

A man with dark hair, smiling, stands in a field of tall, dry grass and brush. He is wearing a blue button-down shirt with a small logo on the left chest, blue jeans, and a brown belt. His hands are in his pockets. The background is a dense forest with trees showing autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

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# LEADING WITHOUT SAYING A WORD

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The CEO of Hancock Lumber  
shares his views on leadership.

BY KEVIN HANCOCK



In 2022 Hancock Lumber was recognized as one of the Best Places to Work in Maine for the ninth year in a row. Our average employee engagement score was a 90, compared with a national average of 34. What training systems were involved in earning such a score? None.

What outside consulting groups were engaged? None.

What off-site leadership programs were managers and supervisors sent to? None.

Then how did it happen?

First, a clear vision was established. The employee experience was to be our first corporate priority. Then a small amount of modeling was provided. From there, it was all self-organized. We became one of the Best Places to Work the same way a baby learns to walk.

Humans arrive on Earth already knowing how to learn. Exceptional organizations of the 21st century will come to honor this truth, learn to get out of the way and allow self-organized growth to flourish in a natural rhythm that dances to the hum of the Universe itself.

## A MATTER OF LEARNING

A baby goes from crawling to walking in a matter of months with almost no coaching. It's a system of trial and error, tipping and falling, progress and regression, experimentation and self-correction. With only minor peripheral support, babies teach themselves to walk by watching the world around them and advancing on their own terms through self-motivation, loosely structured group interaction and practice. This is the innate and optimal learning system for humans, but unfortunately, human organizations rarely employ it.

Think about how a baby learns to walk.

Now, picture how we teach students in school.

Then visualize how we manage and supervise adults at work. Finally, contemplate how governments rule and direct their populace from remote capitals. Can you see the disconnect?

Our systems for teaching, managing and governing are all top-down and standardized exercises in following and uniformity. A baby aspiring to walk has more freedom to acquire that complex skill on their own than a 16-year-old has in English class, or most mature adults have at work. Control and standardization from the center — that's how we've come to teach, train, direct and un-inspire.

Now, think again about how a baby learns to walk. Next, consider how we might reimagine

our learning, governance and business operating systems to align with how humans naturally learn.

## SOCIAL EXPERIMENTS

Over a decade ago in remote villages across rural India, Sugata Mitra conducted a series of exceptional social experiments designed to better understand how children learn.

In dirt-covered town squares where kids congregated, he inserted a computer screen and control panel with internet access into a randomly selected wall. No instructions were left behind. No adults stood by to invite children to gather and then teach them what to do. Here's what happened next . . .

Within hours a child would find the device and begin experimenting. This child, like all others who participated in the test, had never used a computer or been on the internet. To add to the complexity, the computer language was English, which none of the children in the region spoke. In less than 10 minutes, that first user was successfully browsing the web, having never seen anyone do so before. By the end of the first day, dozens of children had congregated, taken a turn and learned to use the device. Within weeks the group knew hundreds of English words and had achieved advanced internet navigation skills to play games, watch shows and gather information. When later tested on proficiency, all children typically passed. Everyone earned the same high grades. Rarely were there any discrepancies in learning. When the children learned on their own, no one was left behind.

"Big parts of primary education can actually happen on their own," Sugata explains. "Learning does not have to be imposed from a top-down system."

"In nature, all systems are self-organized. Learning is ideally a self-organizing system."

Sugata describes from his research the four optimal conditions for learning:

- Fault tolerant
- Minimally invasive
- Fluid, allowing free flowing connectivity with others
- Self-organizing

It's worth comparing our existing business practices against these four principles. **FB**

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