

Chapter 4

Improvisational Self– Directed Learning: Leveraging Psychological Capital and Exercising Human Agency

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary organizations are characterized as complex and continually changing as a result of global competition, technological advances, and fluctuating consumer expectations. Flourishing within continually changing environments requires professionals with the capacity to thrive within a dynamic context. Developing the capacity to think and act quickly is important and doing so with competency and character is paramount. Becoming an effective organizational professional requires proficiency in improvisational self-directed learning. Improvisational self-directed learning describes people who can solve novel and surprising problems, create value from fortuitous events, and take action without preplanning. The exercise of human agency, bolstered by strong psychological capital, which includes self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, is presented as the foundation for self-directed improvisational learning.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational life in the contemporary global marketplace is characterized by constant change and continual technological advancement, which requires new and improved ways to connect, communicate, and achieve organizational goals. In order to keep pace with these new opportunities, organizations need avid learners who thrive in dynamic environments. Developing the capacity to think and act quickly is important and doing so with competency and character is paramount. In other words, effective organizational professionals need to be proficient improvisational self-directed learners.

Improvisational self-directed learners are individuals who solve surprising problems, create value from unexpected opportunities, and take action with minimal forethought and without preplanning; their behaviors are tailored to specific context; and knowledge creation is idiosyncratic to a particular time

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and place (Boudreau & Robey, 2005). Improvisational self-directed learning is particularly important for success within organizational environments that are rapidly changing as a result of global competition, shifting expectations, increasing demands, and technological advancement. Improvisational self-directed learning builds upon prior learning and expertise while stimulating creative and innovative action. Improvisational self-directed learners possess strong psychological capital, exercise human agency, and contribute to the development of thriving learning communities. Improvisational self-directed learners draw from a broad repertoire of skills and flourish within positive, psychologically safe, organizational environments. In this chapter, improvisation is introduced along with psychological capital, including self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. The exercise of human agency, bolstered by strong psychological capital, is also presented as a foundation for self-directed improvisational learning.

IMPROVISATION

Various researchers have used improvisation in music and theatre as a metaphor to describe organizational behavior (e.g., Barrett, 2012; Dupree, 1992). In order to glean valuable insights about the nature of improvisational behavior in organizations, Weick (1998) argues it is important to understand the process of improvisation, which “works without a prior stipulation, it works with the unexpected” (p. 544). Improvisational behavior is spontaneous, novel, and creates something new; there is a sense that improvisation occurs in the spur of the moment, using intuition, and with on-the-spot spontaneity (Weick, 1998). Tyler and Tyler (1990) describe improvisation as action taken without foresight, without pre-planning, and without control of the present or future. Berliner (1994) states, “Improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relations to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation” (p. 241).

People draw on pre-existing skills and prior knowledge when improvising (Berliner, 1994; Metcalf, 1986; Moorman & Minor, 1998). According to Weick (1998), “improvisation does not materialize out of thin air” (p. 546). Improvisation emerges out of activities that are controlled but not predetermined (Mangham & Pye, 1991). The rules and routines that are preestablished and well rehearsed in an organization provide a foundation upon which individuals and groups effectively engage in improvisational behavior (Vera & Crossan, 2005). The connected themes of order and improvisation (Weick, 1998) underscore the value of prior routines and prior knowledge on improvisational behavior and processes (Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995; Hatch, 1997; Weick, 1993, 1996). Yet, if these organizational rules and routines, like prearranged music, block learning, they can be detrimental to the development of improvisational behavior (Barrett, 2012). Improvisational behavior occurs as people “explore the very edge of their comfort zone, to stretch their learning into new and different areas” (Barrett, 2012, p. xi).

Today’s business environment is increasingly dynamic (Wind & Mahajan, 1997) with faster product development cycle times (Griffin, 1997), higher innovation levels (Olson, Walker, & Ruekert, 1995), and less time for advanced planning (Moorman & Miner, 1998). In this type of dynamic and changing context, the gap between composing and performing as well as between planning and implementing is narrow, and the narrower the gap, the more improvisational employee behavior becomes (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Improvisational behavior “enables managers to continuously and creatively adjust to change” (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998, p. 33).

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