

The Facts of Mutual Learning

What if there was a way to solve problems with minimal conflict? A way to resolve differences with open discussion so everyone could learn from the experience?

This month's PILOTed focuses on mutual learning with an interview of Jim Oher, who is a practitioner of Mutual Learning, a practice that is designed to encourage learning, minimize conflict, and promote effective decision making.

Jim has 30 years of practical business experience, both as internal manager and as a consultant.

He has created workplace services for a broad range of clients and has advised leading businesses on human resources issues. He is nationally certified in several disciplines, and is a frequent lecturer at national conferences. Jim is certified to use several leadership development instruments and has been involved in such initiatives for companies throughout the world.

Jim is an author and editor of several books and articles on leadership and management issues and is a member of the Alliance for Strategic Leadership, The Worldwide Association of Business coaches, The Institute of Executive Development and the International Coach Federation.

Can you describe what mutual learning is?

Mutual Learning increases the effectiveness of communications. Mutual Learning is mutual involvement: you learn from others; you interact with the other person by inquiring. The idea behind mutual learning is that it is a frame, a way of approaching a situation as it relates to people. Engaging in mutual learning is seeking knowledge, but specifically knowledge that will result in action. The opposite is the unilateral control model, where each individual is trying to control the interaction. The unilateral control approach creates distrust and reduces commitment and learning. But this is what we all often revert to when we feel threatened.

What is mutual learning especially effective for?

Mutual learning allows you to learn, to come to better decisions with other interested parties or stakeholders.

It is useful in every single situation where there is potential conflict. I use it in every interaction and new opportunity. By using it, I better understand what others need from me, they better understand what I need from them, and we all have better access to the information we need to come up with an optimal decision.

Mutual Learning may not be good in certain crisis situations where it is more important to decide fast than to get input from others.

Can you boil it down to a few basic principles?

There are three basic principles: curiosity, transparency, and joint accountability.

1. Curiosity – really being inquisitive, asking yourself, what is the other person thinking, why is he or she thinking that, why is he saying what he is saying, what is he seeing that you don't see. This means suspending judgment; when you hear another person's idea it's easy to say, "that's wrong" or "that's irrelevant."
Mutual learning means wanting to know why the person is saying that, what does

- he know that you don't and how could that information teach you something that will help you get what you want.
2. Transparency – saying what you think and feel, not compromising, not camouflaging what you are saying. Let's say a person says something very aggressive, like "You're not explaining things correctly. This doesn't mean you should say, "you idiot" if you are angry; or "you're wrong" if you disagree. In mutual learning, transparency is more like, "when you say that I don't understand what I did or said that provoked you." You reveal that the statement had an emotional impact, but it still moves the dialog forward.
 3. Joint accountability – If you are trying to resolve an issue or take an action that involves an other person or group, each of you has to be accountable. Each person or group is accountable to the other; you have to work together even if you see things differently. According to the model, there is no resolution unless both commit to the decision, unless both are accountable. This doesn't mean that both parties have to agree with every aspect of a decision. For example, you may have a different approach to a problem that you feel is superior but your boss has the decision making power, your commitment is to help her succeed.

How would I get myself in the right frame of mind to utilize Mutual Learning in a situation?

When you approach a situation where you are interacting with others to solve a problem or accomplish some goal, you would proceed from some basic assumptions:

You have information; others may also have relevant information that may be different or conflicting. So we need to find out what information we each have.

Each of us may see things others do not, because of different information, biases, or background. If we can understand where our differences stem from, maybe we can design a richer solution.

Differences are opportunities for learning. When we differ, there is an opportunity to learn something new from each other. Remember that people are trying to act with integrity given their situation, empathy and compassion quotient.

Then there are core values that are imperative for mutual learning:

- Valid information: you will reveal all relevant information you have on the subject, whether it supports your position or not. Ideally this information is validated by an independent source or by the people concerned.
- Free informed choice: Decisions are not coerced, seek to create an environment for everyone involved so people agree to do things because they have all the information, not because they feel manipulated or coerced. They commit to a resolution because they use their own reasoning and have seen all points of view.
- Internal commitment to the decision: once a decision is made, people will do whatever is necessary to implement the decision
- Compassion: you will temporarily suspend judgment in order to understand other people's perspectives, rather than protecting yourself or others, which would be unilateral control.

How is it different from other schools of learning, training, or education?

Unilateral control model is predominant in most organizations. When we work with people or groups we have to work to change how people have been conditioned to communicate and make decisions.

Mutual learning would be considered the opposite of unilateral control. In unilateral control, the goal is to get everyone to achieve my goal. The mantra is win don't lose. The goal of communications is to minimize expressing negative feelings. In unilateral control, my assumption is that I have pure motives and that others only oppose me if they have impure motives or unfounded feelings. Thus, opposition is based on irrationality; the only rational arguments are those that support my position.

Can you describe a few practical results from using mutual learning?

I use mutual learning in my own communicating when coaching, counseling and teaching. I also instill mutual learning in my clients so they can achieve better results.

One company wanted me to coach an executive who they thought had some issues. They wanted him to fly down to headquarters and talk to people there and find out what others are saying about him before I started working with him. I could have just said, "That won't work." Or I could have said, "They are the client, if that's what they want to do, I'll just pick up from there."

But I suspended judgment, and looked to find what information they had about the situation that I didn't. I spent some time finding out the reasoning behind the request, what they were looking to accomplish.

They felt it was important for him to know what the situation was, then he would be motivated to change. When we both understood that I knew their reasoning and their end goals, then I could suggest, "shouldn't I meet with him first, see if we can achieve rapport and understand what the issues are from his stand point? Perhaps he'll have a better understanding and more tools when we talk about how others perceive him."

The end result was that the executive did talk to people at headquarters, but he'd been better prepared on how to assess what people were saying and we already had the rapport so that we could work together to improve his capabilities rather than viewing me as someone thrust on him from the "enemy".

Here is another coaching example. One client works with someone who gives long presentations and turns people off. They had tried to make the person give shorter presentations; they'd had speaking coaches work with him on presentation techniques.

When I worked with him, I asked him what he wanted to accomplish, which was to get through all of the information so that people would fully understand the facts and his reasoning. But after further questions, he volunteered that his end goal was to convince people to take some specific action.

With this as a higher level need, I could suggest that if people were interested they might be easier to be convinced: that two to three pages might keep people's interest and that it was great to have 30 pages of backup if people asked to see the details. The person said thank you and started giving much more effective presentations. He was open to the suggestion because he understood that I'd been interested in his point of view, that I understood his rationale, and that I was just suggesting alternatives that would help us both.

Let's say I was working with a group to solve some major problem and we were coming at the problem from different points of view; how could I use mutual learning to come up with a workable solution?

There are 9 strategies.

1. Test assumptions and inferences. We all make assumptions and draw inferences, but usually we aren't aware of what we are doing. We have to raise our own awareness and question whether our assumptions or inferences have validity and are different from other people's.

2. Share all relevant information. This means sharing information you have that doesn't support your position. After all, the goal is not to win, it's to come up with something that works.
3. Use specific examples and agree on important words. Specific examples might be negative, one of the members of the group may have done something that set the group back; but removing the example from the discussion removes essential information and reduces the chances that the problem can be solved.
4. Explain reasoning and intent. If you do not provide your reasoning, others will create their own explanations for your intent or for how you reached your conclusions.
5. Focus in interests not positions. The statement "we need to hire 34 teachers before the new school year" would be a position. The interest would be the reason behind a) why that is such a strong feeling and b) what are the underlying needs. In this case, the interest would be in complying with a state law for class sizes. In one of my earlier examples, a position is that the executive should go to headquarters and find out what people are saying about him. The interest, though, was to increase that person's effectiveness because he was a rising star. You can solve an interest, you can only do or not do a position.
6. Combine advocacy and inquiry. Advocacy is you supporting your position. You have thoughts and feelings and you share them, you put them out there. Inquiry is asking for more information, asking for specifics, "what do you see?" Testing is a form of inquiry, to confirm. Combining advocacy with inquiry shifts from a series of monologs to a conversation.
7. Jointly design the approach. Go ahead and advocate your solution. But then inquire about how others see things differently, and jointly craft something to address their interests, information, reasoning, and intent.
8. Discuss undiscussables, which are the feelings and thoughts that emerge from the dialog. These are usually things that people think are important but that people think can only cause defensiveness, like when the group believes that someone is not performing well. They may not bring up the issue. They may be afraid to talk about it, but if they talked about it by bringing up the consequences up front, they can be brought up. "If you see me getting offensive or defensive please let me know."
9. Use a decision making rule that generates the commitment needed. Generating a decision with consensus, while often taking longer, will more likely yield dividends when it comes time to implement.

Is there a connection between mutual learning and TQM (total quality management)?

It is continual quality improvement. Continual Quality Improvement, Action Learning, and Action Inquiry are other terms for Mutual Learning. Your own individual improvement and that of the organization you work with.

How would someone learn more about mutual learning?

They could email me, Jim Oher, jim@oher.net. They could also look up Don Schon, William Torbert, Roger Schwarz, or Chris Argyris.

Jim, thank you.

About Mitchell Weisburgh:

Mitchell Weisburgh is Managing Partner of Academic Business Advisors, LLC. He has over 20 years experience running training and education companies. He has written over 100 course manuals on both technical and soft skills. He publishes the PILOTed Online Learning newsletter (<http://nl.pilotonlinelearning.com>), runs the Westchester Online Learning Consortium, and is on the Board of the Westchester Chapter of the ASTD.

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