

Developing a Learning Culture - Blue Tit or Robin?

In their book 'The Living Company', Arie de Geus and Nicholas Brealey describe how in the early 20th century milk bottles in Britain had no top on and birds quickly learnt to siphon off the cream from the top of the milk. Robins and blue tits were particularly adept at this.

Then, between the two world wars, aluminium seals were placed on milk bottles. By the early 1950's the entire blue tit population of the UK, about a million birds, had learned how to pierce the aluminium seals. Regaining access to this rich food source provided an important victory for the blue tit family as a whole; it gave them an advantage in the battle for survival. Conversely, the robins, as a family, never regained access to the cream. Occasionally, an individual robin learns how to pierce the seals of the milk bottle, but the knowledge does not pass to the rest of the species.

In short, the blue tits went through an extraordinarily successful institutional learning process. The robins failed, even though individual robins had been as innovative as individual blue tits. Moreover, the difference could not be attributed to their ability to communicate. As songbirds, both the blue tits and the robins had the same range of communication methods: behaviour, movements and song. The explanation could be found only in the social propagation process - the way blue tits spread their skill from one individual to members of the species as a whole.

You can see the same phenomenon if you put food such as nuts out for birds. Quickly 'word' will get around the blue tit population and you will have a steady stream of visitors. Whereas you will typically only see the same solitary robin.

By early summer, when the young are flying and feeding on their own, you see blue tits moving from garden to garden in flocks of eight to ten individuals. These flocks seem to remain intact, moving together around the countryside.

Robins, by contrast, are territorial birds. A male robin will not allow another male to enter its territory. When threatened, the robin sends a warning, as if to say "Keep out of here." In general, robins tend to communicate with each other in an antagonistic manner, with fixed boundaries that they do not cross.

So, which bird are you most like - the blue tit or the robin?

Do you openly share your experience with others?

Do you seek input from others to help you come up with solutions?

Are you open to building on others' ideas?

Do you seek opportunities to meet, mix and talk with others?

Do you seek opportunities to learn from others?

Do you facilitate a learning culture within your team?

.....Food for thought? See www.iridiumconsulting.co.uk for more tips.