



Introducing a ‘stop-doing’ culture: How to free your organization from rigidity

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Abstract Individuals and organizations cannot learn perpetually. Managers should be aware that unlearning becomes necessary to discard obsolete and outdated mental models, assumptions, behaviors, or routines. We investigated new product development teams and interviewed change consultants to explore the phenomenon of unlearning in real-life contexts. We particularly focus on examples of cases in which these steps have been used and implemented successfully. In order to make room for new knowledge and foster innovations more efficiently, we identify and suggest four critical steps managers can introduce to help their employees unlearn: creating situational awareness, providing islands of temporal and spatial freedom, encouraging an error-forgiving and stop-doing culture, and reducing the influence of old knowledge over time. Fostering unlearning can prevent rigidity and stagnation while opening up room for innovation. This article adds an important practical dimension to the mainly theoretical ideas in the field of unlearning and provides strong implications for managers and other practitioners.

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1. Why letting go is important

When looking at rituals, traditions, behaviors, or daily routines, we often observe the same phenomenon: Humans are creatures of habit. Leaving our comfort zones is challenging (Govindarajan, 2016) and we usually avoid re-examining what is going

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well—especially during times of great success. Although sticking to a proven strategy can be beneficial in many ways, our established mental models and habits might obstruct us from keeping up with the environment. Think about your own business: When was the last time you have critically scrutinized well-proven aspects of your business? Have you asked yourself why companies go bankrupt despite possessing abundant resources to innovate? Are you prepared to tackle future challenges, particularly when they do not unfold the way you expected?

Such questions become increasingly relevant. Organizations are situated in dynamic and unpredictable environments; what managers have learned as best practices may suddenly become obsolete. Hence, organizations are required to discard existing mental models, assumptions, beliefs, or routines. The process of intentionally getting rid of established knowledge structures is referred to as *unlearning* (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Unlearning becomes essential when we want to adapt to a new situation but some of our knowledge contradicts new ideas. Think of an example from the philosophy of sciences: As long as people did not discard the idea of the earth being flat, they could not comprehend or adopt the idea of the earth being spherical—simply because both views are incompatible (Kuhn, 2012). Before individuals can easily learn, they first have to unlearn obsolete or outdated mental models, assumptions, habits, or practices. Subsequently, they need to find more effective solutions to achieve their goals and finally ingrain the new cognitive or behavioral models (Bonchek, 2016).

This is no different in organizations. The examples of two renowned companies illustrate how the neglect of unlearning has an influence on a company's success. Despite having already developed the digital camera, Kodak's top management failed to perceive the disruptive impact of digital photography on their business. Kodak did not take the new technology seriously enough and did very little to prepare for a possible shift from film to digital photography as the prevalent technology. The inability to unlearn its core business, scrutinize existing assumptions and business models, and discard obsolete knowledge and practices eventually led to the company's demise.

In its very early stages, Netflix's Reed Hastings offered Blockbuster a partnership, which the former market leader of the video rental industry declined. Blockbuster's former CEO, John Antiocho, and his team failed to see flaws in its business model and underestimated the collective behavior of customers that would later lead to the

company's bankruptcy in 2010. Blockbuster's resistance to letting go of outdated business models and its failure to re-examine its strategy, combined with Netflix's technological development, ultimately fueled Blockbuster's collapse.

2. Keeping up in a turbulent environment

As natural processes of forgetting (e.g., memory decay or involuntary knowledge loss due to non-repetition of routines) might not be adequate to keep up with the increasing pace of change, managers should be aware and possess an understanding of unlearning as an important element of innovation (Becker, 2008). The practice of inducing deliberate unlearning entails the elimination of old routines and habits to enable the absorption of new technologies (Cegarra Navarro & Cepeda Carrión, 2013). Individuals or organizations that are incapable of discarding knowledge, values, or beliefs might create rigidity in thinking and acting, which, in turn, could stifle adaptability (Hislop, Bosley, Coombs, & Holland, 2014).

Unlearning is typically triggered by the onset of a problem (Hedberg, 1981). Causes for deliberately discarding knowledge can stem from internal or external entities. Organizations are best advised to let go of cognitive and behavioral patterns when they become ineffective or obsolete. Displaying a high capability to unlearn is crucial for keeping up with and staying successful in a highly dynamic and turbulent environment (Akgün, Byrne, Lynn, & Keskin, 2007) or during crises (Slatter, 1984). Signals to take action might come from employees or external sources such as customers, partners, or even competitors (Sinkula, 2002).

Especially in terms of innovation and new product development, the capability to identify and discard outdated and obsolete cognitive and behavioral patterns becomes increasingly important. Unlearning enables the creation, implementation, and utilization of new technologies (Cegarra Navarro & Cepeda Carrión, 2013) and the generation and application of new knowledge structures (Cepeda Carrión, Cegarra Navarro, & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2010). Unlearning also facilitates an orientation towards absorptive capacity through internally and externally acquired knowledge (Cepeda Carrión, Cegarra Navarro, & Martínez-Caro, 2012), allows for a recovery from accidental forgetting (Wensley & Cegarra Navarro, 2015), and increases organizational innovativeness (Leal Rodríguez, Eldridge, Roldán, Leal Millán, & Ortega Gutiérrez, 2015). Similarly, unlearning enables

market-driven organizations to provide better value for their customers (Sinkula, 2002). Unlearning can make room for new knowledge in organizations' memories and, consequently, generate opportunities to seek new ideas (Zahra, Abdelgawad, & Tsang, 2011). However, since knowledge is hard to separate (i.e., losing one part could decrease the value of other parts), it may also be possible that purposeful unlearning of supposedly outdated practices could obstruct organizational functioning and, hence, learning (Zahra et al., 2011). Unlearning, if inappropriate or purposeless, could cause negative consequences when the abandoned knowledge leads to the leakage of critical knowledge (Yildiz & Fey, 2010).

Over the past couple of decades, the field of unlearning has received increasing attention (Klammer & Gueldenberg, 2018). Typically understood as purposeful knowledge loss (Martin de Holan, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2004), unlearning is linked to several concepts such as learning, innovation, or change management. Unlearning includes thoroughly re-examining proven aspects of business (Sheaffer & Mano-Negrin, 2003) and is, therefore, extremely challenging when adopting new management practices. Intentionally discarding obsolete knowledge serves as an important prerequisite for new learning (Hagel & Brown, 2017) and creativity (Mukherjee, 2017). However, we know very little about how it can be achieved in organizations. We want to step beyond the promising—but predominantly conceptual and theoretical—idea that stands behind unlearning and ask a simple, yet highly relevant question: How can managers help their companies unlearn?

3. Unlearning in knowledge-intensive environments: The method

We employed a holistic multiple-case study design to examine the phenomenon of unlearning in new product development teams. Since we take a different angle with a focus on knowledge loss instead of generation, we follow an inductive and iterative process of creating new insights. Our research deals with issues and processes of managing knowledge, which is why we opted for exploring knowledge-intensive environments.

Over a period of 2 years (2016–2017), we gathered interview and other data from 10 different companies. We conducted 30 individual interviews (three members per team and company), each lasting for about an hour. Differences in job positions in the respective teams (e.g., head of R&D, team leaders, regular team members) have not

been taken into consideration as we focused on the group dynamics as a whole and refrained from distinguishing between hierarchical levels. We developed a semistructured interview guideline based on existing literature and preliminary interviews. We asked participants to provide additional data or documents in order to qualitatively enrich and possibly triangulate our findings. In a second step, we administered follow-up phone calls and emails with our interview partners (at least one individual of each company) to clarify pending questions and provide room for comments on the general idea. These ideas and insights were generally confirmed by our partners.

At the beginning of 2018, we conducted an additional series of interviews with consultants to obtain an outside perspective on our initial findings. We focused on two issues: (1) if the consultants had observed and experienced such processes and (2) how to successfully deal with these processes. In doing so, we could confirm our findings and outline several intervention techniques on how consultants initiate unlearning in organizations.

4. The inability to unlearn as a barrier

Our research shows that one of the main reasons why organizations fail to initiate change and drive innovations is the inability to unlearn. This inability to discard obsolete knowledge can be perceived as a barrier to innovative thinking and behavior that might lead to rigidity and stagnation. Resistance to discarding embedded cognitive structures and established routines is a major obstacle to unlearning, especially on the individual level. Since employees have invested a great amount of time, effort, and maybe even emotions in creating worldviews and routines that provide safety, it is understandable that they do not want to leave their comfort zones. Naturally, that makes unlearning very challenging. Such individuals are resistant to new approaches to doing things as they simply fail to see the need to unlearn by actively questioning existing assumptions and routines.

Daily business is another factor contributing to the inability to unlearn. Due to daily routines, employees rarely have sufficient time to identify outdated practices. Carrying out operative tasks and following predefined organizational processes, combined with stress and time pressure, prevents employees from thoroughly scrutinizing existing knowledge. Daily business hinders individuals to think outside the box, as embedded assumptions and routines provide safety. In addition, individuals are being exposed to an increasing amount of

information, which might lead to sensory overload. An excessive number of meetings, phone and video calls, and emails, as well as exposure to the internet, social media, and news might lead to failure in separating relevant from irrelevant knowledge. Daily routines, paired with information overload, pose a major hindrance to successful unlearning. Resistance to unlearn also arises from individuals' fears that taking risks will lead to critical mistakes. Interestingly, even in supposedly innovative R&D teams, employees display risk-avoiding behaviors. Stemming from the anxiety of making crucial mistakes, employees typically refrain from engaging in new ways of doing things, but much rather tend to stay on the safe side. Risk aversion, therefore, contributes to the resistance to unlearn.

The inability to unlearn may lead to some undesired and negative consequences for organizations. The failure to identify and, more importantly, discard obsolete knowledge can cause firms to miss innovations and obstruct their ability to keep up with technological developments in the environment. Resistance to unlearning does not always stem from employees, but can also be seen at the level of top management. Companies (or their CEOs and top management) tend to cling to what has worked well in the past—especially in times of environmental turbulence or crisis. However, this may not always be the right path to follow. The examples of Kodak and Blockbuster demonstrate the necessity of constantly scrutinizing well-proven aspects of business. Companies need to be aware that knowledge can become outdated or obsolete and they need to be willing to discard it. The inability or resistance to unlearn can, therefore, pose a major threat to the survival of an organization.

To counteract these rather negative consequences, organizations should find ways to promote unlearning. Our research shows that employees become more receptive to innovative ideas and create space for new learning when unlearning precedes these processes. Through our research, we identified four key approaches that managers can follow in order to enable and foster unlearning in their organizations.

Top management needs to create situational awareness to when old knowledge has become obsolete. By freeing themselves from information overload, individuals become more open to new technologies and find new ways of doing things. Organizations are best advised to encourage a culture that allows for making mistakes without fear of being punished. Unlearning enables employees to adequately, flexibly, and quickly respond to changing internal and external requirements. A prerequi-

site for successful unlearning is that both top management and employees display the willingness to let go of obsolete assumptions and behaviors. Only then can organizational context allow individuals to discard existing beliefs and routines.

5. How organizations can foster unlearning

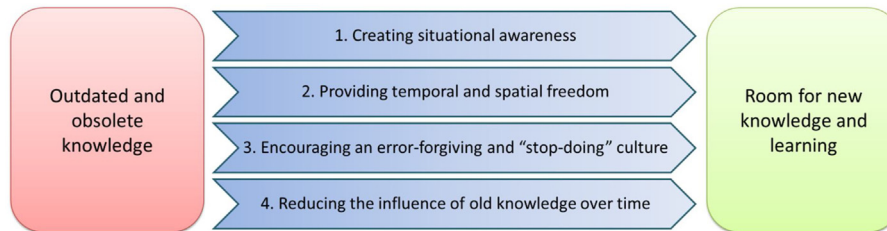
Consider one of our cases that exhibits all four approaches. Doppelmayr, one of the global market leaders in ropeway engineering, planned to develop a radically innovative product. Top management deemed it necessary to free their employees from preconceived notions, assumptions, and other bias. The idea was to refrain from using blueprints and sketches for existing products and start from scratch. Starting with a core team, the employees were sent to a vacant facility on the organization's premises 1 day a week for about 1 year. They were situated in offices without phones to isolate them from daily business. This would allow the team members to focus on the new product without any external influences. During this time, employees had the opportunity to question assumptions about existing products in a safe environment where they were allowed to approach product development in a more experimental manner. Employees did not need to fear negative repercussions for making crucial mistakes. The new product contained several radical novelties and was well received by the customers.

Doppelmayr's top management purposefully created the awareness of letting go of existing notions in a top-down approach. By providing temporal and spatial freedom in the vacant facility, employees could remove the shackles of daily routines. Also, they were allowed to create and experiment with new ideas in an error-forgiving environment. All measures helped to reduce the influence of old knowledge over a long period of time (Figure 1).

5.1. Creating situational awareness

Unlearning is commonly not executed proactively but is instead triggered by internal or external problems. Managers should actively promote unlearning by developing enhanced situational awareness on the individual and team levels. Situational awareness involves being aware of what is happening while simultaneously sensing how your knowledge impacts behavior. Identifying irrelevant and outdated knowledge makes space for new learning and prevents information overload. Personal filters and skepticism aid in

Figure 1. Four key approaches of unlearning in organizations



discarding obsolete knowledge. Changing the situation by rupturing routines, introducing rules of sensemaking, or even future labs can serve as a means to foster unlearning.

Our cases show that situational awareness is mostly instilled via a top-down approach. Top management often creates a sense of urgency to highlight the necessity to discard certain obsolete beliefs and routines. This sense of urgency might also be evoked by creating an artificial crisis to trigger unlearning more quickly and radically. In doing so, managers can develop employees' awareness and mindfulness. This allows individuals to reflect on their own world views, cognitive maps, and routines. In short, managers should help employees who are leaving their comfort zones to increase their capacity to absorb new ideas. However, it is often not enough to simply create urgency; employees also need to display readiness to let go of old knowledge. Our cases reveal a recurring pattern in terms of situational awareness. Teams from Blum and Grass, both top players in the metal fittings industry, as well as Zumtobel, a global player in the industry of lighting solutions, emphasize that the complexity of their products is quickly increasing (this probably holds true for most industrial products). This requires employees to be aware of their existing beliefs and assumptions about the products and, if necessary, scrutinize them. Individuals also need to be attentive to their business environment. While managers can conjure situational awareness, employees must individually identify and discard obsolete knowledge.

One respondent from the consulting firm theLivingCore observed that unlearning often fails because employees do not feel involved or fail to realize that they need to be the ones to realize such processes. What is needed, he stressed, is positive excitement among all employees such that they are willing to break with old patterns of thinking and behavior. However, finding ways to spark excitement is a big challenge for managers, and he urged them to translate the numbers and figures into interesting stories that are tailored to the

contexts of the respective employees. Empathizing with those involved in unlearning processes is crucial because situational awareness can only be achieved when everyone knows what he or she can stop doing specifically.

For unlearning to be successful, employees should be aware that unlearning initiatives hinge on their very own mindsets and actions. Managers should put themselves in the shoes of their employees and think of ways to motivate and engage them.

5.2. Providing islands of temporal and spatial freedom

Managers should allow employees to use time and space to detach themselves from the shackles of daily routines and stagnation. Companies should set degrees of freedom that enable individuals and teams to work more freely. Through moving freely within these boundaries, team members should be able to scrutinize and break free from obsolete and outdated mental models, perceptions, or routines that hamper unlearning. Companies such as Google, Facebook, or Airbnb offer many alternative work-places that serve as islands of creativity.

As discussed in our first example Doppelmayr, time and space were used to enable individuals to scrutinize existing assumptions and beliefs with skepticism. Particularly open-minded and curious individuals who are susceptible to facing and overcoming challenges can positively unfold their personalities in such environments. They benefit from freeing themselves from daily routines and operative procedures. Interestingly, employees of one of the case companies are called to clean up their desks and offices once a week. Employees are urged to get rid of old or obsolete notes, documents, or other information that could be regarded as mental weight and hampers the creation of new ideas. The interviewees confirmed that this practice actually helps them acquire fresh perspectives. The management team of this company perceives the offices of their employees somewhat as a metaphor for the organizational memory. Consider another example

that uses space and time to encourage unlearning of existing beliefs and routines. At Blum, one day every two months, the R&D department of the company organizes so-called 'developer days.' Employees or project teams can sign up to present what they are working on, talk about ideas for future projects, or verbalize problems and how they try to solve them. Colleagues usually attend these conference-like settings to escape from daily routines and see other ideas in hopes of learning about other solutions or approaches to solving a similar problem. Attending these meetings enables employees to scrutinize their current ways of doing things.

One of the interviewed consultants mentioned the example of an office furniture manufacturing company that aimed at renewing their strategy. Although well-established in the market and known for high-quality products, the company's products seemed to have lost its innovative touch. Management saw great potential to introduce a new, innovative line of products: designing and producing office furniture for startups and the entrepreneurial market segment. The company's employees, however, struggled with changing their existing mindset of how these new products could be designed and produced. In fact, employees needed to discard elements of the existing organizational culture in order to understand how startups and entrepreneurs work. Management decided to send employees to co-working spaces, startups, and business incubators. Employees were asked to continue working from such types of offices to grasp the mindset of entrepreneurs, including what they need and value. In doing so, the company's employees were enabled to get rid of established assumptions about how regular offices should be designed. They were able to see what entrepreneurs and individuals working in startups truly need for their daily work.

Providing employees with islands of spatial and temporal freedom allows them to question routines, habits, and well-entrenched ways of thinking. This allows employees to unlearn previous experiences, assumptions, and procedures and, at the same time, make room for new ideas and behaviors.

5.3. Encouraging an error-forgiving and stop-doing culture

Although they are supposedly innovative, employees in R&D exhibit high levels of risk aversion. Managers should introduce and foster a culture that permits employees to make mistakes and errors along the innovation process. An entrepreneurial or error-forgiving culture might diminish

the fear of making critical mistakes and foster unlearning among individuals and teams. Open-minded and proactive individuals would particularly benefit from an error-forgiving culture that allows for mistakes.

Fostering an error-forgiving culture is closely connected to the previous step. In addition to providing temporal and spatial freedom, managers also need to cultivate a culture (or at least a subculture in a project team for innovation) in which employees lose the fear of making critical mistakes. Most of our case companies have realized the need to create a safe environment for their employees in which they are allowed to follow exploration and exploitation approaches in the process of product development. Products in metal fittings consisted of about 20 parts 25 years ago, while the product with the same purpose is made up of more than 200 parts today. Products and the underlying systems have become much more complex and, hence, influencing parameters or levers to advance innovations are not automatically evident. To drive innovation at Blum, the company composes teams to follow a trial and error approach with existing and future products. In this safe environment, employees are encouraged to take risks and break with old cognitive patterns and assumptions through experimentation. The employees of the company are allowed to make mistakes in this safe environment. Respondents stress the importance of making negative experiences and value the insight into why some assumptions and routines about existing products are obsolete. Knowing why something does not work is (at least) equally important to knowing why something does work. Making mistakes without having the fear of being punished allows employees to turn negative experiences into something positive.

Interviewed consultants point out that this dimension might often lead to a paradox in the business reality. On the one hand, managers are well aware that employees need freedom to play around with new ways of thinking and acting. And in most cases, managers are committed to providing this space. However, reality paints a different picture if things go wrong and employees are left to feel the consequences and penalties of their failure. While such negative cases evoke uncertainty, employees feel much safer when they follow old and proven ways of handling things. Nevertheless, it should be quite the opposite: Reward those who are brave enough to leave established paths.

One consultant reported an interesting case in which management tried to loosen up hierarchical structures and establish a more entrepreneurial spirit. Naturally, employees were reluctant to give up rigid but established traditions of decision

making. Management was forced to make their request more credible. At one point, top managers decided to ban suits and ties from their everyday business outfits in favor of more casual clothing. According to the consultant, this was a simple yet powerful symbolic action that helped to reinforce the new culture of the organization.

The process of unlearning is supported when employees can experiment with new knowledge. Managers, employees, and consultants all stress that it is essential for managers to walk the talk. Only when employees are ensured that they can make mistakes will they start thinking and doing things in a new way. Of course, they might fail in the beginning, but this can be thought about in a new way: They did not make a mistake, they just found one way that does not work.

5.4. Reducing the influence of old knowledge over time

Perhaps the biggest challenge for managers is ensuring employees do not fall back into old habits and routines. In order to actively discard old knowledge from the cognitive and behavioral repertoire of organizational members, managers need to remove stimulus-response models that trigger the use of old knowledge. They can move to change architectural patterns: rearrange desks, intentionally disrupt information exchange, block the use of specific incentives and procedures, or change corporate language by removing terms or phrases that have been associated with old behavior.

The last and probably most challenging step is to avoid falling back into old mental models and behaviors while simultaneously implementing and augmenting new assumptions and routines. As our cases show, managers use a few simple tricks to reduce the influence of old and obsolete knowledge. One is creating the environmental conditions that keep employees from falling back into old cognitive patterns and routines. By removing past retrieval cues or diminishing the retrieval strength of stimulus-response patterns, managers can disassociate employees from undesired behavior. Disassociation can be evoked via the removal of artifacts and symbols employees associate with old and obsolete assumptions and routines. This might include using different language or changing architectural patterns such as removing old pictures, getting rid of office decorations, or introducing new seating arrangements. Consider the case of a furniture manufacturing company mentioned by a consultant at which management aimed to foster a more innovative spirit. In doing so, management initially involved a few employees

to break with established practices and introduce new ones. They soon found out that their initial plan of carrying out a single workshop did not lead to success; individuals would accept whatever was demanded but as soon as they returned to their office desks, old habits kicked in. Subsequently, the company carried out a number of workshops over a few months. Every week, employees came together and reflected on how new behavior patterns could be better realized. Over time, the number of instances in which employees fell back into old behaviors decreased until, finally, they successfully unlearned the old ways of doing things and got used to new ones.

One consultant reported on the case of a huge corporation led by a patriarchal leader for decades. The company was successful; routines and best practices were deeply embedded in the organizational structures. When the CEO left the company, the new management board aimed to renew the organization. However, every change initiative—no matter how convenient and useful for the employees—was doomed to fail. It seemed as if employees were chained to the mindsets and behaviors that have proven to be successful in the past. When a group of consultants entered the organization, they observed that it felt like the former CEO never really left the company. Pictures of him were still hanging on the walls, literally looking over the shoulders of employees doing their work. Important meetings were still held in a huge seminar room that everyone knew had been the favorite place of the former CEO. Such artifacts had a strong influence on employees. The old ways of doing things were as present as ever. Removing such artifacts was a crucial step in helping employees unlearn old ways of doing things.

Since outdated knowledge cannot simply be removed from the heads of employees, organizations need to find ways to reduce the influence of old knowledge. What keeps old knowledge in the minds of individuals? What artifacts remind employees of old knowledge? Those are crucial questions to keep in mind during periods of unlearning.

6. Lessons for practitioners

Our cases confirm that unlearning helps make room for new knowledge. By creating situational awareness, providing temporal and spatial freedom, fostering an error-forgiving and stop-doing culture, and intentionally reducing the influence of old knowledge, managers can help their employees discard old assumptions and routines. Promoting unlearning measures enhances creativity

in the process of new product development as employees become more receptive to new ideas. Furthermore, the ability to identify and discard obsolete beliefs and behaviors allows employees to respond flexibly and quickly to changing external and internal requirements. The ability to unlearn can be seen as a crucial driver for innovation. Managers should, therefore, enable and encourage their employees to free themselves from outdated and obsolete knowledge to make space for new ideas.

What we should stop doing is just as essential for future success as what we should not forget or continue to do. Managers are best advised to reassess and challenge deeply engrained mindsets. In doing so, organizations can free themselves from rigidity and stagnation while making room for new knowledge. This room for new knowledge can then be utilized to create new and innovative products, services, and business models. Especially when situated in a dynamic environment, unlearning enables organizations to adapt quickly to market environments, customer demands, and trends.

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