

The competitive imperative of learning

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Most executives believe flawless execution guarantees high levels of customer satisfaction and good financial performance. But an excessive focus on execution inhibits the ability of employees to learn and innovate. It also prevents experimentation and reflection.

The author recommends a different approach to execution, which she calls "Execution as learning". In this approach, the focus is not so much on making sure a process is carried out as on helping it evolve.

In Execution as learning, the focus is not on getting things done more efficiently than competitors. It is on learning faster. Employees must absorb new knowledge while executing. They often sacrifice short term efficiency to gain insight into and respond to novel problems.

Step 1: Provide process guidelines: The path to execution as learning starts with establishing standard processes. But the goal is not so much to produce efficiency as to facilitate learning. The process guidelines are arrived at using best practices gathered from experts, publications and competitors. Standard processes simplify routine action and highlight discrepancies that suggest the need for further process improvement.

Step 2: Provide tools that enable employees to collaborate in real time. Knowledge work often requires people to collaborate in real time to solve unforeseen, novel or complex problems.

Step 3: Collect process data: Data is collected to serve as the input for the next stage of the learning process.

Step 4: Institutionalize disciplined reflection: The goal of collecting process data is to understand what is working and what is not and to prevent failures from recurring. Disciplined reflection helps a company to move forward. However, it takes productive resources offline. So many managers see this as lost productivity. But they should realize that without this slack time, it will be difficult to achieve and sustain excellence.

When managers empower people instead of controlling them, focus on asking the right questions instead of providing the right answers and believe in flexibility rather than blind adherence to the process, they move to a higher form of execution. In this kind of an environment, people will know that their ideas are welcome. They will keep looking for ways to lower costs and improve quality.