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How to Step Up and Move Ahead in the Face of Ambiguity

Dr. Susan Cain, Ed. D | Corporate Learning Institute

There's always room for improvement. Two-Minute Reads are a free tool you and your organization can use just for that reason.

Most of us work within some fairly ambiguous expectation parameters at our jobs. In my coaching practice, I have seen individuals stop in their tracks and teams fail to move ahead because they did not want to risk action in the face of uncertainty.

How do we negotiate through this process in a way that optimizes learning, growth and smart risk taking? The answer may surprise you. We need certainties as well as ambiguity to grow our business.

Certainty and order generally maintain the status quo, allowing replication of core processes. Ambiguity gives us space to “unlearn”, to allow new practices, tools and skills to be developed. It exposes opportunity, expands our awareness and sheds light on what is true. Here are the unwritten rules for operating effectively with ambiguity for team members:

1. **Forget right and wrong.** Taking a risk without knowing all of the cards allows you to learn faster—although possibly not successfully, be ready to be wrong—and share your findings with others.
2. **Notice areas** that need action steps.
3. **Ask for clarification** if needed.
4. **Otherwise, step into action**, especially if the stakes are low.
5. **Be ready** for these barriers to learning and be ready to face them.

The Three Deadly Enemies of Innovation, Learning, and Risk

Take a look at how we as individuals block learning from failure:

1. **You were wrong.**

Many of us are paid to be right. We base our self-worth on it, and we incorporate this need to be right into how we value ourselves. Being wrong is unacceptable; it makes us feel less self-worth; it can scare us; it even affects our mood to the point of avoidance.

Antidote: make a group or team guideline that being wrong is part of getting it right, and agree to share failures and call them "learning". Reward effort.

2. **You lose face with others**

Again, we are paid to look good. If there is even a hint of distrust on a group or team, competition takes hold and self-preservation comes to the rescue.

Antidote: Conduct a "team check in". Allow each person to express their need for feedback or affirmation by asking each person to share their understanding of what they learned.

3. **You or others condemn a slipshod approach**

This is a slipshod approach. Slipshod methods create innovations, unless they added no learning value or the learning value was ignored or discounted. If the slipshod approach produced nothing, then discuss and discard. If there was added value, discuss and deploy.

Try having a discussion with your group to develop guidelines that will assure risk-taking, learning from failure and discarding approaches that won't work.

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