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EMPOWERING TIMES



THINKING ALOUD

Learning in Covid Times:
Are you up to it?
Jay

PODIUM

Emmanuel David
Director - Group Human
Resources, TMTC



WE RECOMMEND

The Obstacle is the Way
Ryan Holiday

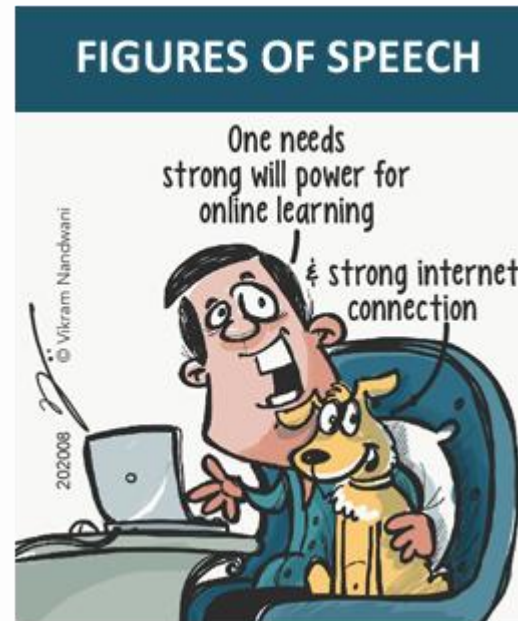
Dear Reader,

Central to every organization is the Learning & Development (L&D) function that ensures employees are able to successfully meet the challenges of their tasks and that they are properly aligned with the achievement of business goals. Amid the implications of the current pandemic, learning and development professionals scrambled to adapt, as did corporate leaders and employees. Transitioning from face-to-face professional interactions to remote work became the need of the hour.

The former Chief Learning Officer of Microsoft, Chris Pirie, in a Forbes interview quotes: "business leaders must find new ways to create engaging experiences which are experiential and fun. That means incorporating more gamification, virtual reality and augmented reality for corporate learning." The learning and development function is evolving, and adapting is key to overcoming challenges in this space. Embracing new technologies and virtual collaboration tools during these times along with re-skilling workforce for a post-pandemic workplace will define the future of work.

ET this month looks at the '**Corporate Learning & Development during the Pandemic Era**'. On the **Podium**, **Emmanuel David** - Director - Group Human Resources, Tata Management Training Centre (TMTTC) shares some of the challenges that have emerged in the learning and development space for corporate learning professionals and the opportunities that lie ahead.

In the **Thinking Aloud** segment, **Jay** drives home the message that agile L&D leaders should pave the way for growth during these trying times through experimentation and new ways of learning. In the **We Recommend** section, Prasad reviews Ryan Holiday's **The Obstacle is the Way** which guides readers on the attitude and mind-set required to make every obstacle an opportunity to move ahead and succeed.



In **Figures of Speech**, **Vikram's** toon shares some nuggets of knowledge!

As always, we value your opinion, so do let us know how you liked this issue. To read our previous issues, do visit the Resources section on the website or simply [Click Here](#). You can also follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) & [LinkedIn](#) - where you can join our community to continue the dialogue with us!

THINKING ALOUD

Learning in Covid Times: Are you up to it?

Jay

Does learning stop when crisis hits a company?

If you looked at the actions of a large number of firms, the answer seems to be a sorry 'yes'. Strange that this had to happen when these firms had been proclaiming in the not too distant past that people are their strongest assets. True, Covid-19 has changed the organizational arithmetic upside down. But isn't this when you turn to your strongest suit?

It is no one's case that costs need not be readdressed when a pandemic hits a company. When revenue gets hurt, it is wise to subject all activities to scrutiny. The logical step is to slash wasteful expenditure. However, there seems to be a confusion on priorities. Since when has learning & development become a wasteful expenditure? Or, was it always so in most firms but had been carefully disguised in the name of employee engagement?

The acid test of a manager is what he does when the chips are down. So too for the management of a firm. Of what use is the business continuity plan for a firm when at the outset of the first major crisis, a firm takes knee-

jerk reactive steps. Apparently, business continuity plans never took into account that employee needs are not just money but also food for the mind. Clearly, there seems to be a clash of philosophies. The school of thought that is holding forth today firmly believes that all that matters now is revenue and that employees can be jettisoned to salvage the vessel that has sprung leaks and is in troubled waters. It is worthwhile to note the comment of that doyen of Indian industry, Ratan Tata, who observed that laying-off employees is not the answer. *"The initial tendency was to lay off people, but is that going to solve your problem? That's a knee-jerk reaction [of] the traditional workplace to lay off staff because the business is gone,"* he said. He went on to say that *"Unfortunately, I have a view that we are not in business just to make a profit."*

Obviously, this is a minority view in current times. But this reflects a deeper view that if an organization's leadership had sought to enroll its employees to the challenge of jointly tackling the crisis created by unfortunate, external events, they would respond. The situation arising from the crisis is perhaps the best time ever for a firm to test what they had been claiming all along, that as a great place to work they have an empowered team of employees who are driven by the purpose of the firm and not just by their pay-checks. Take your mind back to 1982 to the story of 'The Spirit of Delta' when employees contributed funds to buy the ailing company its first Boeing 767 plane. That US 30 million dollars gift is perhaps the biggest symbol ever of the recognition that employees understand that their fate is intertwined with the fortunes of a company.

The question therefore is when will business leaders understand that the onus of generating change is primarily with them. Many decades ago, Alvin Toffler, the renowned futurist, wrote that 'the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.' The pandemic has pressed the change button so hard that it has packed decades of change into a few months. While a few firms moved quickly to a new form of working from home, others struggled for weeks in the face of extended lockdown in parts of the country. The wiser ones have now moved forward to a hybrid model of some days - some people at the office, the rest from home. What has not been met well so far is the re-skilling challenge. Pravin Rao, of Infosys and the current Chairman of the Information Technology industry forum, NASSCOM, emphasised recently that the shelf-life of skills in their industry is now down to two to three years. The message to the software developers was simple: stay on the learning train as a lifelong student who is ready to 'learn, unlearn and relearn' or risk obsolescence. The question to be asked is whether business leaders are also willing to make critical investments in their people to help them prevent them from being out-dated.

The learning & development leaders who should have been on the forefront of managing the transition to this

new world of learning have by and large been found wanting. Preoccupied with their administrative chores, many of them have been swept away by the strong business currents that tested their mettle. Their inability to cope and create shifts in learning methodology once again provided ample evidence as to why they (and their function) have not been taken seriously enough in their firm. At a time when they should be experimenting with innovative methods of connecting with employees, many are themselves facing existential questions of relevance.

It is time to move ahead to a new world order where agile leaders create new excitement. Fear is a powerful driver - but not a sustainable one. The task of evoking change is with the business leader who offers inputs of learning and creates an appetite for it in his team. Technology is a tool that can be harnessed without too much effort. There will be some pain - but treat that as a sign of growth. Plunge into experimentation and find joy in discovering new ways of learning. And, recognise that the time to do so is now.

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Podium

Emmanuel David

Director - Group Human Resources, Tata Management Training Centre (TMTc)



Emmanuel David is the Director of Tata Management Training Centre, the capability building arm of the Tata Group. With over 3 decades of experience in sectors like automobiles, infrastructure, hospitality and financial services, Emmanuel has led the HR function in many organizations, and brings with him expertise in conflict management, designing and implementing HR policy and system, talent, and performance management. While working with Voltas, British Gas and Honda, he has successfully resolved legacy industrial disputes. An alumnus of XLRI, he is equipped with an Advanced Management Program of AIMA on Strategic Profitability Management and is also a certified Belbin Team Role Facilitator (UK).

For his leadership in Relief and Rehabilitation efforts (Disaster Management) during the Surat floods in 2006, he had been awarded the "British Gas Chairman's Safety Award". It has now been published as a case study in the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad - 'Leadership role of Human Resources in Times of Crisis'. Emmanuel serves on the Board of St. Peter's High School, Panchgani, and Under the Mango Tree (UTMT), a social enterprise that promotes beekeeping to increase agricultural productivity, enhance incomes and improve livelihoods of marginal farmers in India. Emmanuel is an avid blogger, writer, photographer, and an experimental chef. He is also regularly invited to speak in Churches for his deep insights and a practical look at religion.

ET: The Covid-19 pandemic has sent ripples all around. What challenges have emerged in the learning and development space for Corporate Learning professionals as well as Managers in industry?

ED: Honestly, I would say that the Covid-19 pandemic is a little more than ripples. It is manifesting in several

tsunamis around the world, and we are grappling with public health, socio-economic, and psychological issues. What has started as work from home for a few days is now here to stay for far, far longer.

Initially, the challenge we identified was 'what do we do in this context?'. Very quickly we realized that we needed to learn new skills to cope with the myriad changes our organization was going through. We needed to adapt.

One big challenge was the transition from physical to online. It was imperative to do so and prepare teams for the same. This isn't just a transition of technology, but one in behaviour as well, as work online limits things like eye contact, non-verbal cues, and the resources available in an office context.

The next challenge involved questions of how and what to move from physical to online. Both the content and the pedagogy were an interesting challenge because it wasn't simply a matter of transferring them from a physical classroom to an online platform. It required tweaking and customization to adapt to online platforms. I think what has definitely helped is having an aligned team and a reservoir of trust which every team member enjoyed with each other, which greatly facilitated this transition. I would say that teamwork is a big factor in how smooth the transition is.

ET: The cynics are saying the 'death by power Point' is getting replaced by 'death by zoom'! What are your thoughts on virtual learning and has the pandemic created new opportunities that can be tapped by companies?

ED: I think these 2 are clichés. While people may feel overloaded by the use of one platform, it is inevitable. What is imperative is a platform, and I believe there are some good platforms available. The platform is like a pipe, and what emerges from it depends on what you put in it: oil, water, or waste. If the content is good then there's definitely every opportunity for it to have a superior impact, rather than 'death'. For those who do have access to the technology that makes online learning possible, it's a win: anyone can teach, anyone can learn, anywhere and anytime.

In my experience, it is possible to be very creative in online learning. In this mode, people can respond and participate anonymously, and this anonymity actually enables authenticity. Let me give you a scenario: in a physical classroom when you have eye contact with participants and ask them how they're feeling. It is likely that

you will get positive and affirmative responses. Whereas when I asked a virtual class the same question through a poll, people used words like 'annoyed', 'irritated', and 'tired', which made me aware of their state and gave me the opportunity to recognize and respond accordingly. It is an interesting challenge for a facilitator as she/he has to be alert, aware, and responsive.

In physical classroom settings, for class participation, at best I would allow 3-4 participants to respond to a question. But now, it is possible for all participants to ask a question at the same time or respond to a question at the same time. There is an opportunity for these platforms to have a backend AI to categorize the responses and/or do a sentiment analysis of participants' textual responses, thereby enhancing the quality of learning and shared experience.

ET: As companies pivot to online remote work, online employee engagement practices will be the key to bridge training needs. How will technology enhance this experience further?

ED: If you look at the three basic employment segments: agriculture, manufacturing, and services, work from home is an impractical prospect for different sectors. Agriculture cannot work from home, and neither can manufacturing, except their leaders and managers. Even in services, it is those who work with information that have the opportunity to work from home. So, this is possible only for a section of society, rather than being universal and it is important we keep this in mind. Having said that, engagement of those who are working from home is extremely critical. If engagement is one side of a coin, accountability is the other.

The key here is to create a safe working culture, especially since we are physically distant. The role of a leader is to define outcomes and goals and facilitate adequate resources to deliver. For example, I've made available Wi-Fi dongles because connectivity was an issue for some where they stay. Further, laptops have been replaced in situations where colleagues found them to be inadequate.

Leaders also need to be aware that while their connection is with the employee, their voice is amplified to the family. Therefore, they do not have control on what is said or unsaid, or how it is all said. There should be reasonable transparency of information on their end. This enables a two way information exchange. It's amazing how team members can collaborate with each other and deliver shared goals.

Empathy and recognition are two aspects which need to be fostered. We had an evening 'dessert' a few days

after the lockdown began, where one colleague was chosen for the dessert and everyone shared what they appreciated about her or him. Since this was on an online meeting platform, it was possible to record the same. The colleague who received the dessert nominated someone for the next day. This created a lot of positivity and team bonding. Recently, for a colleague who was leaving for higher studies, team members put together a nice quiz about her which created some very unique memories.

ET: How do you see the future of L&D and what is your advice for cultivating a learning culture for forward-looking organizations?

ED: I see a lot of opportunity for L&D to be impactful. Firstly, L&D needs to create a culture of learning, which can foster curiosity and provide a 'pull'. Learning is done better through a pull than a push. If L&D professionals are able to communicate current realities and preferred futures in an articulate manner, it is likely that their constituency will embrace learning.

An important shift is needed to be made from employment to being made employable. The onus needs to move to employees to upskill themselves. With all employees co-owning their learning, a learning culture will be created. It is made possible with learning experience platforms and learning management systems to give the right nudges. Enabling them to consume bite sizes learning will help turn learning into a marathon rather than a sprint. For example, Coursera recently offered a set of courses for free for corporates. My whole team picked out one course and are doing it together, and this is bringing about team members sharing what they're learning and the value they are seeing in it. This even facilitates stragglers to pull up their socks.

The most delightful thing is the liberating impact of learning. When I meet with participants at the end of every program, there is a recurring question from many of them - "What's next?". This question brings a smile to my face each time and stirs my heart. I ask them back, "Was this top of your mind before you came to TMTC?" and usually they reply - "No". As that response reveals, one of the signature values we seek to create at TMTC is to ignite the human curiosity to learn. I therefore make the appeal to them each time this comes up, to keep that spirit alive.

ET: As a veteran human resources professional and Head of Tata Management Training Centre, perhaps the premier Corporate University in India, can you share some best practices initiated by your organization to help Tata firms build capabilities in these trying times?

ED: I read a quote by an American poet, James Russell Lowell, which reads: 'Mishaps are like knives that either serve us or cut us, as we grasp them by the blade or the handle.'

Keeping this in mind while facing new challenges has been key to how TMTC has adapted. As you are aware, the Tata Management Training Centre is the oldest corporate university in India and has the distinction of being the second oldest in the world. It has been an oasis of learning as well as known for its hospitality. To keep up the services, we have been providing and adapting to rapidly changing workplace contexts; shifting online was imperative even prior to the pandemic. In 2019, we set in motion plans for going digital to onboard a learning management system and a learning experience platform, targeting May-June 2020 to go live. The pandemic only accelerated our efforts and the first week of April this year saw us having a series of test runs on the online platform.

Our webinar series 'Learning Latitudes' debuted on April 9. Since then, we've delivered 86 webinars with 15k unique attendees having a cumulative of 45k participants. I'm also pleased to say that the Tata Group has the highest enrolments for the courses globally under Coursera's initiative, 'Coursera for Employee Resilience', which is free to companies all over the world.

We've also carefully created a calendar for the year taking inputs from key stakeholders and released it a couple of months ago. In order to encourage self-paced learning, we have created learning journeys on 25 pathways on the themes of 'Future Ready and Future Engaged'. We continue to deliver our flagship leadership programmes online but with the same content and rigour. At the backend, there has been a lot of engagement with facilitators and faculty partners on the use of online learning platforms and tools like menti.com to ensure that the learning experience is impactful.

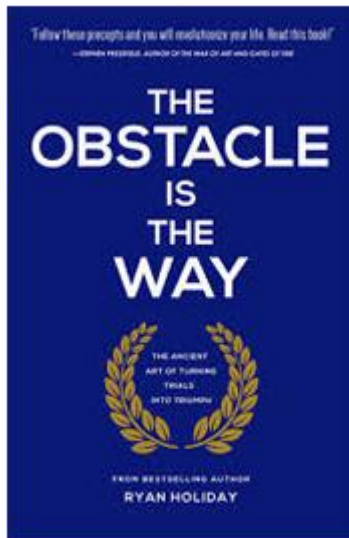
Overall, my reflection on this shift is as follows. In a physical setting, in addition to content what also got communicated was context and the intent. Whereas in an online setting, content is definitely given, but effort needs to be made so that context and intent are understood. This, I believe, is where the opportunity lies to be creative and impactful.

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We Recommend

The Obstacle is the Way Ryan Holiday

- Reviewed by Prasad Deshpande



This is an inspiring book and very apt in the times we are in.

Ryan begins with a story of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the five good Roman emperors and possibly the wisest emperor to have governed Rome. Marcus was Stoic and his diary meditations have guided people over the centuries.

Marcus writes "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way." What Marcus meant was that the Stoic turns every negative into a positive no matter how bad or undesirable a situation becomes and uses the situation as an opportunity to be their best selves. The Stoic grows stronger and better with every obstacle they face and so can we. This is the core message of the book.

This is not a book on Stoicism. Ryan packs it with examples and lessons that he learnt along the way as he overcame enormous challenges in his own life - learnt hard lessons on how 'success can be an imposter' and about Ben Horowitz's 'The hard things about the hard things'.

Ryan talks about 'three interdependent, interconnected, and fluidly contingent disciplines: Perception, Action, and the Will.'

The Discipline of Perception:

We act as we see things and most people cannot perceive a crisis as an opportunity. We perceive what our fears, frustrations, insecurities, and emotions drive us to see. The story of how John Rockefeller kept an iron nerve and trained himself to see with ruthless objectivity enabled him to weather the great panic of 1857. The lessons he learnt enabled him to take calculated risks that propelled him to be the richest man in the world. The Greeks had a word for this: *apatheia*. It is the calm equanimity that comes with the absence of irrational or extreme emotions. "Nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," as Shakespeare puts it. It is not about being just an optimist but to be 'ceaselessly creative and opportunistic.'

Perception is everything. Our perceptions determine, to a large degree, what we are and are not capable of. They determine reality itself. As Ryan asks pertinently: 'When we believe in the obstacle more than in the goal, which will inevitably triumph?'

The Discipline of Action:

The second part of the book deals with how to take action. First, Ryan asks us to remember: Action is commonplace, right action is not. As a discipline, it is not any kind of action that will do but directed action.

Ryan shares many examples - the story of how Demosthenes became the greatest orator that Ancient Greece had ever seen is moving. In the book, the great British historian B. H. Liddell Hart writes that "the Great Captain will take even the most hazardous indirect approach over mountains, deserts, or swamps with only a fraction of the forces, even cutting himself loose from his communications, facing in fact, every unfavourable condition rather than accept the risk of stalemate invited by direct approach." But some obstacles are impossible to overcome, some paths impassable. This is where the discipline of the will comes.

The Discipline of Will:

As Ryan writes, "the will is the critical third discipline. We can think, act, and finally adjust to a world that is inherently unpredictable. The will prepares us for this, protects us against it, and allows us to thrive and be happy despite it. It is also the most difficult of all the disciplines. It's what allows us to stand undisturbed while others wilt and give in to disorder."

Ryan shares many examples in this section of the book. Abraham Lincoln who battled his own demons - a terrible depression - to Theodore Roosevelt who literally willed himself to become a healthy adult from a sickly and bedridden child.

We all have a choice to succumb to the obstacles in our path or triumph over them.

The cycle never ends. Just when you thought you had successfully navigated an obstacle, another emerges. Life is a marathon and not a sprint as Ryan reminds us and the obstacles in our path builds our stamina and resilience to find a way through the obstacles yet to come till we eventually reach the end of the line.

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THROUGH THE LENS



Nature photographer, **Rupesh Balsara**, spots the common Pierrot Butterfly largely found in Sri Lanka, India, and Myanmar. These butterflies are specifically found fluttering in open vegetations, wastelands and scrublands. A fast but irregular flyer, it flies around shrubs and herbs and is fond of feeding on nectar.

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