Debate: The 70:20:10 ‘rule’ in learning and development—The mistake of listening to sirens and how to safely navigate around them

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Richard Harding

Open University

To the Sirens first shalt thou come, who beguile all men whosoever comes to them. Whoso in ignorance draws near to them and hears the Sirens’ voice, he nevermore returns, that his wife and little children may stand at his side rejoicing, but the Sirens beguile him with their clear-toned song (Homer, 1919, p. XII.39ff.).

The popular 70:20:10 individual learning model is similarly beguiling the organizational learning world. Like Circe’s warning to Odysseus, some forewarning of its dangers seems prudent.

Since the 1990s, scholarly emphasis and practitioner interest in individual learning practice within organizations has shifted from the formal to the informal (Clardy, 2018; McCauley et al., 2013). A popular version of the informal approach claims ‘70%’ of learning arises from in work experiences; ‘20%’ through relationships and ‘10%’ through ‘formal’ training, hence the 70:20:10 ‘rule’ (Clardy, 2018).

From researching learning and development (L&D) in UK policing organizations, it is clear this ratio is beguiling its leaders. They are not alone; this seductive ratio has captured policing organizations, it is clear this ratio is beguiling its effectiveness has led numerous organizations to reduce investment in L&D departments (Clardy, 2018) because if formal training ‘accounts for only 10% of development, why do we need it?’ (McCauley, 2013; as cited in Clardy, 2018, p. 154).

The concept of workplace ‘learning’ from experience, peers, and environment is supported by common sense, lived experience and academic literature (e.g.: McCall, 2004). Experiential learning is central to creating organizational culture (Schein, 2009) and it is clear that ‘learning’ takes place irrespective of plan or intent. Consequently there are often differences between what an organization wants its corporate citizens’ behaviours, cognition and knowledge to be and how they actually behave, think and value and share knowledge (Schein, 2009).

The siren song of the 70:20:10 ‘rule’ tempts the unwary, promising self-evident truth, efficiency and cost saving. Here Circe might have warned of ‘kindunos’ (the ancient Greek word for danger); the exactness of the 70:20:10 ratio suggests caution. Contingent real world phenomena generally defy such precise, immutable and generalized quantification (Pirie, 2015) and it’s unlikely to apply so exactly in any organization—let alone across differing ones.

That ‘there is actually no empirical evidence supporting this assumption [the 70:20:10 rule], yet scholars and practitioners frequently quote it as if it is fact’ (DeRue & Myers, 2014, p. 842); it fails to deliver individual development (Johnson et al., 2018); and it has a misleading central assumption that modes of learning are independent, rather than interdependent and need to be considered holistically (McCall, 2010), suggests further caution. Overconfidence in the assumption that unstructured learning approaches automatically deliver capability development (Johnson et al., 2018) leading to their prioritization over other approaches, creating a ‘haphazard process’ (Conger, 1993, p. 46) that insufficiently considers intentionality, accountability and formal evaluation (Day, 2000), suggests that even more caution is necessary. Lastly, even where learners have exposure to knowledge aligned with organizational and professional orthodoxy it competes with other informal knowledge through not wholly rational processes which are subject to contextual, individual and inter-relational influences (Powell et al., 2018); thus its value to and adoption by individuals and groups is less than certain.

There is no dispute that informal learning occurs, however what ‘lessons’ are ‘learnt’ is more equivocal; the hazard lies in the potential that this ‘learning’ meets neither corporate requirement, utility or approval, and in some cases may be their antithesis.

Circe advised Odysseus to:

Row past them [the Sirens] and anoint the ears of thy comrades with sweet wax, which thou hast kneaded, lest any of the rest may hear. But if thou thyself hast a will to listen, let them bind thee in the swift ship hand and foot upright in the step of the mast, and let the ropes be made fast at the ends to the mast itself, that with delight thou mayest listen to the voice of the two Sirens. And if thou shalt implore and bid thy comrades to loose thee, then let them bind thee with yet more bonds (Homer, 1919, p. XII.39ff.).

The song of the 70:20:10 ‘rule’ is attractive but to listen safely to this contemporary Siren (perhaps with empirical knowledge rather than wax as protection) Circes’ admonishment to caution, engagement with foreknowledge, and restraint (and more restraint if temptation becomes too strong) is perhaps as wise now as it was in the 8th century BCE when Homer recorded it.

ORCID

Richard Harding http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3839-9366

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