

Corporate Kindergarten: How A Montessori Mindset Can Transform Your Business

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I'll spare you the perfunctory context setting about how our globalized economy is moving at a rate of change unimaginable even a decade ago. It's a given. Business models, product cycle times and even the Fortune 500 had a much longer shelf life in the 20th century than they do today.

To remain competitive – or, dare I say, relevant – organizations must achieve vastly higher levels of strategic agility, or face the foul risk of becoming “Blockbusted.” And by strategic agility I mean the ability to tactically pivot at the drop of a hat, to launch novel initiatives and kill off those that are no longer serving you.

At its apex in 2004, Blockbuster Video had nearly 60,000 employees and over 9,000 stores worldwide. Its market value and annual revenues each exceeded \$5 billion, and it boasted a #1 position in the space by a long shot. In fact, CEO John Antioco was doing such a stellar job that his compensation that year totaled \$51.6 million.

Yet the writing on the proverbial wall had been glaringly apparent for years. New threats and opportunities were ever present. It seemed obvious that Blockbuster's dinosaur retail business model had to change, but did it have the desire or strategic agility to course correct and reinvent itself?

Rewind the clock to 2000, when Blockbuster turned down a chance to purchase the still struggling Netflix for \$50 million. Cue forehead slap. Humming a worn out tune, fingers in ears and blinders securely fastened, it continued ignoring new entrants and technologies – think Redbox and video streaming. Fast forward six short years from its peak in 2004, Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy protection. By 2011, the company and its remaining assets were auctioned off for a paltry \$233 million to Dish Network. (Fun fact, Netflix is now worth over \$50 billion.) So what does this story have to do with Montessori and what kindergarteners inherently know about strategic agility? Quite a lot. Hint: if you're thinking dinosaurs, that's not it.

Montessori kids are unique. They're taught differently and they learn differently. Just ask 15 time Grammy Award-winning musician Yo-Yo Ma, author and Nobel Prize recipient Gabriel Garcia Marquez or the founders of Google and Amazon. As entrepreneur Peter Sims explains, "the Montessori educational approach might be the surest route to joining the creative elite, which are so overrepresented by the school's alumni that one might suspect a Montessori Mafia."

The vast majority of employees in Corporate America grew up confined by the rigid structures of our conventional education system. We sat in well-organized classrooms comprised of straight lines of desks, with the omniscient teacher positioned front and center. Generally speaking, we had thick textbooks, were required to memorize innumerable factoids, took tests like it was our job and were taught to produce the exact same answers as everyone else. This may be a tad hyperbolic, but you get the picture. Point being, there are clear parallels between traditional organizational structure and culture and traditional educational models. Can you see them? As another example, take a closer look at typical corporate policies and procedures that govern employee behavior. Starting to connect the dots?

Contrast these norms with mixed-aged classrooms and a teaching method where learning is largely self-directed, where children gravitate toward what interests them and where teachers act as coaches and facilitators rather than puppet-masters or dictators.

In Montessori classrooms, learning and teaching is a bilateral process with older children acting as competency models for younger ones and student interests influencing teacher lesson planning. Homework and standardized testing is minimal, and emphasis is placed on personal mastery over benchmarked grades. Children confidently brim with new ideas about challenges to tackle, having learned that failure is acceptable and mistakes are merely learning opportunities.

So some obvious questions arise: How acceptable is failure in your organization? Are all your employees hardwired to seize opportunities, innovate, contribute their best thinking and flex their implementation muscles? Or are they sitting on the sidelines waiting for senior leaders to dole out directives?