

A Practice Learning Field: the Electric Maze

by Richard O. Kimball, Ph.D.

To the uninitiated, it is a strange sight. Twenty executive men and women are gathered around a 7 foot by 10 foot, checker-board patterned carpet. The intensity is palpable. The group is utilizing a communication system that is part grunts, part hand signals, part gestures, and part clapping. One thing is clear -the challenge captivates them.

The group is searching for a path through the Electric Maze. After 10 minutes of strategic planning, verbal communication is no longer allowed. Getting themselves to the other end of the maze represents their collective vision. The group has been told that while there is at least one continuous, safe path through the maze, the maze is also full of squares that beep, signaling that the team is off-route.

The *Electric Maze* has three primary levels of performance feedback built in, which are financial results, speed, and quality. The entire team (organization) loses money anytime anyone steps on a beep that has previously been discovered (rework). Secondly, there is a narrow window of opportunity, for every 25 minutes the safe route through the maze changes, sending the team back to square one. Lastly, at the end of the exercise, the group evaluates the quality of its performance by a set of norms that they established in an earlier session.

One at a time, team members step out onto the carpet and seek to extend the group's forward progress through the maze, which is an error-making and error-correcting process. Since 0 of the territory is unknown when the exercise begins, productive mistakes (first time beeps) are essential and valuable information. The team's success is dependent upon quickly assimilating the emerging information into a collective intelligence of the whole system. Similar to any maze, the *Electric Maze* challenge has diagonal moves, side- ways moves, forward and backward moves. Similar to business, the *Electric Maze* has box canyons, dead ends, and confusion points.

Eight minutes into the exercise and despite the 10 minutes of planning, the team is rattled. Its original strategy doesn't seem to be working. As the information being discovered becomes more complex, the group's system is proving to be too rigidly functional, cumbersome, and overly complicated. The group is unfocused. Some individuals hesitate at the end of the discovered, safe path, afraid to take the next step and hit a beep, even though to do so quickly would be new, valuable information. This costs the group precious time. Some group members spurn the group's collective memory in favor of their own individual memory and hit beeps that have been previously discovered. This too costs the group money. Losing time and money, the group is in crisis.

While the group is still working its way across the maze, let's examine the pedagogy which supports this action-learning exercise. We will return later to the activity in the room.

Since the publication of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline (1990)*, there has been considerable interest in creating learning organizations. Quite possibly the rate at which organizations learn may become the only sustainable source of competitive advantage in the 1990s. A key question within this article is "How can we build organizations in which continuous learning occurs?" According to Senge, the litmus test of a learning organization will be when people, instead of advocating their own positions, enter into dialogues of genuine inquiry, which is at the heart of organizational learning.

Senge also suggests that *team learning skills* are far more challenging to learn than individual skills. Consequently, organizations need practice fields, where people can safely

explore aspects of organizational cultures, because the virtual absence of meaningful rehearsal keeps most management teams from being effective.

One basic concept in the field of experiential learning is that people are naturally inclined to learn (expand understanding), to grow (expand their capability), and to perform (expand their efficacy). This concept has little to do with taking in information, but everything to do with enhancing capacity. Learning is about building and enhancing our capacity to create results which we previously could not attain. Moreover, learning does not take place in the domain of our competence. Learning takes place in the arena of what we can't yet do; what we don't yet know; and, what we don't yet understand. This is the essential nature of learning. It occurs on the edge of what you know and what you don't know. (It is not a comfortable place, nor is it a safe place.) In addition, the ability of an organization or an individual to learn has a lot to do with its capacity to tolerate uncertainty, fear, discomfort, ambiguity, and mistakes.

Learning is intimately related to action, moving toward, rather than away from, our anxiety. Learning is a journey—both mentally and physically. While one must be clear about the destination, the path is never certain; and, like the *Electric Maze*, it requires stepping off the end of what you know and where you are safe. The journey involves beeps or wake-up calls, but one's aliveness as a learner can be measured by one's ability to risk by stepping out in the first place, to hear the beeps (life's teachings), and to incorporate their lessons. Just like in the *Electric Maze*, an individual or an organization can always "reserve the right to get smarter" and take corrective action. The journey, however, is a process, and it begins with the first beep.

Now let's go back into the room and see how the group is progressing through the practice learning field: Sixteen minutes of experimenting with the *Electric Maze*, the group begins to shed its original bureaucratic system. Rather than moaning and groaning when someone hits a beep, now each person's turn is celebrated with applause. A major transformational event occurs as a young woman gets down on her knees and begins pointing to the safe squares in her territory, rather than following the group's rigid system. The managership of the *Electric Maze* is now more fluid, and the group is focused, energized, and committed. The group moves like a fast-break basketball team. Everyone is now a part of the team.

Occasionally a beep in known territory, costs the group money, but the group's new orientation is to fix the problem rather than to assign blame. Increasingly, set-backs are rare. Artificial barriers between people disappear. Innovative ideas are utilized quickly. After 20 minutes, the first person is safely through the maze amidst wild applause and cheers, but quickly the group refocuses, queues up holding hands, and within 90 more seconds all 20 participants are through the maze, backslapping and high-fiving.

Following the spontaneous celebration, the group surrounds the maze to analyze their results according to the criteria of money, efficiency, and quality. What was it like to be part of this fluid team/organization? How did the team learn and improve? How did trust and support transform the culture? Did the team achieve the results that it was after? What obstacles got in the way and how did the team get rid of them? What were the keys to effective team performance and how can they take this new capacity to learn back to their day-to-day business environment?

Unlike a classroom discussion about self-directed or high-performing business teams, the participants in the *Electric Maze* have just practiced these concepts. Rather than reading a book, watching a training videotape, or listening to a presentation on self-managed teams, they have just created a self-managed team (albeit in a simplified situation and for a brief period of time).

Following some time to reflect in their individual journals, the group collectively looks back upon the action-learning experience for its lessons. In discussing their experience, the participants identify some key principles of team learning:

1. Everyone acted as though he/she owned the results (positive & negative).
 2. No one said "That's not my job."
 3. The vision (i. e., the desired results) was clear, but the plan was flexible.
 4. Innovative ideas were used quickly.
 5. Continual learning and constant improvement were systemic imperatives.
 6. Mistakes (i.e.,beeps) were viewed as opportunities for everyone to"learn."
 7. There was an absence of hierarchy. There were no artificial barriers.
 8. Narrow functional thinking and bureaucracy were eliminated in the team's commitment to meet and exceed the expectations of the customer/coach
9. All ideas were solicited and listened to. Dialogue prevailed over discussion.
 10. Individuals "walked the talk" The group sought to eliminate the disparity between its declared operating principles and its actions.

The team has learned through a *practice field* and its own direct experience. Most importantly, these are the learner's lessons, not the "teacher's." The facilitator's job has been to be a "learning coach," not a lecturer.

A self-managed team is intrinsically motivated toward greater performance, and is committed to the growth of all its members. It is able to self-monitor and self-correct. Becoming a self-managing "learning team" cannot be taught. It can, however, be learned.

Teams frequently assess their business challenges accurately and develop strategies to meet those challenges, but are unable to pass the real test—translating strategy to action. The challenge for experiential educators is to design practice-learning fields where participants can experiment, explore, and apply the principles of effective teamwork in the field of action. In these practicum settings, teams make productive mistakes, try out new behaviors, and synthesize discrete learnings into new organizational awareness. Through an incremental process such as the *Electric Maze*, participating teams would begin to develop the necessary skills and habits, as well as insights into organizational learning necessary to face the "turbulence" and challenges inherent in today's global environment and information-service age.

References

- Bennis,W. (1989). *On Becoming a leader*. Redding, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gallway, T. (1974). *The inner game of tennis*. New York: Bantam Books
- McCall, M. Lomardo, M. & Morrison, A. (1988). *The lessons of experience*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. Doubleday.
- Weisbord, M (1988). *Productive workplaces: Organizing and managing for dignity, meaning, and community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.