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Many of the things we need to know to be successful – to innovate, collaborate, solve problems, and identify new opportunities – aren't learned simply through schooling, training, or personal experience. Especially for today's knowledge-based work, much of what we need to know we learn from others' experiences, through what's called vicarious learning.

Organizations know this learning is important, which is why they invest significant resources in handbooks, protocols, formal mentoring programs, and knowledge management systems to share employees' experiences. Yet analyst estimates suggest that the companies in the *Fortune* 500 still lose a combined $31.5 billion per year from employees failing to share knowledge effectively. By trying to recreate the wheel, repeating others' mistakes, or wasting time searching for specialized information or expertise, employees incur productivity costs and opportunity costs for the organization. Because while formal systems might help communicate established best practices (the *what*), they often don't explain *how* an individual should apply them to their own work. As a manager for Bain & Co. summarized, this approach to knowledge management offers only "a picture of a cake without giving out the recipe."

As a result, employees rely on informal learning practices, such as shadowing or observing senior colleagues to "watch and learn" what they need to know. For instance, in a study of mobile phone manufacturing lines in China, Harvard Business School's Ethan Bernstein discovered that line workers often showed "tips and tricks" that others could copy in order to assemble phones more effectively than could be done using the official methods. (They were especially more likely to share these informal lessons when they weren't worried about over-scrutiny from managers.)

While this informal (and intuitive) approach can be effective, it is no longer reasonable to expect employees to simply "watch and learn" in many workplaces. Organizations across a variety of industries are moving away from work that is easily observed and replicated to work that is more nuanced, specialized, and adaptive. More and more of today's work is knowledge-based and done by people who are geographically dispersed. And success in this work requires being able to adapt knowledge to complex, changing environments. Yet our approach to vicarious learning has not kept pace; our ways of learning from others often assume that work is still watchable and that unobtrusively imitating others is enough.

Coactive vicarious learning

My research has explored an alternative to this "watch and learn" approach. Rather than one person shouldering the burden of absorbing knowledge by passively observing others, I posit that people can more effectively learn through collaborative, two-way interactions with others at work. Through *coactive* vicarious learning, the person learning and the person sharing knowledge work together to construct an understanding of an experience, which better equips the learner to apply it in their own work.

Instead of simply relying on visible results, interactive conversation and questioning allows the learner to understand the underlying reasons behind someone else's actions, making it easier to adapt what's learned to a new situation or task. For example, one study found that pharmaceutical development teams were better able to translate and learn from another team's past experience when they invited members of the other team — the "sharers" of knowledge — to actively participate in their discussion and problem-solving (vs. a "learner" team simply identifying the "sharer" team's knowledge and then trying to replicate it on their own).

Coactive vicarious learning breaks down the one-way nature of observational learning, so both parties — not just the observer — can benefit. The learner's questions and reactions can lead the sharer to rethink an assumption or understand an experience in a new way. It can even prompt a role reversal, where the learner contributes unique experience or knowledge that might help the sharer learn. In studies of MBA consulting project teams, I've found that when individuals engage in this more *reciprocal* vicarious learning, sharing past experiences and expertise with each other in turn (vs. only an expert sharing with a novice), they consistently receive higher client ratings on their performance.

Putting it into practice

While many teams probably engage in some degree of interactive learning already, there are several key steps leaders can take to help institutionalize coactive vicarious learning at work, so that people don't fall back solely on formal learning methods.

Leaders tend to place a disproportionate emphasis on tools like training materials or knowledge portals partly because they are easier to manage and control. It is less clear how to manage amorphous, interactive learning processes; you can't simply force coworkers to interact and share experiences. However, more often than not, leaders simply need to remove obstacles that discourage people from seeking or sharing knowledge and learning vicariously. They can create a structure that allows these interactions to take place organically by focusing on three steps:

Create a designated space for vicarious learning. Our environments directly affect how we interact. So it's important to consider how physical space (or virtual space for geographically dispersed teams) can facilitate vicarious learning. For instance, it might be more difficult to have a reciprocal, two-way sharing of experience in stuffy offices where one person is seated behind a big desk in the "more powerful" chair. Creating a common space that individuals recognize as the gathering place for sharing ideas and experiences lays the foundation for these interactions to unfold.

For example, members of air medical transport teams have to learn from each other's experiences to know how to transport a wide range of critically ill patients. In researching how they learn, I found that a disproportionate number of informal learning interactions took place in one physical space: near the helipad door. Despite having plenty of office space, this 10×15 ft. area became the unofficial, mutually-agreed-upon space for members to share and ask about prior experiences. (This space was a frequent stop during every shift, since it was near the supply room for restocking the aircraft.) Since everyone recognized this space was "in bounds" for these conversations, team members showed they were willing to either share or learn something simply by choosing to stand there.

Similarly, in pursuit of this type of designated space, when Google was designing its new corporate campus, it set out to encourage these learning conversations by planning for lots of small kitchen spaces, because they had discovered that people liked to mingle in these areas and share ideas.

License and endorse vicarious learning. Leaders should be encouraging employees to seek and share experiences often. This gives individuals license to seek out what they need to learn, without fear that they're being intrusive or bothersome — or that it will make them look bad. People often hesitate to ask others for help or advice because it requires admitting they don't know something important. So instead they work in isolation, redoing something that their colleagues may have already done or making similar mistakes.

Leaders can license vicarious learning by acknowledging and rewarding instances when people engage in interactive learning and recycle (rather than reinvent) a "wheel." For instance, managers at Siemens implemented a system of "points" for sharing knowledge and learning vicariously, similar to an airline mileage reward program. Managers can also encourage an open-door environment that welcomes employees to seek or share information — and helps dispel the notion that such behavior is bothersome.

Plant starter seeds of vicarious learning. Beyond creating the space and license for vicarious learning, leaders can encourage greater learning by jump-starting the process. This means leading by example: proactively sharing experiences with team members and setting aside time at the beginning of meetings for people to discuss challenges and problem solve together. Even one-off efforts, such as a team breakfast or "happy hour," can plant the seed for vicarious learning that can then grow into a more consistent practice.

Vicarious learning interactions are not a panacea for an organization's learning challenges. But it is an effective piece of the workplace learning portfolio, alongside formal efforts like training programs, feedback sessions, and knowledge management systems, and informal practices like mentoring and "trial-and-error" exercises. All of these approaches reinforce each other and promote greater learning. In fact, sequencing vicarious learning and experiential learning strategies together has been shown to improve performance compared to experiential learning alone, across a range of different tasks.

Whatever the sequence or strategy, this type of learning is critical for many organizations, and leaders play an important role in making it more systematic, frequent, and easier to deploy. Companies are sitting on far more knowledge and expertise than they realize. Creating the conditions that enable coactive vicarious learning is a central way to bring out the best a team or organization has to offer. As Lew Platt, the former chief executive of Hewlett-Packard (HP) famously lamented, "if only HP knew what HP knows, we would be three times more productive."

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