THE RATE OF LEARNING

“For any organism to survive, its rate of learning must be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change in the environment” - Reg Revan

Let’s think of the South African nation as an organism and then apply Revan’s wisdom to it. For the South African nation to survive, its rate of learning must be equal to, or greater than, the rate of change in the environment. How are we doing as learners?

Since the rate and quality of change and growth in our institutions (which ultimately goes a long way in determining the quality of life in modern societies) are largely determined by the leaders of our institutions, how good are our leaders as learners? Reading or listening to the news about Zimbabwe, HIV-AIDS, the crime situation, accountability in government departments (budgets not spent), the brain-drain and more, we often feel very frustrated about the seemingly unwillingness from leaders to learn from the past or from others’ advice. What seems to be obvious to the outsider is for some mysterious reason not so obvious to the key decision maker? Is the situation more complex than what we assume, is it nothing but hidden agendas of personal interest, or is the leader a slow or unwilling learner?

Even in the most forgivable scenario – assuming moral character but complex challenges with good arguments on both sides – the real test is the willingness to stay open to new insights and new wisdom. Good insights on one day can be bad ideas on another. If a leader is not willing to learn, he can quickly change from a good leader to a bad one. No good leader is born with all the right answers and solutions to the world. It will always be a learning process for a good leader to find the best responses to the challenges of the day.

To be a good learner as we age, apparently does not come naturally to human beings. A child asks on average 125 questions per day. An adult only 6. It is a clear indication that we tend to slow down dramatically as learners with age. Learning is hard work. It is harder work to give an hour’s full attention to another person than to spend 10 hours at work attending meetings but never giving full concentration to what people say – in writing or orally. It is also harder work to reflect on and to integrate one’s own beliefs and values with creative strategies than to argue from a well-known point of view that one simply adopted from others. As Scott Peck maintains, laziness is the original sin and it is our laziness to do the hard work of giving attention, of risking confrontation, of committing and of giving love that leads to evil.

We need to fight our laziness to learn – even more so as we get older. What keeps us from learning broadly falls into one of four categories:

Not so say what we think
By not saying what we think we not only keep others guessing our thoughts or views, but we never learn to be fully accountable. We keep a backdoor open through which we can escape when things get rough or uncomfortable but we also aren’t going anywhere. The fear of being wrong or saying something unpopular inhibit our learning – we will forever wonder what the value of our thoughts are. We will not learn. We will not grow.

Not to do what we say
As they say, the proof is in the eating. Talk is cheap and we at best learn a few cheap lessons by talking about what we plan to do. It is by following through with actions that we make the useful discoveries about what work and what not, what is beneficial and what not. It is also by following through on our ideas and visions with actions that we learn more about ourselves - our resourcefulness, our courage, our skills, our inner strength etc.

Not to see what we do
To be blind about the effects of our actions is another learning impediment. Even when we reflect on what we’ve done and do some introspection we can still miss important learning from our actions. We need others to help us. We need to trust some people to help us with their feedback, their observations.
Not to recognize what we see
The hard work of learning includes the application of our analytical abilities to what we see. The more we practice mindful observation the easier it can become to recognize what we see when looking at a situation. But often it is only after long and hard contemplation that the underlying patterns that will help us to solve the problems we face, become clear.

Lifelong learners are people we recognize as thoughtful and wise. They are scarce. So are good leaders. The reason is probably that we need the peculiar balance of maturity and childlike naivety. A good learner will be someone who is mature and emotionally healed enough not to feel that he needs to compensate for earlier wounds of his ego and at the same time have a childlike hunger and eagerness to learn more about a world that never stops to fill him with awe and wonder.

I hope I have given you some motivation to embrace lifelong learning. I hope you can find some applications of these ideas that will make a significant positive difference to yourself and others.

I close with some of Peck's views of the work of attention.

The work of attention – Scott Peck
True listening, total concentration on the other, is always a manifestation of love. An essential part of true listening is the discipline of bracketing, the temporary giving up or setting aside of one's own prejudices, frames of reference and desires so as to experience as far as possible the speaker's world from the inside, stepping inside his or her shoes. This unification of speaker and listener is actually an extension and enlargement of ourself, and new knowledge is always gained from this. Moreover, since true listening involves bracketing, a setting aside of the self, it also temporarily involves a total acceptance of the other. Sensing this acceptance, the speaker will feel less and less vulnerable and more and more inclined to open up the inner recesses of his or her mind to the listener.

As this happens, speaker and listener begin to appreciate each other more and more, and the duet dance of love is again begun. The energy required for the discipline of bracketing and the focusing of total attention is so great that it can be accomplished only by love, by the will to extend oneself for mutual growth. Most of the time we lack this energy. Even though we may feel in our business dealings or social relationships that we are listening very hard, what we are usually doing is listening selectively, with a preset agenda in mind, wondering as we listen how we can achieve certain desired results and get the conversation over with as quickly as possible or redirected in ways more satisfactory to us.