

A Bigger Block of Concrete; Streetwise Lessons on Organisational Learning

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This is an article about organisational learning. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it's an article about how organisations fail to learn. Are you still with me? Good. You see this is definitely an article about the world in which you operate every day. The one in which you strive to have an impact and make a positive difference. And, since it's an article about learning, I have put my own learning points in boxes throughout the article. You may well identify some different ones of your own.

Our story begins with closure

Picture the scene. The next street up from mine used to be a through road. A few years ago, the council consulted with residents and closed one end to all vehicles, other than bicycles. So far, so good.

The closure was achieved by installing large wooden bollards, set in concrete, which block the road and also stop cars mounting the pavement to get through. The council also put in what's called a 'T' type turning head. To the non-expert, this is where the road is extended a little way to left and right, like the cross bar of a 'T', to allow vehicles to turn round using forward and reverse gears.

It was the bollards that first caught my eye. Soon after the road was closed, I noticed that two of them had been knocked out of the ground. My first thought was that they must have been physically man-handled by gangs of marauding youngsters. No longer satisfied with hanging around on street corners, I figured they had taken to dismantling them.



Over the months that followed I learned otherwise.

Learning Point

When something goes wrong, it's not always obvious why. Many people in organisations start with 'culprit thinking', looking for an individual or group of people to blame, but it's seldom helpful and very likely to lead down blind alleys.

Haven't we been here before?

It didn't just happen once. Not long after the bollards were repaired, each one set in a fresh block of concrete, the same thing happened again, and then again, and yet again. Each time it took weeks, often months, for the council to repair the damage. Every fix lasted a matter of days. This has happened at least five times during the course of a few years.

Learning Point

Some things organisations think are fixed aren't. If something keeps going wrong, you'd think it would be obvious that the solution isn't working. Yet it is clearly the case that people within organisations continually fail to recognise repeated failure. Worse, in time, they come to see dealing with ongoing failure as 'the work'.

As soon as I recognised that the problem was a recurring one, I began to look at it differently. I realised that it couldn't be kids doing this kind of damage, it would take too much force. And why always the same two bollards? You might think me a bit



slow, but it gradually dawned on me that it was vehicles that were causing the damage; drivers were reversing into the bollards and knocking them out of the ground. Ah, I thought, so the problem is bad driving. It is the customer that is to blame.

In light of my new theory, I wondered what could be done about this customer failing I felt I had pinpointed. I wondered about educating drivers, maybe putting up signs urging them to drive more carefully. But wouldn't they get annoyed if the council started doing this? After all, it's probably only a minority of drivers at fault; wouldn't it be tarring them all with the same brush?

Learning Point

Of course, blaming customers is another example of 'culprit thinking'. As we can see here, not only does it give very little to work on, it's very likely to lead organisations to take action that will antagonise and damage their relationship with customers. In the private sector, this could ultimately mean losing them. In the public sector, they are unhappy, probably think something like "bloody useless council", but they have no where else to go. In truth, when organisations conclude that the customer is the problem, it's almost always time to think again.

Designed to fail

In fact, I still wasn't seeing the whole picture. On reflection, looking more closely at the context, I began to see that the problem lay not with the drivers; it lay in the design of the road closure itself. It was, in fact, the fault of the provider.

Watching people using it, I could see that the turning head did not allow enough space for vehicles, especially large ones, like delivery lorries and refuse wagons, to pull into one side of the 'T' and then back up into the space on the other side. It was extremely difficult for them to do anything other than reverse back towards the bollards and risk hitting them.



Learning Point

Performance of any service, product or machine is first and foremost determined by its design. In this case, although car drivers could, with effort, avoid damaging the bollards, for larger vehicles it was pretty much unavoidable. Failure to take account of the whole system, considering the needs of all road users, not just residents, meant it had been designed to fail. The only alternative for these drivers was to 'work round' the problem and reverse all the way back down the street instead. Our lives, inside and outside work, are filled with far more of these 'work rounds' than we realise.

Failing to learn...

Interestingly this fundamental design fault was exacerbated by the fact that the bollards are set up close to the kerbside. Set them further back and the drivers of most vehicles would hit the kerb and realise that they need to stop before hitting the



bollards. Fitting the wrong size turning head is no doubt expensive to rectify, but taking this alternative course of action would effectively 'turn off' the problem, along with all the associated ongoing repairs costs, relatively easily and inexpensively.

Yet whenever the team of in-house council contractors turned up to fix the damage, they never set the bollards further back. They just put them back the way they were, only using a bigger

block of concrete each time. Perhaps they were different workmen each time, and didn't know it was recurring problem. Still, I found it hard to believe that employees steeped in day-to-day experience couldn't understand what was happening in this instance, or how to respond for the best.

Maybe they did know, I thought. But to get paid and keep their jobs they had to follow the job specification and do what they had been told by those who commission the works, managers distant from the work, who didn't know the problem and probably wouldn't listen to the employees who did.

I contacted the council to check.

Learning Point

Understanding problems in order to learn a better way requires a thorough knowledge of performance; what is happening and why. If they are to get to the root of problems and learn what they need to know to effectively lead improvement efforts, managers must be prepared to go and see for themselves how systems and processes are working. When they are there, they must also ask good questions of those employees who know what is happening day-to-day, making sure to listen to the answers.

...or learning to fail

The people responsible for commissioning repairs confirmed my analysis of the problem. They even explained, unprompted, how one solution would be to reposition the wooden bollards back from the kerbside. And yet, it still hasn't happened. Every time a team of council workmen turns up to fix the problem, all they do is put things back the way they were before.



Learning Point

It is entirely possible for people in an organisation to 'know' something, to have learned what they need to learn, and still fail to act on that learning effectively.

I needed to know why they didn't make the changes necessary to 'turn off' this recurring problem. Could it be that they had mistaken putting things back the way they were before as being the same as making improvements? I had seen this in other organisations. Was this the way they saw the problem here?

I went back to them and asked. I was told that the bollards were a 'maintenance' issue and that the council could probably save lots of money in this area if they only had enough in the first place to be able to 'invest to save'. In short, it was their strongly held belief that it would be necessary to continue to employ fixes that don't work, to keep wasting money in other words, until there was sufficient money available to stop behaving this way.

Learning Point

We view the world through frames, mental models that determine how we think and act moment to moment. These frames usually matter more than 'the facts' in any given situation. So, if managers believe it is impossible to make improvements without first spending more money than they currently have, then in all likelihood we will have to wait a long time before we see improvements.

The cost of failing to learn

Finally, not far from this road closure is another one that uses the same kind of turning head. You have guessed it. Several bollards have clearly been hit by vehicles here as well. The same ones again. No doubt, the problem with the wooden bollards is occurring in neighbourhoods throughout the city, wherever this design has been employed.



Learning Point

In life we put great store by the value of learning from experience. But in organisations the opportunities to learn in this way are often severely limited. Employees rarely experience directly the results of their decisions. The designers of this road closure could well be unaware what has been happening with their design. Having done their bit, they passed it on to someone else to build, while others have the job of maintaining it.

Consider for a moment the losses: ongoing repair costs multiplied many times over; annoyed drivers, damaged vehicles and delayed deliveries; council employees engaged in pointless, ineffective work; dissatisfied and frustrated residents looking out on the eyesore of broken and uprooted bollards for months on end, repeatedly chasing the council to do something about it; the list goes on.

This is what happens when organisations fail to learn. And I can't help wondering just how big those blocks of concrete are going to get.



I hope you enjoyed this article. In my work, I seek to help my clients hear their customers and then do something positive about it. Working together, we frequently address challenges like the ones described here.

To learn more about my work, visit www.davidallenconsultancy.co.uk.