A New Learning Script

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You possess a large number of what the cognitive psychologists call “scripts.” Honest. You do. You don’t know it, but you do.

A “script” is an implicit understanding of what happens in a specific situation. For example, all of us have a script that tells us what to do when we walk into a restaurant. This script is very functional because everyone else in the restaurant has the same script. Everyone knows who should and will do what.

We all also have an education script. We learned this script in first grade: Show up, take your seat, and listen attentively—or, at least, as attentively as you decide the lecturer and the topic warrant. Some people take notes—either because someone once told them that they were supposed to take notes, or because they need something to do to keep their mind from wandering, or because they actually think that the lecturer is saying something that they might want to remember.

Notice what is implicit in this education script: The lecturer. The person in the front of the room who is responsible for conveying knowledge into everyone’s brain. According to this script, the students’ job is to sit quietly, to attempt to absorb the knowledge that the lecturer is conveying, and, when they don’t quite understand something, to ask a polite question. This script is convenient—for the students at least. For it does not require them to do much work. If they fail to understand something, it is not their fault. It is the lecturer’s fault. This traditional, education script lets every student off the hook.

I want you to throw away this educational script. As a replacement, I propose a script in which every participant in Driving Government Performance has to do some real work. In fact, this educational script assigns to you much more responsibility—for your own learning, and for the learning of your colleagues. This script requires you to think critically about what every person in the room is saying. This alternative script requires you to decide what you are learning and how you will apply this learning in your current and future jobs.

This executive-education program will be a conversation, and any conversation is a series of stories. For each session, the conversation begins with the case. This is the first story. The conversation is introduced by the case writer who describes a specific set of organizational, political, and cultural circumstances that you have never seen before. And yet, everyone in the room has seen something—perhaps a lot of somethings—that possess important similarities to the circumstances in the case.

This is how you enter the conversation. If nothing in the case is familiar to you, you don’t know where to start. Inevitably, however, you will recognize something in the case; drawing upon your management repertoire, you will offer some analysis or suggestions. You will enter the conversation by identifying and analyzing a problem that you see in the case, by answering a question on the blue sheet, or by responding to what someone else said.

To contribute to this conversation, you have to listen. You have to try to understand the explicitly stated analyses and recommendations and to decipher the assumptions upon which they are based. This requires you to do more than listen languidly or take notes placidly. This requires you to do work—active work. As Roger Schank writes in Tell Me a Story, “the more work the hearer does, the more he or she will get out of [a] story.”

You can, of course, avoid any real work. You can look at the stories told in the cases and by your colleagues and reach a very simple conclusion: The outcome was preordained by organizational circumstances, political forces, or dumb luck. This gets you off the hook. If circumstances, forces, and luck determine everything, there is nothing to learn. Thus, you avoid the difficult task of thinking about what might be learned.

You, however, do not really believe this. Even though you accept that circumstances, forces, and luck have an impact, you also believe you can have an impact. You have chosen to engage in this conversation because you want to learn something. You are looking for ideas that can help you have an impact.

The good news is that the cases—and especially the conversation about these cases—will offer many, potentially relevant ideas. The bad news is that you have to work to figure out which ideas are relevant to you in what ways.