

Mihaly Nagy interviews Verna Allee

in preparation for the Stamford Global 2-day leadership workshop, March 1-2, 2004.

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Mihaly:

What is your approach to teaching in classroom?

Kurt Lewin once said, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." I am a firm believer that every workshop needs to leave people both with good theory and with something that is immediately useful. The underpinnings of the current economy are so different the greatest challenge is for people to shift their way of thinking. So my approach is to introduce a new foundational assumption, framework, tool, or method – and then have them immediately try it out or discuss it from their own experience base.

When you are teaching Knowledge Leadership, what are some of the concepts you hope your students will take away from the course?

One of the biggest difficulties for leaders is going beyond mechanistic thinking to the perspective of enterprise as a living network. That is most important. Next, I would hope that people will better appreciate that there are three levels of innovation that must happen for success. Those are the strategic, tactical, and operational levels – business thinking, social innovation, and enabling technologies. My work focuses primarily on fostering new business thinking and implementing social innovations such as knowledge networks.

What are some of the common mistakes and misunderstandings you see in regards to Knowledge Leadership?

The primary mistake leaders make is focusing on only one level of innovation instead of all three. Some people think technology is enough and buy all the latest document and collaboration technologies; others only focus on the human side of work, putting all their emphasis on culture and behaviors. Most fail to seriously adopt new business thinking. When you look at companies that fail, they are often only innovating on one level. Many technology companies failed in the dot-com crash because they only innovated on technology. However, if you look at their management practices and business models, they were strictly industrial age. Those that adopted more participatory management practices, and also learned to leverage knowledge and networks in their business model, are still going strong.

What are some of the Knowledge Leadership principles that seem more difficult for managers to adhere to?

Once you strip away all our ideas and imposed structures for how we think about business, we see a world of interwoven, interdependent networks of real people exchanging knowledge and goods. The network is the living system at the heart of enterprise. However, you cannot administer a network – you can only serve it – which is turning all our old ideas of leadership upside down. Instead of attending to processes, leaders must now help create the conditions for real knowledge sharing and self-organization to happen. This requires very different behaviors on the part of leaders and managers, and real behavior change is difficult for people.

What concerns do you hear most in the classroom?

People appreciate the classroom experience as an opportunity to step back from their everyday activities and gain a fresh perspective. We are all so busy that it is difficult to take time to really explore the questions that matter. Another thing people struggle with is that even though they are learning new ways of thinking and working, they must now go back to an environment that does not support them in a new way of working. Many organizations are being led by people who became successful using another set of leadership principles, beliefs, and behaviors. This can make it very difficult for people to apply what they are learning, as the scale of the change that needs to happen can seem overwhelming. It is not enough to just learn. People now must go back, and demonstrate and teach others, even though they might be struggling themselves to do things differently.
