

## **Jonathan Gosling:** Beyond Experiential Learning

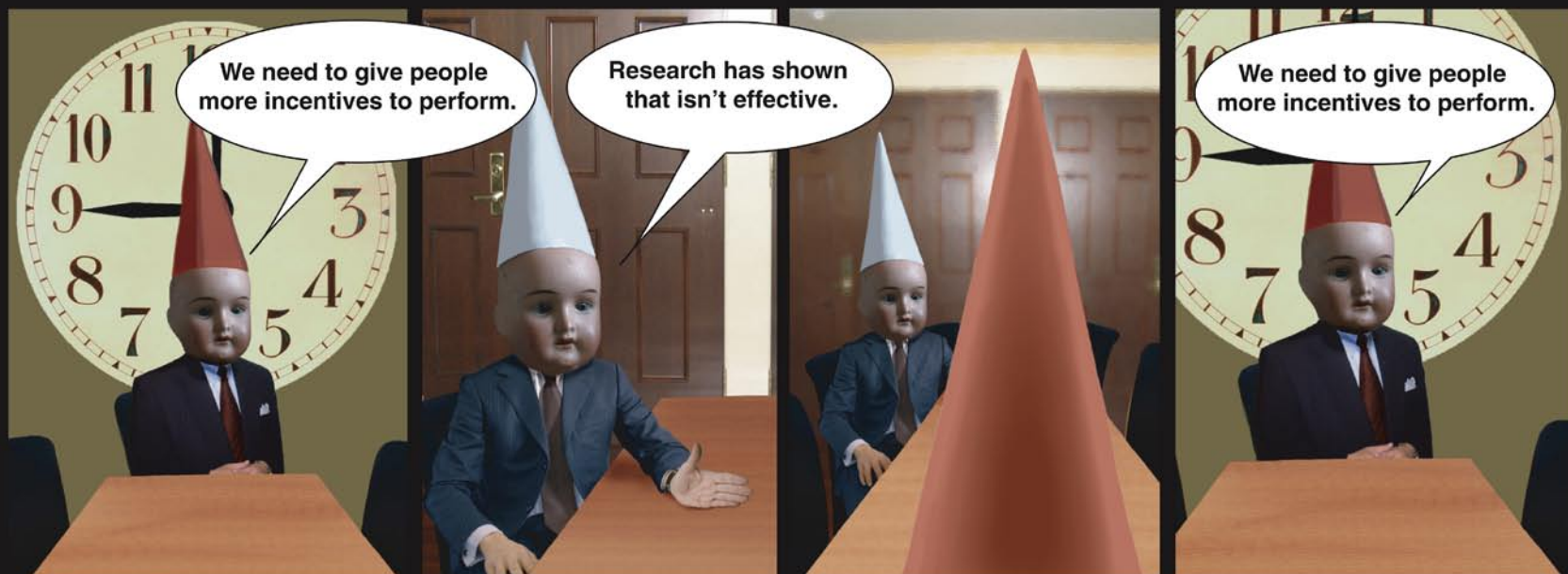
Jonathan Gosling has been pushing the frontiers of how we, as managers and professionals, learn. A professor at Exeter University he has been involved in developing the IMPM (International Masters and Practicing Management), the ALP (Advanced Leadership Program) and [Coaching Ourselves](#). I caught up with him for an update on his ideas.

**DC:** Lectures are not a great way for people to learn. What works better?

**JG:** The first step—as is well known to training professionals—is experiential learning. This is the sort of thing where, for example, a group is asked to quickly build a bridge out of Lego blocks. That type of activity can provide a rich experience on which to base their learning about an issue like group dynamics or production processes. The cognitive recognition of a truth (an idea about management) is combined with something more visceral. Experiential learning helps people absorb knowledge and integrate it with existing knowledge. But that is still only going halfway.

## INCENTIVES

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Learning should not be dependant on being captured by an individual and then transported from the classroom back to work. The next step, which is rarely taken, is to link what people are learning with the processes they are actually responsible for managing. If you make that link then they will automatically begin to do things differently in the workplace.

The way to make that link is to have people reflect on the actual issues they are facing as part of the learning experience. In the Advanced Leadership Programme managers sit in tables with their peers and discuss the ideas in the context of their own company and the projects they are working on. They don't spend their whole time listening to instructors or talking about other companies or doing abstract exercises; they spend their time drawing on their own experience and discussing their own issues.

**DC:** Why the emphasis on reflection?

**JG:** Reflection is the activity that links learning to practice; it's what takes abstract ideas and transforms them into 'this is what it means in my work.' People can learn to be reflexive in training programs and take that habit back in to work. You don't want to be reflective all the time—it's only one of five mindsets we teach—but in order to be properly reflective you need to build up the habit and learn the skill.

**DC:** Is it possible to completely leave the classroom behind?

**JG:** Yes, we've designed an approach we call 'close learning' as an alternative to executive MBA programs. The manager stays in the workplace. They discuss topics with the instructor by phone and get learning material via the web. The instructor stays very close to the participants during their daily managing and leading experience. It's one-to-one teaching. The instructor customizes each participant's learning experience around the challenges they face at work.

**DC:** Does that mean there is no set curriculum?


**JG:** It's not entirely open ended because we do know quite a lot about adult developmental learning. We know that, for example, the ability of a manager to perceive the power dynamics in their own work place depends on them first having a relatively sophisticated self awareness of their own responses to power and their own sense of autonomy. Therefore it's important at the early stages of a close learning program to develop that self-awareness.

After gaining self-awareness people understand better what's going on around them. They begin to notice that as managers explain what they are doing, and why they are doing it, these managers are perhaps unconsciously making reference to common theories about leadership, or about power, or about efficiency. Participants become more alert and more sophisticated at distinguishing the leadership theories as used in the workplace.

This approach has some similarity to coaching, but includes an education in contemporary concepts.

**DC:** How does 'close learning' compare to 'distance learning'?





**JG:** In distance learning the student is conceived as being a very long distance from the source of knowledge. It's as if the knowledge is all banked in the business school and the participants can access the knowledge through the computer almost as if it were an ATM. But knowledge attained that way is still abstract, it is just written word, and it doesn't come alive until they can integrate it and use it.

With close learning we are saying the relevant knowledge is what the participant is gaining through their experience of managing. That knowledge isn't made useful until they can reflect on it in a disciplined way. Close learning helps them see their existing knowledge in a fresh light.

Sometimes, even more basic than that, close learning is just a way for them to discover what it is they know. It helps them look at their daily experiences and notice new things. That disciplined structure comes from an interaction with the instructors from the business school.

**DC:** We've gotten rid of the classroom; can we get rid of the instructors too?

**JG:** The relevant knowledge for a manager is in three quite different places: some is the knowledge that he or she has arising from their own work; then there are the insights, questions and perceptions of colleagues, customers and others; and finally there is also a value in the codified knowledge from the business school. Real value arises from bringing these three together, which requires a certain amount of structure, not much instruction (but a lot of curiosity on the part of the manager). Our Coaching Ourselves model does that. The Coaching Ourselves organization provides conceptual frameworks to help people ask good questions and prompt discussion to pursue those questions, often with hints on how they might want to proceed. Small groups of people who work together meet once a week to examine their own managerial situations through the light of these conceptual frameworks.

This really takes the ownership and possession of the knowledge right to the heart of the managers, where it belongs; especially managers who share, collectively, the knowledge and responsibility for it.

**DC:** Let me end by asking about that venerable learning mechanism: the book. In school we are taught that the book, not the reader, has the relevant knowledge. That seems out of tune with your thinking. How do you approach books?

**JG:** When I read a book, I read it from a number of different angles. Largely, I'm reading in a kind of conversation. The author is saying something to me; what do I think about it? Often I'm engaging in that quite actively because I think about how it might convert into something I might teach. In another sense, reading a book for me is a bit like mining or farming. I'm drawing from the book ideas, models or data.

It's also true that I read books even when I don't know quite where it's going to take me, I'm interested to find out what this person has been thinking about for the last few years, and investing the energy to write it down.

