



Those who fail to learn, are condemned to failure

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Evaluation provides the opportunity to learn

In the age of uncertainty in which we live it is no small challenge to best prepare ourselves, and the organisations for which we work, for the future. I would suggest the evaluation is an essential element for a business to succeed into the future and hence, notwithstanding the obvious difficulty in forecasting this future, it would be delinquent to avoid any exercise to regularly evaluate the position of those organisations to which we have a responsibility.

The evaluation process should provide the opportunity through which we learn and hence modify future action accordingly in order to meet our intended purpose. It involves considering the impact of internal and external factors both prior to deciding on appropriate action, thus creating an expectation, and after acting, when the results of such action are evident. The evaluation process should therefore allow for the comparison between the two (*viz* expectations and results) through which the opportunity for learning should manifest itself. If the results achieved are in line with the expectations, and are positive, this should reinforce the action which produced the results. If, however, the results and expectations are divergent and are negative for the organisation remedial action is indicated.

This process is outlined in the illustration which follows.



In order to be productive the evaluation requires that each component of the diagram should be clearly articulated and understood by all participants in the exercise, as it is only through this that the learning inherent in the evaluation exercise is realised by the individuals and hence the organisation.

I believe that it is appropriate to consider both the past and the future time dimensions (the present is really a combination of the most recent history and the immediate future and so addressing the past and the future elements should adequately address the momentary present) to adequately conduct the exercise.

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Common techniques provide input to the evaluation

The concept of evaluation in the historical context finds application in areas as commonplace as the review of actual financial results against budgets, setting staff objectives and implementing performance review through to benchmarking and strategy review. Although in the present dynamic environment we may be a little sceptical of the relevance of past results the circumspect reviewer will gain comfort from the adage that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Likewise, projecting into the future also has some established mechanisms which are easily accessible to those of us not blessed with a crystal ball or the ability to read the tea-leaves. The data available through the traditional SWOT analysis or a scenario planning exercise provides the opportunity for great learning and although requiring some conjecture are not by any means esoteric disciplines.

Whatever techniques are adopted within the organisation, key to the success of the interaction is the honesty of the participants to ensure that all pertinent input is made available and brought to account in ultimately determining a common understanding of the lessons to be derived and the optimal action to be taken to capitalise upon this knowledge.

In concluding this brief article I am reminded of the subtitle of a collection of essays by Charles Handy published under the pertinent title "Beyond Certainty". Handy writes "We must not let our past, however glorious, get in the way of our future." Equally I would suggest that we must not let our future, however uncertain, get in the way of our learning now. ♦