

Development and Learning in Organizations

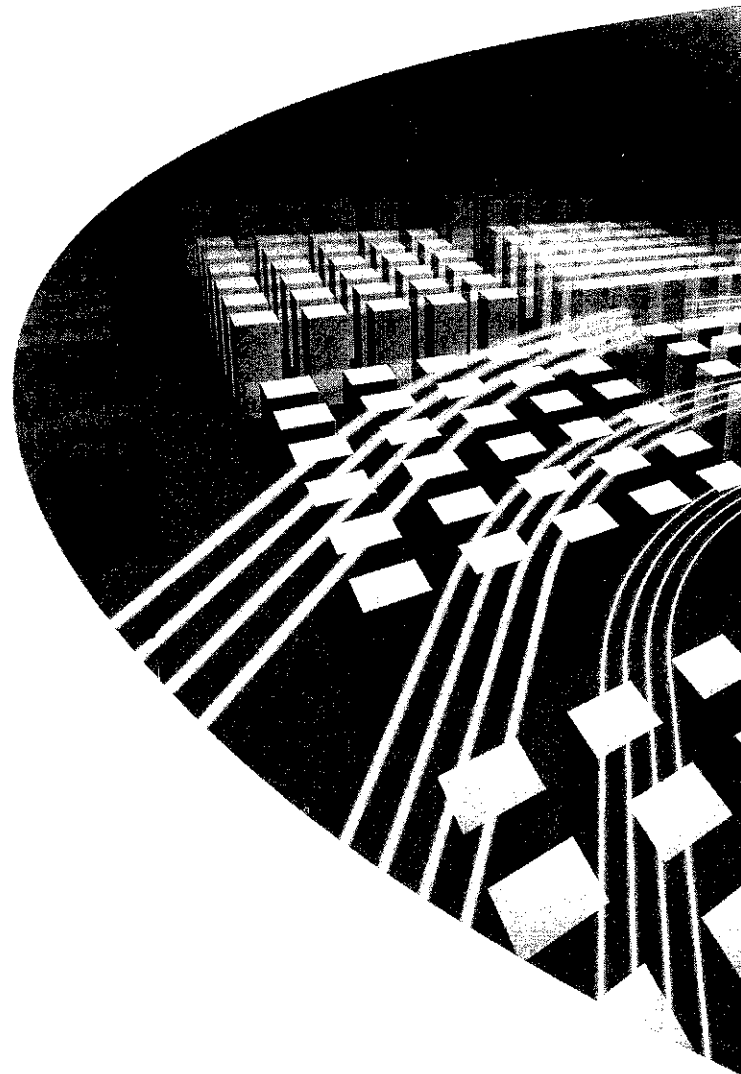
An International Journal

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Creating opportunity from crisis: taking a strategic and learning-focused perspective

Sparking worker creativity: cultures where garden variety creativity can flourish

Exploring the vacuum in training evaluation: is this a case of mission impossible?



Interview with John Amaechi



A former NBA basketball player, John Amaechi is the founder of Amaechi Performance Systems, a company that helps organizations to optimise individual and corporate development and performance. John is dedicated to personal excellence, mentoring and counselling young people through sport. In 2001 John formed the ABC Foundation and set up the Amaechi Basketball Centre in his hometown of Manchester, England. Following the success of this he hopes to develop five further centres in the UK. For more information about John, visit his web site at: www.amaechiperformance.com

What led you to move from the world of sport into that of psychology?

Frankly, I knew I was going to be a psychologist way before I knew I was going to be a basketball player, I knew I was going to be a psychologist when I was eight years old. My mother was a General Practitioner and she got me my first job as an occupational therapist's aid in a psycho-geriatric hospital and I watched my Mum and the way she interacted with patients and I clearly knew that the biggest part of her job in my mind was the psychological care and the emotional well-being of her patients and their families as much as any pills or injections. Also I don't like blood and guts, so I knew I wasn't going to be a Doctor!

You have worked across the fields of sport and business. What lessons do you think the sporting world has to teach the business world?

The sporting world is really a much more intense version of the business world. What struck me about sport was how much it is just about business how clearly, individuals within the sport as athletes are commodities often with no more say in what happens to them than race horses but with all the principals of business applied to them. I think, in terms of what the business world can learn it is the more generic aspects of teamwork and leadership. Often people in sport end up talking in very anecdotal ways to business about leadership and teamwork and I think there needs to be more of this, because whilst a lot of sports do work in teams, a lot of professional teams do not really exemplify team work. I was very lucky to spend at least one year on a team that absolutely did embody that, where for the first time and the only time frankly, I was on a team where gestalt principles applied where the whole truly was greater than the sum of the parts, but most of the time that is not what happens. Most of the time, one or two elite individuals have a different set of rules applied to them, a different set of responsibilities and a different set of expectations and other people just have to accommodate that which I do not think is necessarily the greatest model for teamwork.

You have been involved in a lot of work on diversity and this is an area which is still quite problematic in a number of organizations. What first steps do organizations need to take to begin to address the issue?

Pragmatic self-assessment is usually the way-forward. You have got to look at yourself with a really critical lens and see where it is that you are failing. I think a lot of businesses, when it comes to diversity have really got the wrong end of the stick and believe that diversity is an issue that must be addressed within business rather than something that cuts across all of the streams of business. A lot of companies want to do a box-ticking exercise in diversity, which does them no good. I want businesses to really engage in processes whether it be reassessment of their management and leadership or whether it be diversity and how this

can be tangibly beneficial. The mistake that most people make is assuming that the presence of diversity equals access to the uniqueness of those diverse people; it is a huge thought error.

Executive coaching has seen a huge growth in popularity as a development tool within organizations. Why do you think that is?

I think that in this environment people need to consistently find ways of improving themselves, especially now with the increase in the number of young people going to university and the increase in the number of people doing advanced degrees. Younger, qualified people are coming along and in this marketplace you have to continue your own personal development. And a lot of businesses are even doing this on behalf of promising elite individuals within their business.

On your web site you mention the links that APS have with Penn State University and San Diego University for Integrative Studies. How important is it that Learning & Development professionals keep in touch with the research going on in universities?

Incredibly important, I fully admit that I'm different than most especially in this kind of field in that I am a total research geek. I think it is fascinating every time I read a new piece of research it gives me an edge, it is often up to me to find ways of applying that but we have to stay on the crest of this wave of ever-increasing complexity and sophistication and understanding of new concepts and for me the only way is to continue to delve back into what is going on now at the best possible research institutes.

On the flipside, do you think there is any responsibility for the people in the research institutes to have a more practical focus in their research?

I think so, but we also have to recognize that we cannot ask people to be all things to all people. I was talking to somebody at Penn State the other day, she is the head of the Psychology department and she has done this amazing work with social emotional training for young people in early years environments and she is finding it difficult to apply a lot of her research in a more general sense even though some of the principles are obviously applicable. But that is where people like me come in I suppose, in that I've applied some of those principles for early years into my charity in Manchester for example. So some of us have a talent for applying what they read and some of us have a talent for producing that type of high quality research. So I think it is about finding partnerships.

You have a number of varied roles, as an Ambassador for Amnesty International, Director of the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, a psychologist and a speaker – to name but a few. Which of the roles do you most enjoy?

I think what I enjoy about my job is the ability to do so many different things. Last week I was in an investment bank installing for them a new program on diversity that was really focused on reaping some great performance benefits as soon as possible. Two weeks before that I spent ten days in an organization completely reorganizing or helping them to completely reorganize the management team so it is the diversity of things I can do that I enjoy as much as any one of the things separately.

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