

# Unlearning: Self-Assessment and Introspection

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## Introduction

Our continued frustration with reports and studies highlighting ongoing a lack of effective senior leadership provided the incentive for our overall theme of this year's UPDATE series. Respected companies such as DDI and IBM publish Global Leadership Forecasts. Other scholarly articles challenge the value of leadership development programs. These studies and reports year after year show the lack of confidence in leadership, making us scratch our heads about how to change this disturbing trend. Clearly existing leadership development is not delivering results. If you follow our articles over the past several years, you know the level-of-effort expended vs the findings of these studies perplex us. Something was missing, and what we believe is missing is something that was never really addressed. The notion that more of the same will have some other outcome is fallacious. Pondering the situation, we determined and believe the only way to seriously change leadership is to demonstrate that they must look at their organizations, and themselves, from a different viewpoint. We characterize this as a paradigm shift, in the sense where leaders need to unlearn long-time habits, practices, perceptions, etc. resulting in a culture of "keep on doing things the same way our predecessors did." Hence, our articles in 2019 attempt to build the argument that unlearning is the needed step to improving leadership and leadership development.

Our final issue focuses on taking the notion of unlearning and noting how the concept manifests itself as successes and where the tendency to not unlearn will lead to the eventual demise of an organization. The following is excerpted from the conclusion of our July 2019 issue.

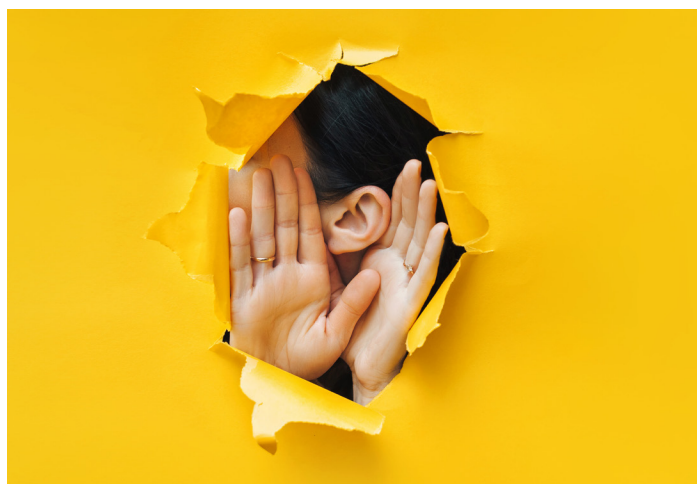
*Old traditional hierarchical thinking appears to bog down organizations and more so in today's business and technological environment. Unlearning old practices, habits, thoughts, perspectives and methods opens the doorway to new approaches, allowing an organization to grow and prosper in a rapidly changing world. Perhaps the first step is to acknowledge that unlearning is a barrier to moving forward toward enlightenment. With this acknowledgement, focus leadership development on the effective leadership practices while individually recognizing those influencers that are barriers to internalizing and implementing effective leadership practices.*

## Background

Research demonstrates so many times that after the leadership program ends, new behaviors aren't sustained, and studies show that adult learners in a lecture setting forget nearly 50% of what they learn within two weeks. Furthermore, consider most highly trained leaders – CEOs – are often not able to translate their knowledge into experience.<sup>1</sup>

Yet very few organizations manage this high-value asset (effective leadership talent) in an integrated, cohesive way. Even after spending more than \$50 billion annually on developing their leaders, many companies still do not have the bench strength to meet their future business goals. Moreover, despite the spending, investments are often fragmented with a lack of returns. Leadership models and development programs abound; few tie to business goals. Worse yet, there's scant evidence that they actually work.<sup>2</sup>

A conventional topical approach to leadership development has been the standard for over 20 years. Methods vary but content is consistent depending on the audience and understood needs. This is not bad; the content is solid and provides good information. The challenge becomes how the person receiving the content understands it in their context/world. How is the message internalized, or is it even heard? Does the person consider it



relevant, or do they discount it as ‘I know better and don't need this?’ Is the message counter to a fundamental value or belief of the person hearing it? Does the person realize that these “new” concepts are contrary to organizational culture and their own influencers? Leadership development programs present good material but rarely in the context of the person attending. Leadership development programs are typically presented to broad audiences where individual context and application may not be practical. Understanding the context that the person works in and the pressures he/she has to deal with improves learning effectiveness. This application and contextual adaptation often falls on the learner as a follow-on activity or non-structured professional development.

Therefore, we are suggesting a paradigm shift in the approach to leadership development. We believe, for the most part, the program content is solid, while techniques evolve with technology. We also believe the paradigm shift has to do with those who seek to become better leaders, and organizations that embrace learning and improved leadership performance.

For lasting and meaningful learning to occur, not only must the content be solid, but also the learner must embrace new concepts and learning and understand the context within which they work. For us that means possessing the ability to unlearn those

influencing factors that are, by default, barriers to new learning and implementation. We are all impacted, at least to some degree, by these influencing factors, whether we acknowledge them or even recognize them.

To achieve the paradigm shift, unlearning must occur. For unlearning to occur, one must clearly understand those influencing factors or as we refer to them, ‘Influencers.’ The only way for this to happen is rigorous and honest self-assessment. We have identified 10 Influencers as part of a self-assessment instrument we developed.

#### Unlearning Self-Assessment:

- Prejudice
- Perceptions
- Values
- Religion
- Environment
- Socioeconomic
- Parents
- Military
- School
- Politics

We believe the above influencers have a profound impact on each individual's framework of the world and its peoples. The challenge for leadership development is when something is taught, how do these influencers conflict with effective leadership learning? The next challenge is how does one resolve these conflicts, or not? Do these influencers take precedence over established good practices? Can these influencers be overcome to unlearn and learn a new approach?

Is it possible to unlearn specific things stemming from these influencers? How does one sort all this out, identifying which influencer, comparing and contrasting the impact of an influencer against some new learning and overcoming the old learning?

What are the triggers that force one back to a comfortable state rather than one that must exercise a new learning? Once you reconcile your influencers and are ready to accept and apply new learning, what happens when your subordinates or your bosses challenge that new learning? Can you hold your ground and explain why this new way will improve the organization, or do you succumb to pressure and go back to your old ways?

We envision two approaches to unlearning: formal and informal.

Formal – is an organizational process that explores the environment and behaviors of an organization to identify those barriers or influencers to more enlightened leadership.

Informal – is where young people who side-step traditional barriers and move forward in a rather “throw fate to the wind” approach. We compare and contrast how young people have little unlearning and why unlearning is so important for established organizations.

The formal process is what we are suggesting. This involves a very personal and honest self-assessment process of the above Influencers. The self-assessment process, if done honestly, will reveal insights into how a particular influencer can affect behavior.

We provide an example below of the Influencer – Perception.

Perception = a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression

Perception refers to the set of processes we use to make sense of all the stimuli encountered every second, from the glow of the computer screen in front of you to the smell of the room to the itch on your ankle. Our perceptions are based on how we interpret all these different sensations, which are sensory impressions we get from the stimuli in the world around us. Perception enables us to navigate the world and to make decisions about everything, from which T-shirt to wear or how fast to run away from a bear.

The perceptual process is a sequence of steps that begins with stimuli in the environment and ends with our interpretation of those stimuli. This process is typically unconscious and happens hundreds of thousands of times a day. An unconscious process is simply one that happens without awareness or intention. When you open your eyes, you do not need to tell your brain to interpret the light falling onto your retinas from the object in front of you as “computer” because this has happened unconsciously. When you step out into a chilly night, your brain does not need to be told “cold” because the stimuli trigger the processes and categories automatically.<sup>3</sup>

To help understand these influencers we developed a self-assessment tool. Below is a sample of the tool focusing on Perception. The intent of this instrument is to help an individual look at the influencers and how they may affect his/her decision-making, behavior and reaction to things they learn. Once the impact is recognized, the individual can then start to unlearn those habits resulting in negative behaviors, decision-making and their leadership.

**Sample Assessment**

There are no correct or incorrect answers. The responses you provided are for you to assess yourself and identify those influencers that may affect your ability to learn and implement different ideas and methods.

The actual score you give yourself will indicate the degree of or power the influencer has over your ability to unlearn certain concepts or beliefs.

Think of each influencer and attempt to understand how a particular influencer has or is influencing your behavior and then attempt to jot down that behavior for future reference, as appropriate to lessons that will follow.

<b>Perception</b> a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1. When you see a person or a logo, your mind automatically places that image in your belief system.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Your reaction to a situation is based upon what your senses tell you rather than your knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I have specific constraints in my belief system that affect my reaction to people and experiences.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My perception is my reality.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I see what I want to see.	1	2	3	4	5

Total Score \_\_\_\_\_

### Measures of Success

The higher one's score, the more soul searching one may have to do. Understanding the definition of the influencer then and using the technique of Journaling (for a later article) the improvement process begins. This process repeats for each of the Influencers.



The informal process as indicated above is where young people side-step traditional barriers and move forward in a rather “throw fate to the wind.” We compare and contrast how young people have little unlearning and why unlearning is so important for established organizations. In the past when a new person joined an organization, they were quickly indoctrinated into the culture of the organization. Those you reported to set the standards and the environment. You might initially challenge something or some approach, but you quickly learned that if you wanted to succeed in this organization you did not rock the boat. The current younger generation doesn't appear to play by those rules. They are looking for personal satisfaction and not worried about a “job for life.” For this discussion, we look at success and the lack of success as follows:

#### Compare and Contrast

Success = ideas drive the process, risk is low and return potential is high. In the informal context, young people start with a blank 'screen.' They leverage technology to drive outcomes.

Not so successful = sales numbers and protocol drive the process, risk of change is perceived as high, negative consequences of change are high. Examples involve established firms who use technology to make old process more efficient (so they think).

A brief case study to highlight this concept:

This is a real story, but sanitized for the purposes of this article.

A small high technology company designs and fabricates unique products for a rather specialized application. Competing products exist, but these new designs are better, stronger, and easier to install and last longer. Due to the unique design and fabrication, these products are then sold to a large supplier of functionally similar items, which are not as creative and innovative. The

supplier is an established large company, with formalized and compartmentalized departments. Their engineering group (by their own admission) could not design, fabricate and manufacture a new design in months or even years.

In comparison, the small high tech company is agile, employing the latest technological advances such that they can have a working prototype out in a few weeks, and tooled up to produce the product within a month. They leverage relationships (through technology, social media and personal interface), affordable technology (new equipment like 3D printers, CNC machines, etc.), and hard work to make it happen. Documentation is a follow-up task that can also leverage technology to catch up. The large company at one point suggested that the small firm become their engineering arm. Not sure where that is in the negotiations, but is an interesting opening. The point is the big company must unlearn to be competitive against a new breed of business/technically proficient young people. Understandably, tooling up to meet the scale of demand is another consideration, but not being burdened with tradition and not having to unlearn yields significant advantages.

Unlearning is not an event or a good idea. It is a process requiring internalization and understanding of one's Influencers. Here is another case study. The CEO of a small to medium sized organization was a bit of a control freak. It was a unique organization in that while it had a rather flat hierarchal structure,



everyone knew where control came from. It was also the type of organization, where people wanted to be part of because of its mission, so many tolerated the lack of empowerment and maintained a rather low profile. It was not the environment for creativity or innovation. We have a concept we refer to as Prudent Risk. We have articles and can send them along if you wish. The brief explanation organizationally and from a leadership perspective: If an organization takes and operates at zero risk, then the organization, most probably, should be operated by robots who do just what they are programmed to do; day in and day out. Zero risk is stifling. In contrast, irresponsible risk is dangerous to health safety and value. There is a middle ground, Prudent Risk. Prudent Risk is a rather complex concept, unique to each organization. In a nuclear power plant it's quite different than for a non-profit,



so before implementing Prudent Risk, one must carefully define prudence, and the leadership must understand that once a prudent risk is taken and it goes bad, reprimand is not an option as long as the prudent risk was within the definition of prudence.

Back to our case study. When presented with the concept, the CEO was excited and saw this as an opportunity to change culture and stimulate creative thinking and participation. Therefore, he made a proclamation: the organization was implementing a prudent risk framework, not having thought through it completely. He did not realize he had to unlearn his controlling behavior. With empowerment comes threats to a controlling leader. What happened? Prudence never was defined, an employee took an action that the CEO believed was outside that person's purview, reprimanded the person, and the whole effort collapsed so quickly it hardly got off the ground. The potential was incredible because of the type of organization it was, but that potential was never realized for several reasons, but when drilling down into the case study, unlearning was the ultimate cause.

### Conclusion

Reflecting on our overall theme this year, we started by focusing on the phenomenon of an apparent continuous leadership/management malaise as reported routinely in a variety of credible reports regarding the status of leadership. We acknowledged that we had to drill down into the issue. We are culminating this

year by focusing on a suspected cause of the malaise, the ability to unlearn those attitudes, values and behaviors posing barriers to learning many of the leadership concepts and methods. There has to be a business case if any concept is to have efficacy, as well as, demonstration or comparison/contrast to the status quo. We found two, the obvious one is better leadership, hence better organizations for many of the reasons we discussed in many of our articles. The other is the challenge of the 'do nothing option.'

We point out that the newest generation of business people do not carry the baggage of more established entities or people. Without that baggage, they have little to unlearn and they can move ahead faster, more effectively and more efficiently. This creates the business case for unlearning. This phenomenon is both fast and slow. It is the sort of thing where one may not see it coming, but then it happens in a flash. We also provide a mechanism for unlearning, identifying barriers, confronting them and then doing something about it so leadership development can have a positive business outcome. This approach is not an easy one. Unlearning is difficult and self-assessment even more difficult and uncomfortable. Pressures from within the organization are often strong and may run counter to the unlearning. We believe the effort is worthwhile. We look forward to seeing the annual evaluations of leadership turn around and show positive gains rather than continuing with the malaise.

1 *If You Think Leadership Development Is A Waste Of Time You May Be Right*, Kristi Hedges, *Forbes Women*

2 DDI Global Leadership Forecast

3 Lumen Learning



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