

Social Instruction: The Cure for the Aging Workforce

By Bryan Brew



We've all seen the projections of doom and gloom; your organization will surely fail as the Baby Boomers retire, all of your corporate knowledge will ride off into the proverbial sunset. Despite the fact that the flight has not been as rapid as earlier projected, the fact is simple: the Baby Boomers will eventually leave the workforce; attrition will come in one form or another. Understanding that this *will* happen, how do we protect ourselves?

The fact is that the workforce has a tremendous gap – mid-career employees are disappearing. By the end of this decade, we will have almost 10 percent fewer mid-career (35-44 year olds) workers¹. Add to the inevitability of a declining mid-career workforce, the well-documented differences in communication styles between generational cohorts. Clearly, this changing environment poses a substantial challenge for organizational leaders. How do we cope?

Fans of sports know what to do with high turnover on their favorite team. They can be heard chastising players on TV or the radio across the country: "get back to basics, block and tackle!" However, understanding the fundamentals of most sports is easy, just read a book; simple enough, right? Except reading how to do something and actually doing it are two very different things. For example, I recently read a book on improving my golf swing (I just had to get rid of that slice once and for all!) I still had to hit hundreds of balls to get the hang of shooting straight. What's the difference? A book, article, blog, or other publication is expressed knowledge. Someone who knew how to do something wrote it down for you. Their knowledge is what we refer to as tacit knowledge – the knowledge they have gained through experience. It is tacit knowledge that your organization will bleed when the Baby Boomers exit stage left.

So, since we all know that the magic formula is not going to be found in some book, periodical, blog, or other publication, why keep reading? While it is true that a miracle cure to your organizational

woes won't be found in this article (or any other), I do have a workable solution to present. Suppose you could keep that tacit knowledge, and just maybe some other traits of the departing workforce as well, would you?

Blocking and Tackling: Back to Basics

If you look closely enough, you'll find that it is in fact the fundamentals that will get you past the workforce crisis. What we will call social instruction is in fact a pair of techniques as old as civilization itself. These techniques are basic, yet are not the kind of thing that may be learned from a text. These are very personal, behavior-driven techniques, rooted in the days of oral history – but they are as applicable today as they were 3000 years ago. What are they, you ask impatiently? Mentoring and discipling; that's right, based on the good old-fashioned personal touch.

So why call these social instruction? The basis of both mentoring and discipling is a learning relationship. Yes, a relationship. Social interaction between mentor and mentee or discipler and disciple are aimed specifically at learning. Not only are these classical techniques aimed at learning, what's critical to understand is that they are both aimed at the transfer of tacit knowledge from one person to another. In fact, the word mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. In the story, Mentor is the name of the wise man Odysseus leaves to tutor his son Telemachus while he is away fighting the Trojan Warⁱⁱ.

While mentoring likely conjures up images of wise men (or women!) passing on their life's knowledge to one they have deemed worthy (perhaps visions of Socrates or Aristotle dance in your head); discipling brings thoughts of something totally different. Most people automatically think of a purely religious meaning when they hear the term disciple. Certainly, some of the best (and worst) examples of discipling may be found in religion, but discipling is not a religious experience in and of itself. Webster's dictionary (online) defines disciple as, "one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another..." While a reference to Jesus Christ and his immediate followers is included in the extended definition, it is only one branch thereof. The other branch states, "as a convinced adherent of a school or individual."ⁱⁱⁱ A discipler then is one who develops disciples. Through history we find multiple examples of disciplers; in fact those visions of Socrates and Aristotle dancing in your head: disciplers. That's right, we have the Socratic method, Aristotelian logic, etc. Adherents to these schools of thought are disciples.

Really? Do you really want disciples of Bob in accounting running around in your organization? Probably not, but you may want disciples of Ralph, the Executive Director. Similarly, you may want a couple of mentees of Bob in accounting, so that when Bob decides the time for retirement has come,

someone in your organization can decode the shorthand that ties together entries in your books spanning the last fifteen years!

Why Social?

As discussed, the term social instruction was used to highlight that these methods are at their core, social. Why is that so important? The emerging workforce (as you may have heard or read somewhere) is the most connected generation ever. We are talking about individuals who have never known a time when they couldn't contact someone. What's more, youth is youth; regardless of generational cohort, youth is something encountered, not disconnected. For my own part, I hear stories almost every day about party lines, where towns shared a single analog phone line – something I can't fathom. It's simply foreign to me, as someone just coming into mid-career, that people lacked very individual or personal communication methods. And that is precisely why mentoring and discipling are as appropriate today as they were in the past; they are personal. For example, whether you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ or not, if you have read about him, then you know that as a leader he had a very personal relationship with his followers. He discipled them in the hopes of "cloning" himself, for lack of a better term. Quite simply, he wanted to reach more people, but was left with a very limited resource: himself. So, he duplicated himself, and told his disciples to further duplicate themselves. In so doing, his message has been carried the world over (this article will not debate whether his message has been carried accurately).

Mentoring is also very personal. A learning relationship shared between two people; one person taking another under their proverbial wing. Perhaps Chip Bell says it best: "Bottom line, a mentor is simply someone who helps someone else learn something that would have otherwise been learned less well, more slowly, or not at all.^{iv}" When you put it that way, it sounds pretty darn good doesn't it? The one piece Mr. Bell omitted was what that something is: it is something that the mentor already knows – it is their tacit knowledge.

What to Do Now? Start Today!

So how do you implement these not so revolutionary techniques? Chances are there is some form of both of these going on in your organization today. You likely have some program that inculcates new personnel into the organizational culture: this is the beginning of discipling. You probably have instances of mentoring; the Vice President has his favorite racquetball partner, with whom he shares his thought process for every decision. What you probably don't have is a strategy to incorporate these as real learning tools and to provide you that critical competitive advantage as the workforce loses that oh so critical corporate knowledge. That should change. Today. Now!

Keeping in mind the classic components of strategy, ends and means, you should quickly set out to ascertain what tacit knowledge your organization must have to survive, should have to survive, and would like to have to thrive. Once you have the beginnings of that list, you must add where the knowledge exists today – this may very well be a list by name. Now the hard part – which is the best method of capturing that knowledge? At this juncture, I feel it's important to point out that you cannot coerce a person into mentoring, discipling, or being mentored or disciplined.

Discipling: Discipling should be used as part of your strategy when you need to multiply resources with the minimum amount of difference. In other words, use discipling when you need ten Bobs. This is more than an onboarding process, although, an onboarding process is an excellent place to begin discipling.

Mentoring: Use mentoring when the knowledge being passed requires greater intimacy and at the same time supports more diffuse boundaries. The recipient is likely a more experienced employee being groomed as a replacement or sponsored for a position of greater responsibility.

The last step towards establishing your strategy is the most simply expressed, but by far the hardest: execute.

Developing a strategy to incorporate mentoring and discipling into your organization will reap benefits for years to come. It's likely that the potential benefit of these techniques to your organization cannot be measured (just as much of the tacit knowledge passed cannot be expressed). You won't be receiving any ROI reports – but the fact that someone still knows how to calculate ROI in a fashion relevant to your organization will be reward enough!

ⁱ Ericson, T. (2008). *The Workforce Crisis*. *Texas Banking*, May 2008 (97,5).

ⁱⁱ Bell, C. (2002). *Managers as Mentors*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ disciple. (2008). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Retrieved July 27, 2008, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple>

^{iv} Page 5, Bell, C. (2002). *Managers as Mentors*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.