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Article



Directing Change: Guiding Students to Actively Create Their Futures

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Transformative change doesn't just happen spontaneously, it is something that leaders embrace and sustain. With that viewpoint, it is not surprising that transformational leadership is a central theme for those who choose to become change agents.

John Kotter of Harvard Business School said, "Management is all about dealing with complexity, but leadership is all about initiating and sustaining change."

As educators, we are charged with developing a new generation of leaders. To do so effectively, we have to help our learners embrace change. This embodiment can cause some ripples of pain, and a great leader has to ensure that the pain is not above the threshold at which the individuals abandon the transformation that they are undergoing.

My mission as past University Research Chair for Organizational Behavior and as a current instructor at University of Phoenix is to help the business students in my undergraduate, graduate and doctoral classes adapt to change and to push them beyond the familiar and comfortable.

Balancing Challenge and Skill

From the very start, I try to nudge students out of their comfort zones to advance their skills above their current level and to keep them in a "discomfort zone." It is at this upper edge, where challenge and skill intersect, where the transformative progress happens; I believe it is where each student's awareness of their full potential can be achieved.

First, a great leader must acknowledge that there is responsibility in being the agent of change. To do this he or she must understand that change begins with behaviors. To permanently adjust behaviors, leaders must understand the motivations behind the desired behavior. This includes an unflinching examination of values and the environments in which the specific behaviors thrive.

When learners reach an understanding of their internal and external values they can formulate a plan to deliver successful and sustainable change. The same principles apply whether I am working with individuals in classes, as a mentor, or with corporate leaders who want their companies to be permanently transformed in positive ways.

Awareness is Key

Knowing their values and task preferences and how these influence environments allows students to gain self-confidence which translates back into the workplace. When these internal and external conditions are fused together, students have access to the power to understand their own and others' motivations, to create the type of environment that inspires positive forward-focused behaviors that contribute to their goals and success.

Learners must be deliberate in their actions. Waiting for change leaves them vulnerable to others' vision of transformation, and it creates the chance that their own vision is never realized. This deliberate act is particularly pertinent for students who want to be entrepreneurs—a desire that I see in many of my doctoral learners. They are enamored with the idea of working with different companies and in different disciplines. Once it is understood that they have to take the responsibility to initiate change through action, by knowing their values and the environment they can create the optimal moment for extreme and sustainable success.

The ability to recognize how our internal self and how external forces shape us is a valuable tool for every student in the business world. The ability to understand and balance both sides of the internal/external equation is not a natural talent bestowed to everyone. However, it is a skill that should be developed for those who recognize that this self-awareness is critical to progress, gaining credibility and influencing change in any organization.

As with both my corporate clients and my students, I believe I need to be a total solutions provider. In the classroom, I provide the environment to raise student awareness through the value of understanding systemic solutions to problems, not symptoms. Self-awareness, knowing the environment and targeting desired outcomes provides students with the tools to reinvent themselves and others on a daily basis.

Practitioner-Faculty

As University of Phoenix faculty members, we are encouraged to teach what we live. For me, that means being an advocate of change—the type of transformational change that led me to deliberately leave a successful career after 18 years at Intel Corporation, to take my previous work of managing