Leadership Lab (R)

Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.

> Feedback is the breakfast of champions.
>
>   Ken Blanchard

> There is no failure. Only feedback.
>
>   Robert Allen

> It takes humility to seek feedback. It takes wisdom to understand it, analyze it and appropriately act on it.
>
>   Stephen Covey

> Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.
>
>   Benjamin Franklin

Idea in Brief

Feedback is critical to continuous improvement, personal growth, satisfaction and engagement. And while providing feedback that is timely, meaningful, and complete is hard to do, it will underpin the ability of every organization to compete in the rapidly changing world of business into the future. Those leaders that embrace this fact will reap the benefits of the changing business environment and will attract talent to their firms and survive into the future.

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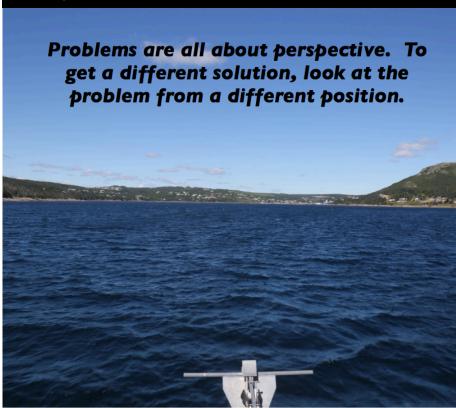www.facebook.com/BLJanke/

Reinforcement Learning
By B.L. Janke

For the last several weeks, I have been studying Artificial Intelligence and specifically, Machine Learning and the concept of Deep Learning. And for a lot of reasons, this technology is exciting and can shape the future of how we interact with technology and to lead. One concept that struck me like the proverbial hammer is the concept of reinforced learning. This concept is as the name implies, is that in a "supervised" way, a human, or agent, intervenes after the computer completes a task to provide some input, correction or reinforcement to the computer so that it can learn faster. To optimize the learning experience/capability of the computer algorithm, the reinforcement of the neural network connections needs to occur as close to the computer action that requires the correction or reinforcement as possible. If the corrective action is taken after multiple tasks or activities that the computer has done, the algorithm has a much more difficult time learning because it does not

know which action created the problem in the first place. Therefore, it does not know where to correct the algorithm.

I found this concept utterly fascinating as it reminded me immediately of working with people and the need for quality leadership in the workplace. It reminded me fundamentally of the discussions regarding feedback that have been occurring in management literature for 50 years (or more) and the importance of ensuring feedback is timely, clear and complete. If feedback is held and saved up until the regular annual or mid-year review time frame, it is no longer timely, and as a result, the employee is often left with feelings of bewilderment and disappointment. And also, because of this, it is difficult for the employee to learn, just like the machine learning example from above. However, if feedback occurs regularly, is immediate, clear, and complete, the opportunity for the employee to learn,

Problems are all about perspective. To get a different solution, look at the problem from a different position.

improve and drive further business improvements is multiplied. The employee feels better about themselves because they get immediate feedback about improvement opportunities rather than waiting for six months for the next formal feedback session and the organization benefits with more timely and better results. After all, the employee is getting more and more correct results faster. And lastly, the leader-employee relationship improves as trust between the two of them grows.

What is also interesting in both the human-centric world and the machine learning world is that reinforcement learning is hard to do! It takes effort and especially discipline

for it to work well; in both cases. Some technical challenges in the machine learning space make reinforcement learning stretched to accomplish today, and so continues to be the focus of research. But also to be fair, it has been hard to do in the human-centric space as well. Even though business literature and management speakers continue to espouse the efficacy of timely, clear and complete feedback, there continues to be a shortage of quality feedback in most organizations. For a variety of reasons, this process continues to be overlooked or ignored because of the emotional challenges it can bring. It would be most unfortunate if researchers address the machine learning

challenges of reinforcement learning before there is widespread acceptance and application of the same thing in the human-centric world. However, those leaders that embrace quality feedback for their people assets will reap the rewards yet unseen in their organizations that will have multiplier effects in many different ways as well, least of which would be the attraction of high-quality talent.

It has been said that the pace of change will never again be as slow as it is today. And to adapt to this ever-increasing rate of change in the business environments, organizations need to look for different leadership models and paradigms to help them navigate the new reality.

Discipline, empowerment and decentralized leadership are ways to adapt to the new business reality. They are not new concepts, but for those that adopt them quickly will enjoy the benefits faster, and will maybe survive in the radical transformative business environment we all seem to find ourselves in. More than lip-service needs to be paid to these concepts if companies are to survive in the future. The rapid adoption of these concepts and ideas is a business imperative like no other ever experienced in business today.

Decentralized leadership is the only way that organizations can adapt to the rapidly changing realities of today's business environment and tomorrow's future. A traditional hierarchical structure cannot hope to survive in the rapidly changing environment of the present, let alone the future. If endorsements and decisions have to continually be run up the organization for approval and then run back down for implementation, organizations will not be able to keep pace with the rapidly changing business environment. In some companies, endorsements can pass through one hundred sets of hands before the decision is finally made. This organizational complexity is utterly unsustainable in the current business environment, let alone the future.

Regardless of how flat the organization is, the knowledge and insight needed to make these decisions quickly can no longer be centralized in one position or one role. The decision-making cannot be concentrated into committees and councils either as this is often inefficient and degrades to the lowest common denominator approach to decision making. And still, other organizations confuse collaboration as consensus adding further complexity and obscurity to the decision-making rights of decision-makers. What is needed is decentralized leadership that understands the business well, acts aligned with the goals and objectives of the organization, and is empowered to make the decisions necessary to accomplish the organizational goals. Individuals within work teams must also be allowed to do the same things within their spheres of influence and with their work scope.

To be effective, organizations employing decentralized leadership must empower their leaders, within appropriate frameworks, and then relentlessly communicate with them about the business, changing conditions, and goals and objectives. Communication is part of the remedy to the rapidly changing business environment and a pivotal discipline to empowering leaders to take advantage of

decentralized leadership. No longer can leaders have all the answers to all the questions figured out as part of an annual integrated strategy that then can be rolled out to the broader enterprise once a year. Instead, the plan will become one of a fluid framework with clarity on the outcomes that are trying to be achieved. And to this framework, additional insights and information can be added as they are discovered, or needed, in a precise and expedient manner. The structure is essential, as is the fluidity and the ability to attach additional details to the established framework. The framework needs to be flexible and resilient that allows new information to be incorporated on an ongoing basis and with a minimum of rework. This framework becomes part of the role of leaders to continually communicate the structure, desired outcomes and any updated insights needed to their team. When leaders are trained well, understand the strategic imperatives and desired outcomes, they will likely make the correct decisions to accomplish the required goals. When parts of this formula are missing, it should be no surprise that some of the choices leaders make may be misaligned with the overall objectives. When the framework and desired outcomes are clear, then the decentralized leadership can

absorb the newly available information as needed and adjust the tactics in the field to accommodate the latest news on an almost real-time basis. A key to making this work is, obviously, ongoing communication.

Communication is one of those activities that we often ask ourselves if we are doing enough. A good rule of thumb is that if you are asking that question, you are likely not doing enough. And the metrics of our past do not give enough insight as to what is needed either. In the rapidly changing environment we find ourselves in, one thing is clear; communication is a remedy for the uncertainty that change brings. Even if you are the source of the change that is being implemented in your business, communication is critical. The channels and modes of communication that are open to us are expanding as well. And the technology that is available to us through which communication can occur should be fully leveraged. From internal social media platforms, emails, webcasts, town-halls, and focus groups, leveraging technology and multiple channels provides additional tools in the communication toolkit. The key is to develop and use all these tools in an integrated way to drive alignment and adoption of new ideas and to listen and obtain feedback from others.

It may feel like there isn't time enough to communicate in the manner that you desire (either in quantity or fashion) in these rapidly changing times, but that is what is needed. Creating discipline around this one activity is critical for organizational success and transformational change.

Discipline is a requirement to leverage decentralized leadership and workplace empowerment. However, for some discipline may seem like an anathema to achieving the desired results. Still, it is because of the discipline that leaders demonstrate that decentralized leadership and empowerment work. "Within discipline," as Jocko Willink often says, "is freedom." If an organization eschews discipline, there is no basis and no framework from which leaders can make decisions in the field. A complete breakdown of standardization will occur, leaders will make their own decisions for the good of the situation that they can see and enterprise anarchy will result. And there will likely be little to no collaboration or alignment on how goals and objectives will be accomplished. It is with discipline that integration occurs and that the right targets are met in the right way at the right time. Discipline doesn't destroy individualism either, nor mute the entrepreneurial spirit of the enterprise. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. In a

disciplined environment, it is evident how improvements can be made and applied or deviations to the standard authorized and approved. Discipline makes sure that the best practices and better ideas in one location can be used to the maximum impact and effect across the entire enterprise and not just within a local organization or business unit. Discipline is what drives organizational cohesiveness and builds trust across the organization primarily through the alignment that leaders demonstrate to the enterprise objectives. Discipline creates the framework and provides the freedom to succeed.

There is a better way to lead that will transform how people contribute and the results that organizations achieve. There is no magic potion that will do this. It is simply applying principles that we already know and demonstrating a relentless discipline to do so. There is no telling what can be accomplished when we treat people with respect and create a culture where everyone is valued and appreciated for the work that they do.