

Benchlearning

Good Examples as a Lever for Development

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Originally published in Sweden in 2000, this translation claims to have developed a new method of 'creating a symbiosis between business operations and human development and learning': benchlearning. This method is described as a combination of business development and organisational learning. The authors acknowledge that benchlearning is interdisciplinary and they call on their expertise in business strategy, education theory and psychology. However, their stated aim of producing a concise and readable book is only, in part, achieved. The generalist, for example, will probably find the detailed consideration of knowledge formation and modern knowledge theory more than a tad taxing.

Chapter one, entitled 'Observations on Management' adopts a broad sweep approach and considers a range of management perspectives. There are a number of interesting observations, in particular, on the 'Meltdown of the planning epoch.' The chapter, though, is slightly marred by a tendency to generalise, for instance, 'In real life, commerce is almost always a win-win situation'. A statement that grated with me, as I sat on my delayed train to work this morning.

Chapter two defines and explores the impact of benchmarking. The effect of benchmarking on efficiency is discussed in detail and a definition is given on the key elements of the process. There are also a number of relevant and, at times, idiosyncratic Swedish examples referenced to illustrate the text, as the authors write, 'The case of the Lentern Buns is illustrative.' This chapter, in addition, perceptively, discusses the practical advantages that this technique can bring to improving organisational performance.

Chapter three considers knowledge formation, stressing the importance of experience in organisational learning. In a rather anachronistic way, the Japanese industrial workers' willingness to problem solve and adapt to changing conditions are cited as important reasons for the success of Japanese corporations in the 1970s' and 1980s'. This perhaps undermines the argument, for readers in 2002, given the current state of the Japanese corporate sector. However, there is a fascinating consideration of how competition increases knowledge and, in turn, on how this knowledge is codified by individuals and by companies and society at large.

Chapter four develops the theoretical consideration of knowledge formation within the context of the contemporary economy and business. The accelerating pace of change and the increasing job complexity are discussed and the chapter ends with the telling and instructive observation that previous generations triumphed over their turbulent times by fashioning educational tools that enabled them to deal with the accelerating pace of business change.

This leads on to chapter five, which defines benchlearning within the framework of modern knowledge theory. An articulate case is put for integrating corporate learning and efficiency, emphasising the increasing need for faster learning and universal

participation for both organisations and their employees. A key feature of benchlearning, the authors assert, which distinguishes it from benchmarking, is that, unlike the latter, it is not primarily based on comparisons of key indicators but rather seeks to learn from ‘tacit knowledge’. The authors illustrate this term by discussing the transitions between tacit and explicit (or clarified) knowledge. One sub-heading is ‘Benchlearning as an attitude’ which states the importance of prior knowledge as an ingredient in the construction of new knowledge, an irrefutable observation. In chapter six ‘Benchlearning in practice’ there is a discussion on the various components of the method, including sections on ‘knowledge management’ and ‘the learning organisation’. There is also a revealing sub-heading entitled, ‘Good Examples’ which states that a key component of benchlearning is not copying rivals but, on the contrary, ‘seeking inspiration in the world around us.’ For instance, the case of Southwest Airlines studying Formula 1 racing, to investigate whether they could improve the turnaround time of their aircraft, is cited.

The book ends with a long chapter describing benchlearning in practice. The authors illustrate the method with examples from two organisations: a subsidiary of the Ericsson Group (Ericsson Components) and from the Swedish Board of Trade. This chapter is the best and most informative in the book: it details, in seven sequential steps, the benchlearning process. The process is logically developed and considers project organisation, teambuilding, analysing the current situation, learning from good examples, developing new solutions, effecting improvements and then follow-up and new initiatives. A quibble with the book’s approach is that, although the authors are prepared, in places, to discuss their methodology in depth, they also tend to gloss over vital issues. For example, the authors note the importance of securing acceptance for change within organisations without divulging any details on precisely how they went about achieving this consensus.

In general this ‘Benchlearning, Good Examples as a Lever for Development’ is an interesting adaptation of the benchmarking approach, fashioned to take into account the human element in organisational development. It also offers an insight into Swedish management thinking and practices. A major weakness is the clunky way certain expressions, such as smugness and good examples are inserted into the text and, indeed, the title.

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