

Practice, not best practice

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Mike Levy talks exclusively to management thinker Henry Mintzberg.

When someone tells you that his method will save a huge amount of your training budget you may be forgiven for being sceptical. But when that person is Professor Henry Mintzberg, you are apt to listen. Mintzberg is one of the very big names in management theory and practice – author of seminal works on strategy and structures. Now he is talking a lot about his organisation Coaching Ourselves which, he says in his characteristically diffident way, “Looks like it might be right for the times. You can do more than you have ever done with a fraction of the budget. And aren't you tired of sending people to programmes and coming back with little or nothing to show?”

Inspiration

Mintzberg's big idea is to assemble small groups of managers meeting in their own time and place of work. They gather for around 90 minutes to do nothing but learn. What do they learn? “Each session is structured to follow conceptual material developed by leading thinkers such as David Ulrich and Michael Beer”. He could also have included himself, a passionate advocate for humanity in business – he is the author of 'Managers, not MBAs' after all.

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Human scale is very important to this Canadian professor. “We don't let the group come with laptops – everything has to be pen and paper. They discuss and reflect on how the topic impacts on them; they learn from each other and – most crucially – develop actions for their own workplace.” The bad news for readers is that the system does not

People Management/Informal Learning/Mintzberg on Management Practice

need trainers, facilitators, coaches or any other intermediaries. – this is good, rather old-fashioned, self-directed action learning.

Community is key

Coaching Ourselves is exciting this prolific author who has a strong social conscience and a withering response to our current capitalist system. He has been the bête noire of the bankers and get-rich-quick business merchants who he sees as destroyers of real wealth. He believes there is nothing more human than a group of peers who have a common interest in learning and applying what they have learnt to their everyday work. His favourite word seems to be 'community'. His aim is to encourage communities of learners who are all participants in thinking through new strategies where they are needed. I ask if the message is getting through – is he pushing against open doors? "I push against doors that are already open."

It is so Mintzberg to democratise learning and eschew guru-dom and 'best practice' which he says, is simply the best practice for other people, not necessarily you. "We don't encourage people to ask: 'why can't we do what they do. The key is the learning process itself – that helps develop ideas and practices which are right for your business."

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The idea of a learning group of self-motivated peers sounds attractive but can it not lead to introspective navel gazing? "No, the materials bring in the outside world – the latest thinking on business and management. But the key is not to simply learn about cutting-edge concepts, but crucially, how those ideas can be put into practice there and then."

The learning groups are meant to have a long shelf life: some have been going for over two years which is right because Mintzberg asserts that we never stop (nor should we stop) learning.

Problems and solutions within the business world

Excited by his coaching organisation, Mintzberg is never far away from being angry or frustrated about the world as it is. "People in Wall Street and the City have grabbed, even hijacked so much of the economy for their own benefit. This is terribly destructive. The building of communities is the way to enhance the lot of business people and especially in poor countries. There is a lot of work being done in Africa and I am hopeful it will bear fruit. As trainers and coaches we do bear some responsibility to help build a better future, one less dominated by greed. The world is driven by financial greed and economic dogma – one controls the earth's resources and the others are its apologists. This attitude tries to destroy or negate human behaviour – we are being reduced to human resources or what some airlines call, 'self-loading cargo'. Globalisation focuses on the economic and assumes that social benefits will follow obediently behind. All the evidence seems to point that it is the other way round – globalisation weakens our social structures – and undermines our democratic institutions. It is throwing our society off balance."

Clearly a passionate advocate of stressing the H in HR, Mintzberg has recently published his book simply titled, "Managing". Unlike many other management books that are either too folksy or dry, this work is full of passion for change through learning, the development of sustainable but human-scale structures and a plea to hear the individual's voice in all the white noise of global trading. His methods may do more than save money; they may even help save the world.