



Unlearning: Breaking Old Patterns To Make New Ones

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CAPLOR HORIZONS RIPPLE PAPERS

...creating ripples of change



Learning differently

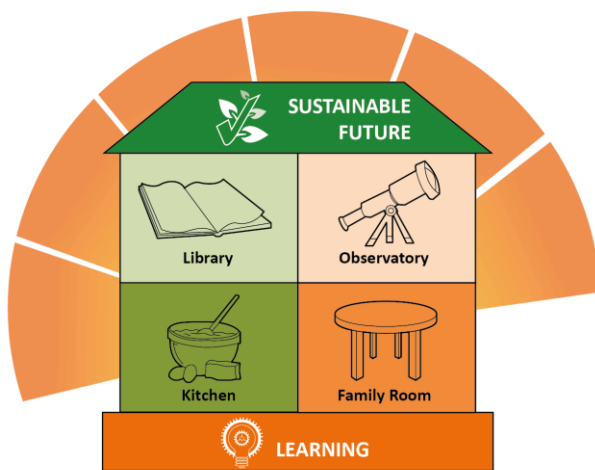
Thinking differently

Acting differently

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Unlearning – A vital process in transformational change

INTRODUCTION



What do we mean by unlearning?

Learning is the foundation of the Caplor House – it is the basis for all development.

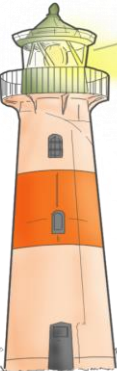
The ability to learn effectively is a fundamental leadership requirement and a vital skill as we work towards creating a more sustainable future.

However, in order to learn, sometimes you have to 'unlearn'. How can we help people to let go of old habits and beliefs in order to make this positive move?

THE IMPORTANCE OF PATTERNS

Whether we are working as coaches, trainers or facilitators we are in a process of helping individuals to create new patterns, or to break (or re-shape) old ones. These patterns may be of behaviour (individuals or groups responding in familiar ways when faced with similar situations), of thought (following a trusted type of thinking such as an analytical, step-by-step problem-solving process), or in relationships (such as one individual assuming control over others, the same individuals forming predictable alliances, or key players engaging in repeated argument).

Organisations develop patterns too: 'The way we do things around here'. These patterns are played out and reinforced in organisational culture, in the recruitment process that encourages managers to employ and promote people in their own image, in the rules and operating guidelines that are in place and in that shared, organisational wisdom that says: "This is what works....do it like this."

A simple line drawing of a lighthouse with a red and white striped body and a lantern room at the top. A yellow beam of light from the lantern room illuminates the text to its right.

Transforming an organisation requires those driving the change to hold many of these established patterns in the **spotlight**, so that they can be challenged and, if appropriate, thrown out and replaced.

PATTERN RECOGNITION AND EVALUATION

The first stage is pattern recognition. Many of these patterns are so firmly established that they are no longer conscious. Those involved in transformation need to be sensitised to the patterns, become aware of their impact and results, and accept that they do exist.

The second stage is to challenge the patterns. The purpose of this is to identify whether these patterns of thought or behaviour are helping to achieve the organisation's desired outcomes:

- Are they effective in moving the organisation in the desired direction?
- Is this pattern successful, but only at the expense of something else that might also be important?

This stage is one of 'pattern evaluation' and requires the facilitator to "hold firm" and confront discrepancies in the group – for example, discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal communication, discrepancies between what is said in the formal session and in informal dialogue, or discrepancies between what is agreed in principle and what is actually put into practice!

MOVING FROM PRESENT TO FUTURE ORIENTATION

Following pattern evaluation, the third stage - for those driving transformation - is to choose which patterns to keep and reinforce and which to break and eliminate. At this point, our aim is to move from a focus on the present into planning for the future – the stage that facilitators refer to as "movement to action".

This involves the clarification of goals and the selection and rehearsal of more effective patterns that will bring about real change.

"UNLEARNING"

The process sounds - and is - simple. However, at both a personal and organisational level it can be incredibly hard to go through.

Why? Because unlearning, letting go of things that have been successful for us in the past and challenging deeply held beliefs is an uncomfortable, even frightening thing to do.

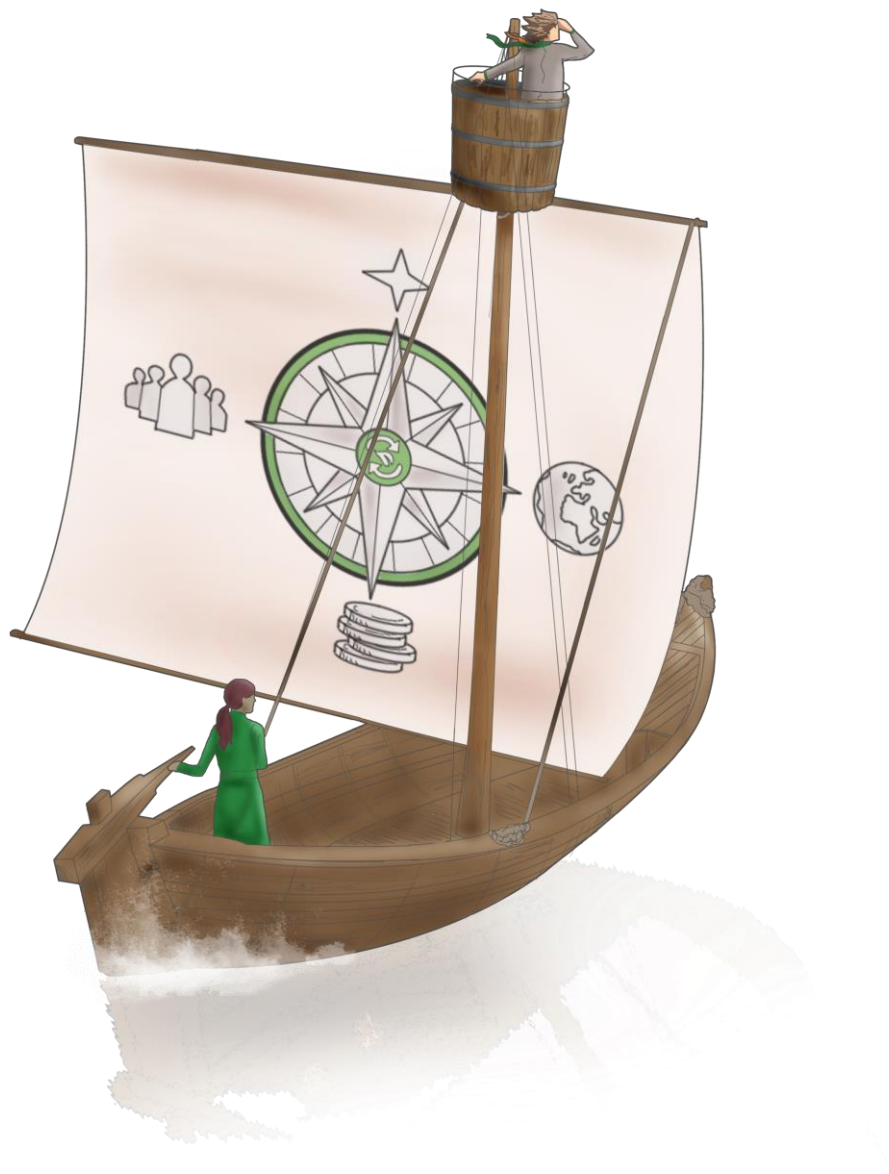
Especially when some of the patterns are so deeply ingrained that we don't even know we have them!

TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONS

Transformational change doesn't happen if we simply tinker around with systems and procedures.

If we are to make genuine transformations in organisations we have to go right back to the underlying patterns and assumptions that cause the organisation to do what it does. We need to question everything we think we know with a range of questions from "Why?" to "What if...?"

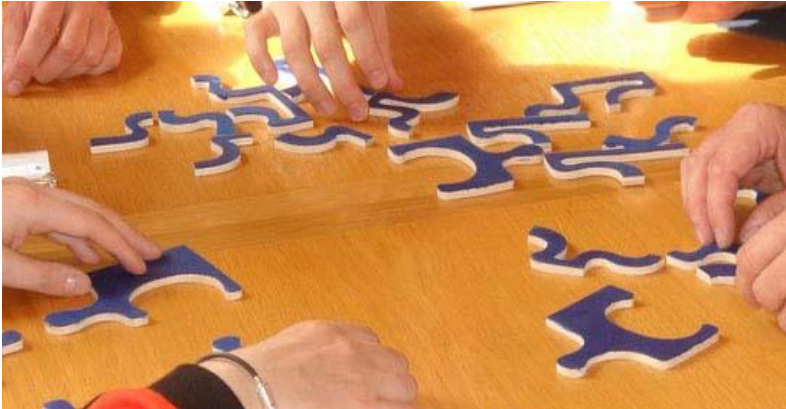
We also need to acknowledge the emotional attachment we have to patterns that have served us well, find ways of preserving them and their inherent value so that they are available should we find appropriate uses for them, but acknowledge that we no longer need them because our world has moved on.



A PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION

In order to demonstrate how we need to unlearn in order to transform, I use a memorable, practical experience. Participants are asked to complete an apparently simple jigsaw puzzle.

The component pieces are poured into a pile on the table and the instructions are simply to 'make the puzzle.'



People work through a predictable pattern:

They turn all the pieces over so that the right side is showing.

They look for corners and straight edges.

They connect pieces that seem to fit together.

Then they hit a problem.

However much they try, they cannot fit the pieces together in the conventional way that they were expecting. Their existing pattern of belief and behaviour doesn't work and they need to break it and do something different.

It is surprising how long it takes for them to find the solution that 'transforms' their way of working and also how much many people resist applying the solution even when they have identified it.

At the end of the exercise we explore the learning process that was involved.

Learners always highlight how strong the known patterns are and how they automatically fall into a known way of working. They describe the 'unconscious' process of turning and sorting the pieces and the assumptions they make about what the final puzzle will look like.

They discuss the uncertainty and anxiety of experimenting with something new and the reluctance to accept that known solutions might no longer be appropriate.

They also comment, frequently, on how they may not experiment with something new because they don't want to be seen as offering a ridiculous suggestion.

However, they recognize that is exactly what is required to create an innovative, transformational idea.

Caplor Horizons – Background

Established in 2014, Caplor Horizons is an independent charity. We work with other charities and responsible businesses and now have over 50 Advisors. These are outstanding people that bring specialist knowledge and experience. They contribute their time on a voluntary basis, or at reduced rates, so that Caplor Horizons can provide high quality and distinctive services at an accessible cost.

Working locally, nationally and internationally, we help other organisations think differently about themselves and the new horizons that they face. We support them in strengthening their leadership, renewing their strategy and improving their influence.

We want to encourage and assist a new generation of organisations that are committed to making a positive and lasting impact. We believe that if we are to achieve real, sustainable change, we need to inspire and enable people to learn differently, think differently and act differently.

Our vision is: *A world where leaders deliver a sustainable future for all*

Our purpose is: *To be courageous, compassionate and creative in facilitating transformational change*

Our values are:

- **Courage** – We are courageous change makers committed to challenging assumptions, taking risks and having difficult conversations
- **Compassion** – We are open, understanding and heartfelt, encouraging the nourishment of our whole selves and others
- **Creativity** – We learn, think and act differently, and are innovative and resilient in an ever-changing world

Our beliefs are:

- Through diversity we ignite dynamic innovation
- Collaboration helps achieve greater impact
- Everyone matters
- We are all leaders in our individual and collective ways
– we are all change makers!
- Learning is more effective if it is fun, engaging and creative
- Building on people's strengths creates greater resilience

Our strategic goals:

- Goal 1: Transforming Leadership
- Goal 2: Strengthening Resilience
- Goal 3: Increasing Collaboration

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