



The Competitive Imperative of Learning

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Amy C. Edmondson

The Idea in Brief

Most managers believe that relentless execution--the efficient, timely production and delivery of offerings--is vital to corporate performance. Execution-as-efficiency is important. But focusing *too* narrowly on it can prevent your company from adapting effectively to change.

Consider General Motors: Managers' confidence in GM's famously efficient control systems blinded them to big shifts in the market, including customers' preferences for fuel-efficient cars. GM posted a \$38.7 billion loss in 2007.

Edmondson recommends widening your lens to include **execution-as-learning**. Companies that use this approach focus not just on carrying out key processes more efficiently than rivals--but also on *learning* faster. To foster execution-as-learning, make it safe for employees to ask questions and fail. Then:

- Provide process guidelines, using the best available knowledge.
- Encourage collaborative decision-making.
- Collect process data describing how work unfolds.
- Use the data to identify process-improvement opportunities.

Through execution-as-learning, General Electric continually reinvents itself in multiple fields. Its 2007 profit? \$22.5 billion.

The Idea in Practice

Edmondson provides these ideas for cultivating execution-as-learning in your firm:

Make It Safe. In psychologically safe environments, people offer ideas, questions, and concerns. They're willing to fail--and when they do, they learn. To create a safe environment:

- Model openness, humility, and curiosity.
- Explicitly acknowledge the lack of answers to the tough problems facing your group.
- Ask questions showing that you genuinely want people's input.
- Reward learning.

Pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly's chief science officer introduced "failure parties" to honor intelligent experiments that failed.

Provide Process Guidelines. Even if you can't fully standardize knowledge work, you can provide process guidelines informed by best practices. Develop flexible guidelines, understanding that today's best practices won't be tomorrow's and won't work in every situation.

Intermountain Healthcare assembled teams of experts on different diseases to develop detailed guidelines for treating patients with those conditions. Derived from analysis and debate among diverse professionals, the guidelines reflected the current best practices in the medical literature.

Encourage Collaborative Decision Making. Knowledge work requires people to make decisions together in response to unforeseen, novel, or complex problems. Provide tools enabling them to collaborate in real time.

The Cleveland Clinic developed state-of-the-art IT systems that help dispersed caregivers who are participating in a patient's care to work together virtually. For instance, through an automated alert function, physicians learn of drugs others have prescribed. Medication decisions with interdependent consequences are thus made safely.

Collect Process Data. Gather data describing how work unfolds. Use it to determine what's going right and what's going wrong.

Intermountain Healthcare allows doctors to deviate from the process guidelines anytime they judge that good patient care requires it. But doctors who deviate must help the organization learn--by documenting what they did differently and why.

Identify Process-Improvement Opportunities. Analyze process data to improve the way activities are performed.

At the Cleveland Clinic, seven teams of physicians focusing on specific conditions (heart failure, stroke, diabetes) study process data to identify areas for improvement throughout the organization's many sites. For instance, data showed that stroke patients treated at various sites had not always received a blood thinner within the three-hour window that research had identified as the standard of care. Analysis of patient outcomes helped make blood-thinner treatment the new standard of stroke care for all Cleveland Clinic hospitals. Consequently, hospitals doubled their use of blood thinner and reduced complications from stroke by 50%.

- [Purchase the full-length Harvard Business Review article here.](#)
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Further Reading

Articles

Building a Learning Organization

Harvard Business Review

July 1993

by David A. Garvin

In this classic article on organizational learning, Garvin identifies the five practices characterizing organizations that excel at learning: 1) *Solving problems systematically* by generating hypotheses, gathering data to test them, and using statistical tools to draw inferences. 2) *Using small experiments* to produce incremental gains in knowledge. 3) *Learning from past experience* by reviewing successes and failures, identifying lessons learned, and recording those lessons in accessible forms. 4) *Learning from others* by looking outside the immediate environment (for example, to customers and to other companies) to gain new perspectives. 5) *Transferring knowledge* by moving experts to different parts of the company so they can share the wealth.

Is Yours a Learning Organization?

Harvard Business Review

March 2008

by David A. Garvin, Amy C. Edmondson, and Francesca Gino

The authors provide a tool for assessing your company's performance on the three building blocks of organizational learning: 1) *A supportive learning environment* where employees feel safe disagreeing with others, asking naive questions, owning up to mistakes, and presenting minority viewpoints. In such an environment, people see the value of opposing ideas, take risks, and explore the unknown. 2) *Concrete learning processes* for generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information; for experimenting with new offerings; for gathering intelligence on competitors, customers, and technological trends; and for developing employees' skills. 3) *Leaders who reinforce learning* by demonstrating willingness to entertain alternative viewpoints, signaling the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer, and reflection; and engaging in active questioning and listening.

Speeding Up Team Learning

Harvard Business Review

October 2001

by Amy C. Edmondson, Richard Bohmer, and Gary P. Pisano

This article focuses on the collaborative decision making so crucial to execution-as-learning, using cardiac surgery as an example. In cardiac surgery, team leaders must not simply execute existing processes efficiently; they have to implement new processes as quickly as possible. The authors explain how surgical teams at 16 major medical centers implemented a difficult new procedure for performing cardiac surgery. The most successful teams had leaders who actively managed the groups' learning efforts. Teams that most successfully implemented the new technology shared three essential characteristics: 1) They were designed for learning. 2) Their leaders framed the challenge so that team members were highly motivated to learn. 3) An environment of psychological safety fostered communication and innovation.

About the Author

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School in Boston. Her most recent previous HBR contribution was the March 2008 article "Is Yours a Learning Organization?" coauthored with David A. Garvin and Francesca Gino.

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