



Change Begins with Me: Learning from Dissonant Experiences

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As industries and technologies rapidly evolve and transform, organizations must adapt or die. While the need for transformation is well recognized, organizations often fail to follow through.

Why is it that many of the most clever and experienced leaders cannot lead their organizations to transformation? In a 1996 study Morgan McCall¹ introduced “the 70-20-10 model” for executive learning, which asserts that experience accounts for 70% of executive learning. In contrast, coaches and mentors account for just 20%, and *training programs* account for only 10%. As their responsibilities increase, most senior executives find that theory and case studies lack relevance. Their own experience is one of their richest untapped sources of learning.

Still, very little attention has been paid to how senior executives actually learn from experience and how they might enhance, extend or deepen their learning.

Many senior executives find it easier to direct others toward learning and change, but they forget that organizational change and learning begins with “me.” If senior executives are open to their own learning, change and growth, they unleash an opportunity for broader organizational transformation.

What is executive learning?

The word “learning” is ambiguous. After all, the first time people encounter the word is at school, where teachers impart and students absorb universal truths, knowledge and theories. Defined as such, “learning” is therefore a cognitive phenomenon, separate from experience and action.

For senior executives, this very limited definition of learning needs to be questioned. For them, learning should also be synonymous with adaptation, change and growth. To this end, experience and action provide important sources of learning.

Learning from Dissonant Experience

With the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget in the 1930s, the concept of learning has evolved to mean a process of discovery – rather than being told truths and knowledge. Piaget advocated that children learn through play and confusion. From early childhood, their cognitive capabilities allow them to make sense of the world by exploring. They test hypotheses to explain why things happen and reduce their confusion.

As reflected in McCall’s 70-20-10 framework, the way CEOs learn has a lot in common with children. CEOs are also more likely to learn from experience than theories and case studies. In fact, our research confirms that the most impactful learning for CEOs comes from exploring dissonant experiences – experiences that are uncomfortable, confusing, surprising or unexpected.

1 The Career Architect Development Planner (1st ed.). Minneapolis: Lominger. p. iv. ISBN 0-9655712-1-1.

In many cases, these dissonant experiences result in feeling threatened, prompting leaders to instinctually minimize the feeling of dissonance by ignoring it, dismissing it as irrelevant or becoming defensive. Yet, if these impulses are resisted, dissonant experiences can be the birthplace of significant learning. For senior executives, learning requires continuous curiosity and adaptation rather than a desire to find the “truth” that can predict human behavior.

Seven Triggers of Dissonant Learning

We have identified seven types of dissonant experiences that have the potential to trigger learning and change. While these provide rich opportunities for learning, they are often not realized. To benefit, CEOs must remain alert to the enablers needed to extract potential learning from experience.



1. Learning from trusted challengers

A supportive relationship with a challenging coach, or therapist, can provide the provocations needed for learning in an atmosphere of psychological safety. Trusted relationships provide helpful sources of dissonance because the relationships are (1) outside the organization, and (2) strong enough for the learner to hear what they may not want to hear without becoming too defensive.

The risk is that these relationships can become too comfortable to maximize learning. The trusted person may become too supportive and not challenging enough. Conversely, trusted relationships can be taken for granted by the learner, and challenges can be ignored because they feel scripted or routine or because different levels of power and authority impede honest discussion.



2. Learning from new roles

For senior executives, new roles (and in particular promotions) create opportunities to learn. However, learning in a new role is not necessarily about discovering clear rules of thumb for success. These “rules” are not easily transferred with growing responsibility. Any learning derived from a new senior executive role is often only relevant to the context in which the role is situated. Thus, the most crucial sources of learning are understanding the context of a new role, how the leader responds and reacts, and, in particular, how he or she takes up authority in that role.



3. Learning from new contexts

From teenagers taking a gap year to executives starting a new assignment in a different culture, anyone can use their experience in new contexts to grow. On assignments in different cultures, executives are frequently confronted with new ways of working and must question their assumptions; the mantra for success is to explore what made you successful in the past, and remain open to adapting when your present experience clashes.

Many people report significant learning from expatriate assignments, although few are able to articulate what they have learned beyond “growing” or “maturing.” Deeper exploration is often needed to uncover how unconscious beliefs are being challenged.



4. Learning through team dialogue

The Socratic Method is an ancient method for learning through dialogue. It relies on inquiry, naiveté as well as advocacy and logic to question assumptions to discover one’s own beliefs and morality. One of the central premises of the Socratic Method is to remove emotion from the discussion – to let go and explore all sides of a challenge.

Most CEOs do not know how to leverage the dynamics of team dialogue to create learning for themselves or their team. Our research strongly suggests that most executive teams do not know how to debate and argue nor how to be open to creating new solutions.



5. Learning from success and failure

Action is how children learn through experimentation. But in organizations, action is often constrained by protocols, rules and compliance developed to ensure the organization is reliable and predictable.

To ensure success is sustainable, there must be tolerance for experimentation that can lead to unexpected outcomes (variance) and, sometimes, failures. But do organizations really know how to learn from the dissonance created by variance?

This well-known paradox also applies to CEO learning. We naturally think that CEOs lose their tolerance for experimentation and variance because the role demands predictability, reliability, and certainty. Most CEOs actively encourage variance reduction (“I don’t like surprises” or “six sigma is mandatory”) while claiming they want people to be innovative. However, attention quickly refocuses on predictability rather than variance, resonance rather than dissonance.

Many CEOs and senior executives will say their experiences of failure generate the most significant learning. But does the need to avoid failure in the CEO role minimize experimentation? CEOs often try to carefully replicate past successes and learn little, avoiding opportunities to experiment and learn.



6. Learning from antagonists

CEOs must choose who to listen to and who to disregard. The choice has an impact on how much and what executives can learn. Diversity of opinion and beliefs can create change, but it also brings complexity, lack of alignment and discomfort. Our research revealed that a surprising number of senior executives choose to surround themselves with supporters rather than challengers who might help them learn.



7. Learning from life-shaking events

We learn from life-shaking events because broader experiences help us explore our inner journey. The inner journey is not about external successes or failures but rather how people grow and mature through fundamental human experiences, including: marriage, divorce, birth of children and grandchildren, stages of child rearing, parental pride, health scares, death of loved ones, loss of friendships, extramarital affairs, remarriage and family dynamics.

In many ways, learning from life-shaking events can become life shaping, if we allow it to. In time, these events can trigger an examination of purpose, identity, meaning and leadership. They are an opportunity to explore our own rich and unique tapestry of experiences and to integrate them into a meaningful narrative.

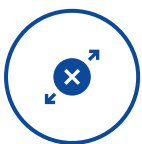
Most CEO life narratives involve stories of letting go, hanging on, creation, destruction, risk, separation, belonging and core identity. Many CEOs are at first skeptical of such learning, wondering how it might improve their leadership, or anxious they would be forced to face issues that they would prefer to leave unexamined.

Our research has shown that when senior executives take the time and space to explore and learn from these more personal life experiences, profound change can occur within. This change is then reflected in who they are as a leader.

The will to learn, or learning how to learn?

While many of the described sources of dissonance will provide learning opportunities, our research has shown that these opportunities are often not exploited. CEOs often fail to learn, but not because of a shortage of experiences. Instead, senior executives merely scratch the surface of the issues revealed by dissonance, preventing any difficult change. In effect, they minimize dissonance by avoiding it through various learning disablers. In turn, their learning failure becomes the organization's failure to transform.

Learning Disablers



1. Externalization of failure

The CEO role is the object of personal and professional attacks from boards, governments, media and members of their own top team. They are constantly expected to explain their performance and the outcomes of their organization. As they explain their decisions and performance, their explanations "externalize" their decisions and outcomes – it was something else. CEOs can learn so much about themselves from their successes and failures, but most of them do not know how. When we ask CEOs to explore what they learned from their most significant failure, many respond with an interesting narrative where the underlying learning has to do with the unpredictability or incompetence of other people, and not their own irrationalities: "I learned not to hire a person like that again."



2. Inability to explore success

We naturally think that CEOs lose their tolerance for experimentation and variance because the role demands predictability and certainty in order to meet expectations. Achieving a performance target is one form of meeting expectations. When predictability is achieved or the performance target is met, there is little interest in exploring the deeper causes of success. There is a tendency to rationalize and simplify the success to a few key variables. If the performance target is exceeded, the emotional elation makes it even harder to understand the deeper causes of success.



3. Unbalanced social distance

The CEO's role creates a social distance between themselves and others. This means they lose touch with the reality of the organization and they miss vital clues about the context. Social distance is created by fears of rejection and an acceptance of isolation in the role. On the other hand, CEOs can be too close to some individuals. Fueled by a desire to rescue the learner from pain, some colleagues simply become trusted supporters, and not trusted challengers. Many CEOs also build trusting relationships with their HR executive or Chairperson as the source of important provocations, as these roles provide a more complete view of the context. Still, these relationships may not be as open, deep or provocative as external relationships because of the embedded authority differences. They can, however, provide a second view of the CEO's context, and as such they can challenge the CEO's interpretations of events and experience.



4. Inability to initiate uncomfortable dialogue

Despite the extensive traditions of dialogue in many cultures and civilizations, most CEOs do not know how to leverage the dynamics of team dialogue to create difficult conversations that will lead to learning for themselves or their team. Most put diverse teams together to challenge one another with different opinions and beliefs, but the level of Socratic dialogue, constructive challenge and argument is often low.

Emotional dissonance is a key stumbling block. It is very hard to remove emotion when history, roles, power, competition and coalitions are sitting under the table. Attempts at being logical above the table are confused by hidden emotional dynamics. As a result, team members either contain their arguments, or dig in their heels with arguments that are uncompromising and repetitive. Dialogue fails to create learning in both situations.



5. Avoiding their own discomfort

Most senior executives can think of someone who antagonizes, frustrates or irritates them. Such frustrations can be dealt with by dismissing or firing that person, perhaps because they are "incompetent," "difficult," "hard work" or even a "pain in the neck." Sometimes the relationship is mutually fraught and they both know it, accepting that they just do not understand one another. Perhaps the antagonist cannot accept the authority of the CEO. The CEO can also be threatened by the competitiveness of the antagonist. Such relationships can consume enormous amounts of energy and emotion, and the simplest response can be to bypass antagonists or fire them.

Antagonists are sources of dissonance. As CEOs already endure a lot of dissonance in their role, it is understandable that they seek to contain or resist the dissonance that antagonists create. Resisting the antagonist can be rationalized as efficient at the time. However, by doing so, the CEO is rejecting not only the ideas, but also the discomfort, the aggression and the feelings of incompetence that antagonists elicit. With the benefit of hindsight, CEOs might admit that they changed their actions or beliefs as a result of the antagonist. Although admitting the antagonist is right in the moment of dissonance will prove difficult.



6. Resistance to self-examination

When CEOs are invited to explore their life-shaking events, many are at first skeptical of such learning, wondering how it might help their leadership, or anxious they may be forced to face issues that they would prefer to leave unexamined. Resistance to self-examination is deeply embedded in unconscious defense mechanisms: Denial, projection, displacement and transference are all unconscious mechanisms that reassure CEOs that they are okay. By acknowledging the omnipresence of these defense mechanisms in daily life, CEOs can open themselves to learning and change.

Once there is a desire to learn, senior executives need to be aware that both the role and their temperament contribute to a failure to learn and to open their experiences to exploration. It is often not enough to say: "I learned that I should 'communicate more,' or 'delegate more,' or 'involve and engage people in the change process.'" Most senior executives are already aware of such rules of thumb from books, theory and their own experience.

Learning how to learn

Is it possible to simply switch on a senior executive's desire to learn? Not necessarily. Emotions and ego often limit the process. Most people will recognize that emotions become separated from experience as time passes, and this separation enables new learning. Thus learning is never as simple as having the will to learn. McCall suggests that the two main sources of learning are experiences and people, but it's not as easy as simply having a supply of experiences and relationships. Most senior executives also need to learn how to learn.