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GOAL SETTING

Why best practices often don't fly



ISTOCK

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Why does so little learning happen in organisations and schools, even when they are exposed to best practices, excellent examples and inspiring success stories?

Perhaps the answer lies in what sociologist Samuel Stouffer described as "relative deprivation" — the idea that we do not judge ourselves in absolute terms. We judge ourselves in relation to people or situations we can identify with.

Consider a budding entrepreneur. He is largely unaffected by the enormous wealth of the owner of a large organisation. He does not see himself in that league; therefore, there is little basis for comparison.

But place him alongside the owner of a small organisation operating in similar circumstances and he may become much more conscious of what the other person has achieved — and what he has not.

The same principle operates in organisations.

A tyre manufacturer may see how an FMCG giant has transformed its supply chain, culture, or customer experience. The example may be excellent. Yet the response could easily be: "That works for them. Our reality is different."

The learning does not necessarily fail because the practice is wrong. It may fail because the learner cannot see themself in the example.

Malcolm Gladwell, referring to Stouffer's work, writes that "we form our impressions not globally, by placing ourselves in the broadest possible context, but locally — by comparing ourselves to people (who we think are) in the same boat as ourselves."

This has an important implication for education and organisational development.

When we teach through cases, examples or "best practices", we often reach instinctively for the most celebrated examples — the largest company, the most successful entrepreneur, the most impressive institution. But the greater the distance between the learner and the example, the easier it is to dismiss the learning:

"They can do it because they are different."

Perhaps, therefore, the most powerful teaching example is not always the best example. It may be the most relatable one.

A small family business may learn more from another family business that is only a few steps ahead, than from a global corporation. A young entrepreneur may connect more deeply with someone who faced similar constraints than with a billionaire whose circumstances are unimaginable to him.

This does not mean that distant or extraordinary examples have no value. They can inspire and expand our sense of possibility. But when our objective is learning, application and behavioural change, context matters enormously.

The lesson for educators, consultants and organisational leaders is simple: Don't merely ask "What is the best practice?" Ask "What is the best practice that this person or organisation can see itself doing?"

Learning begins when people can recognise themselves in the story.

Perhaps that is the real meaning of the 'Big-fish-little-pond effect': our sense of capability, possibility and self-worth is shaped not simply by how good the example is, but also how close we perceive it to be to our own pond.

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