

GET OUT AND LEARN!

BY GERT WILLEM HAASNOOT

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Aristotle (384-322 B.C)

In 2005 I worked with a firm called KPMG. In that year, I got an assignment from the Dutch Ministry of Defense. They wanted us to train professionals to become managers. These were people without any managerial experience. Immediately, I had to think of my time with Randstad, another big Dutch company.

When I was promoted from intermediary to manager at that company, my director congratulated me, gave me the keys to my office and his telephone number and said, most emphatically, “If you have any questions, call me.” In the following weeks, as a new manager with twenty-five subordinates, I experienced the thrill of learning by doing. Now I decided to give the professionals at the Ministry of Defense the same experience. So I made them managers for a few weeks, not with the Ministry itself but with another company. In just a few weeks, they had to connect with their new subordinates and prove their worth as a manager. Of course I assigned coaches to them, senior managers with coaching skills. Most of the participants succeeded gloriously in their new role, one failed miserably, and two did nothing and got away with it.

If you want to teach someone what water is, you can give him a description of water, supplementing it with a photo. You can also give him a bucket filled with water. Now your student can feel the water with his own hand, experiencing it in a safe way. That is not what we do when we try to teach people what water is. No, we just throw them into a pool! Of course with their consent! This way we make them really experience water: the cold, the sensation of floating, their fear of drowning, the joy of learning to swim, and the fun of experiencing something new. Of course, we have to take care that the student does not drown, and that he does not become afraid of water. We always have a Gripping Hook to pull him out.

EMOTIONALLY CHARGED

From recent psychological research we know that our brain “resists” objective self-evaluation by using beautiful mechanisms like, among others, attribution, selective memory and rationalization, and thus reduces cognitive dissonance. Training people by having them reflect upon themselves only helps them to replace one smokescreen for another, because fundamentally we are not able to know ourselves very well. We need to have a positive image of ourselves, and to see ourselves as choosing, smart individuals liked by others. We

also know that the best learning experiences are the ones that are emotionally charged, and that our motivation to learn grows when the stuff we learn is of immediate use to us. Our brain gets sharp and is in learning modus when it has something to win or lose, and when the situation is new and challenging. We watch others, copy them, try new things, reflect on the effect of our behavior, thus creating new behavioral patterns to achieve our goals, maybe, along the way, even discovering new talents - and when we're successful - enlarging our self esteem.

Knowing this, we started a company called "The Curious Network", creating learning experiences based on three criteria:

- You learn by doing something in a real situation in which there is something to win or lose.
- You do this in a situation that is new for you.
- You learn something new using the talents and skills that you have already acquired.

We chose to focus on one branch, the government, so all the participants in our programs are civil servants. In one of our first programs, P2P-advisory, we challenged them to do a real advisory assignment for a company outside the government on a topic they had no prior knowledge of. This way they could not fall back on already acquired knowledge. Their advice had to be sound and of value to the receiving organization. Of course, this was evaluated together with the client. In the course of the last eight years, 300 civil servants have successfully advised companies like the Red Cross, Tata Steel and Philips on

topics they knew nothing about. They learned entrepreneurial skills, client-centered thinking, how to sell themselves, and to be more creative, more relation-orientated and more self-confident. Along the way, we ourselves learned how to keep people in the learning mood even when an assignment failed. You can learn a lot from failure, if you are courageous enough.

A DEEPER LEVEL

In 2014, we wanted to know whether our way of training people was really as successful as we thought. So we put our learning program P2P-advisory up for scientific research. In total 132 former participants were interviewed and their learning experiences analyzed for a Master Thesis. The result of the study: people had learned on a deeper level, and not only their behavior but also their attitudes and beliefs had changed. Just as important, most of them felt more confident about themselves. They had tasted real success!

So, in our experience-economy, learning by doing seems the way to go. Of course, there are pitfalls and challenges in this way of learning. It makes more demands on our capability and motivation to learn and on our guts to leave our comfort zone. That kind of learning situation is less controlled. But slowly we learn to cope with these challenges. We learn that by doing.

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