Eye drops for collective myopia?

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PHARMACY NEEDS TO MOVE FROM A SHORT-TERM REACTIVE APPROACH TO MEETING THE CHALLENGES IT FACES TO ONE THAT LEARNS FROM PAST ACTIONS AND LEADS TO FUNDAMENTAL REDESIGN OF ITS BUSINESS MODEL PARADIGMS.

Any attempt to change is difficult. When change requires a fundamental redesign of what needs to be done and how it’s done, history (and evolution) inform us that genuine adaptation is the preserve of a very few. Volumes have been written in the change management literature about managing change in the context of human organisations. The need for such volumes is simple: humans, and especially groups of humans, do not want to do it!

In the business setting, when environmental change arises, a drop in organisational performance often results. Most commonly, reactive change is implemented in an attempt to restore performance to acceptable (usually historical) levels. The changes implemented are usually directed at correcting immediate profit problems and, thus, are short-term and inwardly focussed. When profits are threatened, the action strategy of reducing operating costs is likely the most common reaction.

FUNDAMENTAL REDESIGN

However, if the environmental change is profound, it can be a signal that the entire game is changing—not just the rules of the old game. In this case, ‘fundamental redesign’ of what a business does and how it does it is the response needed. To achieve this requires innovation, not just reaction. While reducing operating costs can achieve a temporary need, it is rarely a sustainable pathway to the longer-term goal of building business value and shareholders equity. But if change is difficult, innovation is far more so.

Over many decades management researchers have been trying to get to the core of why it is that some organisations (or individuals) can manage to innovate and transform while most others are locked into an action reaction downward spiral.

The notable researchers Chris Agyris and Donald Schön focused on just this issue in trying to address the question: What causes organisations and people to behave as they do? To conduct their research, Agyris and Schön integrated themselves into actual organisations and examined how knowledge can be made ‘actionable’—the mechanism of effective organisational learning and successful business evolution.

EVIDENCE ABOUNDS OF SINGLE LOOP LEARNING, ORGANISATIONAL OVER-DEFENSIVENESS AND COLLECTIVE MYOPIA

Agyris observed two processes which he called ‘single loop learning’ and ‘double loop learning’. Single loop learning is simple and far more common, where feedback from previous actions or circumstances is used to alter future actions.

In the individual community pharmacy context, this can be seen when community Pharmacy A reacts to match the discount pricing strategy of Discount Pharmacy B. While effective for a while, it does place the organisation or individual in a reactive, or defensive state.

DOUBLE LOOP LEARNING

Double loop learning on the other hand, uses feedback from past actions and emerging circumstances to frame questions. These questions examine not only the nature of future actions but all of the underlying assumptions on which future decisions are to be made.

Double loop learning not only asks ‘What should we do next?’, but also ‘Why are we doing it?’, and even more importantly, ‘What else ought we be doing’?

When the business environment changes greatly, as it is for community pharmacy presently, a ‘fundamental redesign’ of the business model needs to be contemplated; that is, innovation is needed. Only by asking these questions can organisational learning become deep-rooted and truly effective. Double loop learning is the pathway to a complete game-change, not just a rule-change in the current game.

When single loop learning (action-reaction) is used consistently in a rapidly and profoundly changing environment, a culture of defensiveness builds. Defensiveness then becomes the prevalent way of seeing and doing almost everything. This in not only true of individual businesses but is also true of larger organisations, such as peak bodies and associations.
THE DEFENSIVE CULTURE

A defensive internal organisational culture not only has implications for the relationships the organisation has with its perceived competitor or aggressor, it also has profound implications for the people within the organisation. Initially, it generates conformity among organisational members, where disparate views are discouraged. ‘Loyal’ organisational members need to demonstrate a common view of the world.

As time passes, this top-down method of internal organisational engagement grows. Aygis called it the ‘machine bureaucracy’. In this culture, communication is nearly always downward from the ‘control’ levels to the members. When communication does flow upward, it is usually at a time and in a format determined by those in control. Indeed, the need for defensive control leads those at the top of the organisation to impose limitations on the actions of their members. Any communication from outside the organisation which does not agree with the defensive positioning, is generally rejected out of hand.

COLLECTIVE MYOPIA

When this defensive culture is embedded, it leads to another phenomenon described in the literature as ‘collective myopia’. This phenomenon occurs when conformity to the ongoing organisation is unquestionable. Reality becomes collective, where a ‘view of the world’ is only able to be observed through the lens of this collective reality. In this culture, the collective reality becomes the standard of judgement— or common sense—and determines what subjects, ideas and suggestions are permitted for free and open dialogue. Implicit rules govern what answers can be proffered to questions raised above such as ‘Why are we doing it?’, and, ‘What else ought we be doing?’. Community pharmacy is in a space that requires more double loop learning and innovation. Evidence abounds of single loop learning, organisational over-defensiveness and collective myopia.

How could it be that community pharmacy has left $100m of government funding for professional services unspent from the Fourth Agreement? How could the respected economist John Menadue be treated so abominably by our profession last year, for giving us his suggestions in answering the key questions raised above? How could it be that our profession cannot even speak of the possibility of professional pharmacist business models that deliver pharmaceutical care to needy patients, but without the need of a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme approval number for a pharmacy premises?

LEADERSHIP

Community pharmacists have been effectively lashed to the rack of the PBS supply chain. All new ‘pharmaceutical care’ inventions and innovations are embedded in it and come with the predictable premises-based conditions. If ever there was a time when effective leadership for all pharmacists is needed—it is now! Leadership can arise from within the profession—from within us all—by fearlessly and thoroughly engaging the key questions together in honest debate:

- What should we do next?
- Why are we doing it?
- What else ought we be doing? ■

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