drops.

The other reason is that there's not enough time for reflection. The newly-appointed principal, for example, could benefit by reflecting why the school does something in a manner that's different to previous personal experiences. New leaders in a school can fall into this trap of too much action. As they strive to make their distinctive mark in their new environment, they start a range of new activities.



When there's a lack of reflection time, there isn't enough time to truly understand why the errors were made. Also, there could still be aspects of the mistake that actually contained good elements. They are worth considering as part of the new action.

How does one solve the bias towards action? A starting point is to ask questions.

- * Is the change really for the better or is it change for change's sake?
- * Are we sure that the majority of the staff clearly understand what needs to be done and why?
- * Is the staff managing and performing well at the present moment?
- * Are there staff members who seem exhausted and overwhelmed?

Before moving to action, build in thinking time. Let those who are going to be involved in the action, have enough time to think of possible effective action. Action leaders need to curb their enthusiasm and impatience to act immediately.

Once the action has taken place, those involved should do reflection. That reflection can be done individually or in a group. Reflection involves asking more questions. What worked? What didn't? What can we learn about how to manage action more skilfully next time?



Bias towards fitting in

Wherever we work, there's a human need to feel that we belong. We want to be part of the group. We follow the social and school rules. Yet there's a catch if we blindly do so. We can suppress our own individuality and are reluctant to put forward our own ideas. To avoid rocking the boat of the 'way that we do things here', we keep our opinions to ourselves.

If a teacher works desperately at fitting into the school culture, another challenge to learning takes place. In the process, that person's unique knowledge, skills and talents are less likely to come to the fore. A school is less than it could be when it doesn't maximise on the wide range of abilities found in any staffroom.

School leaders can use different methods to counter the bias towards everyone trying to fit into the norm. Encourage the individual to cultivate personal strengths ... even if they're not part of the traditional ways of thinking in the school. Questions that could be asked of the person are:

- What are your talents and passions?
- What can the school do to give you more opportunities to express your unique self?
- If you were the principal what would you do differently?

Another method to counter the bias to fitting in, is to recognise and praise those staff members who think 'out of the box'. Personal initiatives are to be both appreciated and encouraged. The late Steve Jobs of Microsoft fame made this remark regarding appointing staff:

It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.

Bias towards experts

In the budget of fortunate schools, money is allocated for professional development programmes. The money is used to call in the experts to advice and train staff.

Yet there's a problem if there's a preoccupation of calling in the experts. There could be an unhealthy deference to experts based on their qualifications, titles and years of experience.

Another challenge to the idea of calling in the experts is that not enough attention is given to staff members who are sometimes directly involved in the real situation every day. Those staff members are aware of subtle nuances that are unique to the school. The expert understandably is unaware of all of them. Staff members might be better problem solvers than the experts.

Instead of always calling in the experts, consider doing in-house training. Amongst the staff there are likely to be hitherto unrecognised experts. There, for example, could be the much-beloved teacher who has excellent classroom discipline. What are the 'tricks of the trade' that are used? They could be taught to staffroom peers and introduced across the whole school.

When hiccups and problems occur, a school can unwittingly go to an automatic default mode. Call in the experts. No! The first call should be to those staff members who are directly involved. Those people who experience the issues should try and fix them themselves. By so doing, they have the opportunity to teach themselves and improve their own performances. Another advantage by turning first to peers is that there's likely to be improvements in interpersonal relationships and teamwork.

Calling in the experts can – at times – do much good for the school. The point is to call on them selectively. It's to remember that virtually every school has already has at least one or two experts. Tap into their talents.

Reference

Gino, F & Staats, B 2019. Why organisations don't learn. *Harvard Business Review (Special Winter Issue)*.

How do I get my team learning?



There are many similarities between a teachers' staffroom and the learners' classroom. The one big difference, of course, is the age factor. Learners are being taught by those who are usually older than them. However, the person leading the learning process in the staffroom could be of the same age or even younger.

Yet whether it be the classroom or the staffroom, there's a wide range of responses in the learning environment. It ranges from those who are excited and enthusiastic about learning to those who need cajoling. There might also be a few on the fringe who vehemently oppose acquiring new knowledge and skills. What can be done to create a learning culture within a team or school that you lead?

Four ways to help nurture a culture of learning amongst staff are (Chamorro-Premuzic 2019: 72-74):

1 Reward continuous learning

If financially feasible, a school might contribute towards paying for staff members' tuition fees as they improve their qualifications. Rewards can also be in the form of promotions. Leaders should create an organisational climate that encourages critical thinking and where challenging authority by speaking up (always professionally, of course!), is encouraged.

2 Give meaningful and constructive feedback

Meaningful learning takes place when there's positive feedback of what has been achieved. It motivates the person to keep on learning. If the feedback includes discussion of shortfalls in performance, the discussion demands tact. When there's no feedback on what has been achieved, a person might feel that all their efforts are meaningless and unappreciated.

3 Lead by example

This is a 'must do'! The leader has to walk the talk of being a learner. Colleagues are watching. So, if the leader is encouraging staff to go on professional development courses and programmes, be first in the queue. Do as I do.

4 Hire curious people

In staff selection interviews, there's a trap that interviewers are inclined to fall into. When asking the candidates questions, there might be an over-emphasis on asking questions to see whether the applicants fit into the current culture of the school. To a degree, that's sensible.

Yet there's also a need to find out if the candidate is a keen learner and has a curious mind. Include in the interview a question such as, "Please share with us a recent book or something that you've googled on the internet that you've found interesting."

Reference

Chamorro-Premuzic, T & Bersin, J 2019. *Four ways to create a learning culture on your team. Harvard Business Review (Special Winter Issue).*



Online help for Science learners and teachers



Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Science students and their teachers have had lessons cancelled or postponed. Harvard University in the USA has launched a free, open, online platform. The platform allows learners and their teachers to explore top quality education content. The site is titled LabXchange. The content library contains excellent digital resources obtained worldwide.

To access the LabXchange site, click on www.labxchange.org. There's no charge for using it or signing up. The project is fully funded through Harvard University and its' supporters, the Amgen Foundation.

Link to Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/LabXchange/>

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