

What will it take to shape a new class of professionals?

by Judy Rosenblum

Missing the Point

As someone who has worked in professional services for my entire career and most recently in the development of professionals, I've grown increasingly concerned that we as leaders have forgotten how professionals actually learn. While all of us remember fondly the senior partner who pushed us, yelled at us and sometimes berated us, all for the sake of making us better, we don't seem to be picking up that mantle for the next generation.

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Even as we find ourselves in the middle of a financial crisis of arresting proportions and a crisis of confidence about the values and norms of our professions, we continue to give the bulk of the job of preparing our people to compete in an increasingly difficult and unpredictable world to our HR and training organizations. We rationalize this by saying that we, as senior professionals, are needed by our clients and that there are too many employees requiring development for us to shoulder the job. We build knowledge management systems to codify and transfer what we know. And then we don't use them ourselves or teach our people how and why to use them. We view our younger generation workforce as self-interested short timers in the business world. And then we bend over backwards trying to create programs that convince them that our company is a great place to work. It seems that we are missing the point and it has taken a new generation of employees and a changing world to make this

apparent.

Have we “set up” Gen X and Gen Y?

We, as parents and grandparents, have invested more in Generation Y than any generation in history. Dubbed the “millennials,” and born between the years 1981 and 2000, they have been coached and tutored all their lives. Through vacations and summer leadership journeys, we exposed them to different cultures, we bent to social pressure and bought them the latest technology and we encouraged them to dream. We worked hard at letting them know that they were capable of reaching their aspirations. Now they face a world that will challenge their ability to succeed in the ways their parents have. How then, when these same individuals enter the workforce, can we assume that the best way for them to learn is in the classroom and that the best educator is the PowerPoint slide?

Gen Xers (age 28 to 40) are already stepping into leadership positions previously held by the Boomer generation. They will, by virtue of their own experiences, cause a change in the way their people are developed. That experience is, in some ways, at odds with the nurtured confidence and striving of Generation Y. While Generation X is responsible for demanding feedback in the workplace, they were “reactive and pragmatic” in their approach to personal development. They believed that it was their responsibility. The Boomers (as their bosses) reinforced that belief system. Then, as the world became more complex and technology took the place of work conversations, more and more distance was created between Gen Xers and their bosses. Now they shoulder the task of creating a new culture of professionalism that bridges the gap between their experience and the needs of Generation Y.

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Generation X and Y together will shape the norms of professionalism for the next 30 years. They can believe that the Baby Boomers had it wrong and have nothing to offer them, believe that we took ours and have abandoned them, or they can learn from both our mistakes and our wisdom.

Both Gen X and Gen Y respect our experience, wisdom and relationships, but the added twist is that Gen Y wants to know why. Having grown up in a time where “CNN brings you the world” instantaneously, they take for granted the interconnectedness of the world. Having been raised to ask questions, they want to know why we make the decisions we do and whether we have considered the unintended consequences of our actions. (Not a bad set of questions in light of the situation we find ourselves.) Today they are experiencing directly the impact of both positive and negative global interdependencies. They, as well as we, believe they are in somewhat uncharted territory. But are they really? The basic underpinning of any profession is judgment. How and why have we forgotten that the practice of our professions is an art, the art of applying not only rules but also wisdom, experience and morals to the decisions we make and the actions we take? And how can we reshape our view of professional education to provide the opportunity for this new generation to learn the art of practice? It will take all of us reaching across the generational divide in the workplace to make this happen.

Killing Apprenticeship

Many have written about the death of the apprenticeship model of employee development. Taken literally, this is true. Gratefully, we are no longer subject to the power of guilds or the hardships of a master/apprentice relationship. The demise was helped along by many economic and social changes. But perhaps the most important push was the industrial revolution, when crafts became jobs and jobs were broken down into tasks. At that point, people could learn discrete tasks rather than master a craft.

At the same time, the educational system shaped what and how people learned. It increasingly began to focus on methods, rules and compartmentalized knowledge. While education rather than apprenticeship became the way to get ahead, it also de-emphasized experience and tutelage as a way to learn.

As the industrial economy developed, corporations marched to the tune of shareholders rather than families and guilds, and people development became a cost. Companies grew and our society out of necessity became more concerned about safety and productivity. More people had to be “trained,” and the most efficient way to do this seemed to be in the classroom, focusing on the job at hand. We learned to do what was directly in front of us.

Command and control hierarchies within companies led us to believe that actual thinking only really occurred at the top. So it was only when we progressed to a senior level that it became important for us to learn to understand our “craft” in broader terms, integrating concepts, seeing our place in a changing world and learning how to operate in that world.

The difference between apprenticeship and current-day employee development goes well beyond the demise of the master-apprentice relationship. It is the difference between learning to be a craftsman and learning to do the tasks in front of you. It is the difference between being a professional and a technician. It is the difference between understanding what mastery of a multifaceted craft looks like, and knowing only what you do. It is the presence or absence of the thrill and the risk, as a young person, of being stretched, guided and chided by someone whom you respect and admire and who cares about you.

Learning Out of Context

As guild apprentices moved through the level of journeyman to eventually the level of master they developed a sense of pride and confidence in their abilities. That confidence allowed them to be creative while maintaining the highest standards of quality, and those who delivered the finest unique work had the largest following.

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While the professions were and are obviously different in terms of what they delivered to their clientele, the judgment and creativity required of professionals and the handling of clients, issues and people were and are, nonetheless, an art. Apprenticeships were a means of learning not only the tasks required to provide legal or accounting services but also how to provide them—in context.

This is one of the stumbling blocks of traditional professional development—the lack of context. As we struggle to create case studies and role plays that replicate the context in which service delivery

plays out, it still falls short of watching a master or being guided by a master as a situation unfolds. The myriad of courses designed to help people handle difficult people, ethical dilemmas or conflict can never replace living in that situation and learning from it. Actually encountering the situation that could not have been predicted, what Schön (1987) calls the “indeterminate zones of practice” cannot happen in PowerPoint. It is learning to use knowledge and skills in the course of problems and opportunities and dealing with the messiness that constitutes the “art of practice.”

This is not to say that training is not valuable. Technical skills, methodologies and approaches are the corridors of practice. Basic communication skills and systemic thinking skills are ways of thinking and acting that are foundational. Well-designed education brings the student as close as possible to practicing in context through experiential learning and simulations. What is lacking is the test of adaptability. This is the zone where learned content meets the reality of practice. This is where the professional succeeds or fails, morally and technically.

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Professional Decoupling

For many years we believed that technical content and professional skills could be decoupled from practice, formalized and taught as professional education (McDermott, 1993). It was assumed that the educated professional could then apply these skills in their day-to-day practice (Dall’Alba and Sandberg, 2006). It was on the basis of this belief that much of what we experience today as professional education was built.

This belief system was reinforced in more contemporary models of professional development based in cognitive psychology. Most of these models are arrayed in “fixed sequences of stages representing successively higher levels of knowledge and skill acquisition” (Dall’Alba and Sandberg, 2006). Assuming that the heart of practice is codified knowledge and skills, these models served to further decouple professional education from practice.

The Dreyfus Model (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980) of professional development moved the notion of practice closer to descriptions of professional development in its articulation of five skill levels. Specifically, Dreyfus and Dreyfus break the code of progression, defined as only knowledge and skill acquisition, as they describe the novice as one who follows “explicit rules they have been instructed to apply.” Four levels up, the expert no longer relies on rules but instead on the accumulation of experience, describing experts “as one with their work” (Dall’Alba and Sandberg, 2006).

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These stage models of development, along with the compartmentalization of tasks and knowledge, have in many ways molded the mindset of professional development in the large professional service firms of today. That mindset is focused on teaching only the rules, skills and knowledge needed to perform tasks at each level of progression in the firm. This is further reinforced by evaluation and promotion systems that are based on evidence of the application of knowledge and skills to the task. It is convenient in that this mindset matches well with the leverage model and rate structure of these firms and allows for most learning to take place safely on the job and education to take place in the classroom. So what is the problem?

The problem has several dimensions.

- First, and foremost, this mindset can choose to ignore the place of context and practice in professional development. How can a young professional learn practice only from learning the skills and knowledge required to perform at their level? How do they learn why they are doing what they are doing? How do they develop a systemic understanding? How do they develop a broad understanding of right and wrong?
- Second, what are the implications of spending five years teaching professionals only knowledge and skills and then expecting them to enter a world of unpredictable, complex situations where the rules do not apply or where soft skills matter more than technical skills? It is no wonder that many professional service firms bemoan the fact that their senior people are technical wizards but have a very difficult time handling difficult situations, adapting to change or developing relationships!
- Third, how do we expect to get the power and energy of a younger generation engaged in their work to the extent that they become loyal to their firms when we do not challenge them to grow in their work and to, in fact, become professionals?
- Finally, how can we develop a fully productive diverse workforce able to deal with the complexity of practice today when only the very lucky or visible receive the mentoring that allows them to learn how to practice?

Mentoring

Mentoring has become a popular trend in our society and, as the Baby Boomers move toward retirement or second careers, thousands of highly skilled professionals want to “give back.” However, most find themselves at this stage of life with no sponsored way to bring their insight and experience to the next generation.

Further, companies are now facing a new dilemma as Boomers remain at work longer than they planned. With three generations in the workforce, and obvious fissures in the way businesses have operated over the last 30 years, how valuable are the knowledge and ways of thinking of the Boomer generation? Is that knowledge and experience still relevant in the world we are living in today?

The answer is yes. What the Boomers have to offer is experience in the “art of practice.” While it is true that this generation has grown up in a world of US domination and has not had to deal with the implications of the new global economic reality, they have had to practice in a world that has offered many changes and stumbling blocks over the years. The collective wisdom developed over a career is most often not about what the person did but how the person thought and how he reflected on actions he may or may not have taken. It is this ability to relate past experience to what is coming and to understand that the mental models that have made you successful in the past can hurt you in the future that will enable a new generation to process the structural changes taking place today and what these changes mean for them as professionals. In the midst of the challenges we face in firms today, there is a great opportunity for senior professionals to transfer this art to the next generation.

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Coaching

Virtually every firm and corporation has a coaching process in place. These processes often get confused with performance evaluations or with the random act of telling a young professional what to do; but when they work well, the young professional is challenged to think on her own with the guidance of a more experienced professional. The dilemma is that while these relationships may blossom and offer real value, they blossom only for a few.

As Peter Senge describes in the “success to the successful archetype” (1990), those who do well get noticed by a more experienced professional who “takes them under their wing” and offers advocacy and guidance which enables them to be selected more often for roles and engagements where they can further prove their value and be seen as successful. This virtuous cycle enhances the development and careers of the individuals involved but many are left out of the system entirely. Is that a problem? If there is only so much time to give to true coaching, why not give it to the most successful, visible and loyal performers?

The fact is that firms need more than those “high performing” few. Firms are made up of solid performers, many of whom could become high performers if they got into “the loop,” but that is tough to do.

Why? Because of business realities:

- High-leverage business models assume many young professionals for each senior professional.
- The staffing functions of these firms tend to staff projects on the basis of preference and availability.
- Client service professionals argue that they do not get rewarded for coaching broadly.
- Many firms still run, promote and recognize based on employee loyalty rather than performance.

Yes, all the systems are in place to coach, appraise and evaluate employees based on objectives, competencies or goals. But how much time and brainpower do the evaluators actually put into an objective view of performance? How many actually know what they are evaluating (what is desired development) and how it differs from the simple act of an employee competently doing what I, the manager, ask him/her to do? If the answer is little or a few, we have to face up to the question of whether we have forgotten how to develop professionals and have, instead, been evaluating workers.

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Taking the first steps

It seems to me that we need to take a set of steps to ensure that our firms are placed well in the hands of the next generation.

- First, when we think about professional development, we need to recombine professional skills and knowledge with context and return to teaching, guiding and modeling the “art of practice.” Our e-learning investments should serve to provide the basic skills, rules and methodologies required to perform tasks. Our classrooms should serve as practice fields for performing those tasks within a realistic context or problem. Our workplaces should become everyday learning labs for building artful practitioners.
- We need to recognize that those skills we have termed “soft skills” actually determine whether our hard skills can be successfully applied and differentiate us in the marketplace. The segmentation of professional

skills from technical skills in curriculums de-emphasizes skills that comprise the “art of practice.” We should be looking for every opportunity to build “soft skills” in context and in the course of work.

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- Professional development curriculums need to shift from a teaching mindset to a learning mindset. PowerPoint is not a learning method. Further, only content can be codified in bullets. Thinking, reflection and interaction cannot. For people to advance as professionals, they should be immersed in problems. The context of a problem provides the opportunity to grapple and engage with others to arrive at a solution. Grappling leads to mistakes and mistakes provide the opportunity for learning and feedback by more experienced professionals. Further, problem-based learning will drive people to knowledge bases and teach them how to use them in the course of work.
- Emphasis needs to be placed on teaching managers to observe competency in context and provide feedback. While our HR organizations have skilled people up on how to coach, and they have developed competency models, very few organizations have actually put two and two together by teaching managers to observe competency on the job and provide immediate feedback. Until our managers actually know what they are looking for and what it looks like when it's happening, we cannot expect to develop professionals who understand what it is they need to do differently in context.
- Finally, we need to act on what we already know. Virtually every employee survey I have ever seen asks the question "Where do you learn the most? a) in formal training; b) through coaching and guidance provided by your manager; or c) on the job in the course of work?" And in virtually every case the response comes back overwhelmingly "c." We know that, yet we tend to ignore the opportunity to put more discipline around learning on the job in order to reap greater, more relevant and more dependable results. We are stuck in the paradigm of training as separate from working and we need to take responsibility for breaking out of it.

The bottom line is that we, and particularly the Boomer generation, must learn to be better teachers in the course of work. That means putting young professionals in the midst of practice, giving them real ownership, responsibility and challenges and supporting them as they stretch to learn and do the right thing. It means having the confidence to show the thinking behind our actions and decisions and examining unintended consequences together. It means telling stories that reflect how you as a professional learned and dealt with ambiguity and uncertainty well and not so well. And it means remembering how we learned and caring enough to take the time to develop those who will inherit our professions and our firms.

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