

## **My Approach to Executive Development: Creating a Learning Experience**

### The Best Teacher is Experience

The evidence is very clear: the best preparation for a senior role in any organization is experience. There is really no contest; classroom training, business school teaching, coaching and theoretical concepts are all left far behind. Certain kinds of experience work better than others. Challenging assignments, significant bosses and reversals of fortune – hardships – are the best teachers. Ideas and concepts have their place but they are best used in the aftermath of experience, as people try to make sense of what happened, of what worked and what didn't. I create learning experiences that mimic the same sequence – experience, discussion and feedback, framework. The discussions help people to make sense of their own experiences and learn from those of their peers. The frameworks help them understand the “so whats”, the contexts in which certain management concepts might work and, more importantly, the contexts in which they won't work. I use a variety of methods to compress the experiences in space and time. Challenging assignments take the form of simulations and case studies that are customized to the client organization. Significant bosses are studied via movies and videos; the impacts of hardships are both seen and felt. As these experiences are discussed with peers and experts, they are integrated using a graphic, multimedia, systems framework that constitutes a compelling vision of how the world works.

### The Client Experience

The client experience is that my programs help them *observe* better, *orientate* themselves better, *decide* better and *take action* better, largely through allowing them to *communicate* better. They see “new” things that are usually parts of the situation they had not *noticed* before and because they now have more of their people *paying attention*. They *orientate* themselves better because they have the management equivalent of a *compass* and a *map* that allows navigation in parts both strange and familiar. They *decide* and *take action* better because the program creates new *connections* and *conversations* between people and ideas. These opportunities for *communication* come together under the umbrella of *story* – the creation and telling of a never-ending *narrative* that deals with where the organization has come from, where it is now and where it is going. This narrative is not the tale of seamless success that is often presented to outsiders – investors and analysts. These smooth confections have a role to play, but it is not here. This is the

real, gritty inside story complete with confusion, misunderstandings, errors, mistakes, outright screw-ups and lucky breaks. This is an unfinished story that is authentic and believable; in short, it is human. It *engages* people because they feel that they can contribute a line, a page or even a chapter or two.

### Creating the Experience

The process of creating a learning experience consists of five stages – discussion, exploration, design, delivery and follow-up:

**Discussion:** I meet with the person responsible for the learning initiative and their boss to understand the organizational context, the objectives of the initiative and how they define “victory”.

**Exploration:** I explore the organization at several levels using a combination of interview and structured questionnaires. I like to talk to people at as many levels as possible to get multiple perspectives and to assess the state of the organization’s current inside story.

**Design:** I go away and think about what experiences might serve the initiative best. I have access to and have used a vast range of cases, simulations, movies, videos and feedback instruments of many kinds. There may be pre-work required in the form of readings, case work, the completion of psychological and cultural feedback instruments etc.

**Delivery:** the learning experience is delivered in the time frames and in as many modules as might be required. I work with trusted, experienced colleagues who can help with the design and delivery of all or part of the experience.

**Follow-up:** the all important follow-up, short-term and longer-term. What worked? What didn’t? If the lessons of experience are to be taken seriously then the learning initiative must be combined with the career paths – the trajectories of participants’ assignments and the bosses they will report to.

How could the learning experience itself be improved? The feedback goes both ways because I’m still learning too.

### My Own Career Story

I was born in England but grew up in South Africa. Growing up under *apartheid*, even as a member of a privileged group, teaches you something about power, its use as well as its abuse and what it feels like to be powerless. I had the opportunity to go to the University of Chicago to study business in the early 1970s. It was the most exciting intellectual experience of my life; the place crackled with energy and the excitement of discovery. It prepared me for a career of continuous learning.

I have always been attracted to change situations and spent my corporate career in a series of “train wrecks” of various kinds. These culminated in a huge learning opportunity after we immigrated to Canada in the late 70s. I was working as a financial planner for a large, public steel distributor. It was the era of “greenmail” and leveraged buyouts. After an attack by greenmailers our company was put “in play” and we were taken over by a rogue member of a wealthy family financed by bankers who should have known better. We took on huge amounts of debt on the eve of a great recession and went insolvent almost overnight. The composition of the team that came together to handle this challenge sounds like the beginning of a bad bar room joke. We had an Englishman, a South African, a Chinaman, a Ukrainian, a Jew and someone from Saskatchewan. Under enormous pressure we bonded and became a hugely effective team because of our diversity. In the process I received a series of “battlefield” promotions and became Executive Vice-President within eighteen months. Over the next four years we performed prodigious feats, shrinking the company, paying off the bankers and allowing the family to go on its way.

We were acquired by a fast-growing conglomerate and over the next five years we quintupled our sales and boosted our profits ten-fold. And then it all began to fall apart again. Our conglomerate owners were from the old “kick ass” school of management and their management style and planning processes slowly changed the organizational context from cooperative to competitive. Former blood brothers began to quarrel with each other; communication broke down and the spirit of trust and reciprocity that had animated us for so long dwindled. We lost our story. As the economy went back into recession the conglomerate that owned us disintegrated and many of the team, including me, went their own ways, taking their huge learning experience with them.

I taught strategy, leadership and organizational behaviour at some of Canada's leading business schools (Ivey, Rotman, Schulich) and management history at the doctoral level before completing my first book, *Crisis & Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 1995/2002). It is now in permanent print with Harvard. I worked for two years with a small Boston-based consulting company in Finland, helping Nokia manage the burgeoning success of their telecommunications business. I then spent sixteen months at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina completing my second book *Learning from the Links: Mastering Management Using Lessons from Golf* (The Free Press, 2002). This was a serious attempt to apply systems thinking to management by drawing lessons from golf. The book did not offer any easy answers but I learned a lot from it and CCL about the essential role of experience in learning and the many ways to create effective feedback. My golf game also improved!

All this time I was developing a comprehensive systems framework for understanding strategy, leadership and change. Set in ecological contexts, it offers a graphic vision of how the world works, allowing people to connect their dots – to understand their contexts – in new and exciting ways. I have had conversations with people around the world about this vision in formal presentations, seminars, workshops and development programs. They all agree that it resonates with their experience at a deep, visceral level. I have spent the last six years commuting to Hong Kong and China designing and developing programs for managers and executives in Chinese Family Businesses. It gave me the opportunity to see legendary entrepreneurs at work close-up. Their success and large scale now demand that they become more corporate but, like entrepreneurs all over the world, they struggle with that. Here in the west, of course the challenge is to make large organizations more entrepreneurial. I am currently working at provincial and federal government levels in Canada on how to introduce systematic innovation into the public service. I have written a stream of articles for business publications, both popular and academic, including the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Financial Times* and the *Globe & Mail*. I teach two keystone courses on the EMBA program at the University of Regina and am a contributing editor to *Strategy+Business*. My real passion is to work with groups of bright, curious people in real situations and to create learning experiences that will change both their lives and the lives of their organizations. My journey and story continue...can we travel together for a while?