



MEDIATING MANAGEMENT IN THE ORGANISATION

Leadership based on principles of Mediated Learning

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Introduction

We have repeatedly postulated that the teacher's mediation skills, in the academic context, were among the most essential requisites, for any teaching-learning process to end up producing meaningful effects.

And what about the manager in the workplace? What about the mediation potential of a manager and the possible effects this potential may instigate, with regard to learning processes within his¹ organisation, its evolution, its productivity and its competitiveness?

Several studies have suggested that a considerable part of our learning occurs at the workplace. Beyond the multiple factors that affect the outcome of any learning process, such as the various skills and competencies that make up the learning potential of the employee, the specific prerequisites implied in the manufacture of a product or the provision of a service or the conditions that render the organisational environment conducive to learning, we would like to emphasise the important role of the manager that interposes himself between a set of knowledge or know-how and the employee, with the goal of promoting learning. We are referring, therefore, to the *mediation potential* of the manager (Sasson, 2001).

We contend that the typical qualities of a meaningful interaction of educational mediators with their students, define the nature and determine the effectiveness of the interaction of managers with their subordinates and their work team, as well.

In this sense, in spite of certain basic differences that stem from the relative proximity of age, matters of status and function, the relationship manager-employee should not be seen as essentially discrepant from the teacher-trainee relation, at least in terms of its potential value of mediation and particularly when both relationships imply a process of guidance and learning.

Even when the employee has been formally and properly trained to perform his professional tasks in the workplace and even if he demonstrates commitment and motivation, the objective and inevitable gap that exists between theory and praxis, the constant need to update professional know-how and the inconsistencies often encountered in the application of any technology in the production process of a company or the provision of a service in an organisation generate many questions that need to be addressed by the manager.

The manager, initially perceived by his employees as a source of guidance and inspiration, should live up to their expectations, undertake the constant task of indicating the course to

¹ For ease of exposition, the pronoun "he" will be used in its generic sense throughout the article.

be taken and serve as a beacon that illuminates the path to follow, while inspiring processes of significant change in his organisation.

The essential qualities underlying a mediated learning interaction were pointedly conceptualised by Feuerstein (1991, 17-49) and then formulated as parameters of the *Mediated Learning Experience*. Due to their universal nature and their evident relevance in all human interactions, they should be discussed and analysed in light of their practical implications for the manager-employee relationship in the context of the organisation and of the workplace.

The importance of human modifiability

The concept of *Modifiability* in the Feuerstein approach, which is equivalent to *Learning Potential*, is intended to serve as a substitute for the traditional notion of human intelligence. This "...capacity of the individual to use previous experience in his adaptation to new situations" (Feuerstein, 1979, 95) represents indeed human learning potential which is reflected through the propensity to modify one's behaviour to better adjust to new and unfamiliar situations.

Learning implies *changing*, since a renewed involvement with an already acquired and internalised knowledge or know-how, would require less investment and a relatively reduced mental effort, as compared to the investment that was required for its initial appropriation.

In addition to the accumulated evidence, both empirical and scientific, with regard to the modifiability and educability of human beings, the firm belief that every individual is modifiable, structurally and significantly modifiable, once the necessary conditions are provided, constitutes an indispensable prerequisite for the performance of the manager.

Otherwise, the role of the manager in the organisation would be reduced to recruiting initially ideal human resources, and then continuously substituting those that do not deliver the expected performance by other candidates available in the market. Given the objective limitations of professionally trained and available personnel, it would practically turn into an impossible mission.

Essential parameters of Mediated Learning

The twelve parameters attributed by Feuerstein to the *mediated learning experience* are comprehensive in nature and encompass various qualities of the interaction that occurs between managers and subordinates as well as among colleagues and peers.

From these parameters we will briefly discuss the first three, which are considered universal determinants and necessary conditions for any mediating interaction and analyse some of its practical implications in the context of organisational management.

Intentionality and reciprocity

Intentionality, which leads the manager to mediate certain work situations intentionally chosen, in a learning experience that is qualitatively very different from the learning that occurs through a direct and often casual work experience, requires not only that the manager be conscious of his intention to mediate. It also requires of him to find accessible channels of communication, which are accepted by his employees, by means of which he may transmit to them his intention and its transcendent goals. Sharing thus his intention, the mediator helps elicit motivation and reciprocity.

A large part of the manager's function is often perceived as an administrative one. The main role of the manager in the company is seen by many, including unfortunately many subordinates and sometimes by managers themselves, as equivalent to administer,

organize, direct and control. In the best of cases, it is also perceived as a role that includes planning, scheduling, and supervising.

We firmly believe that the essence of the manager's function consists in educating, training, guiding and mediating, with the intention of helping materialise and expand the learning potential of his team.

Instead of confining himself to planning budgets, establishing calendars for professional activities and monitoring the workers' performance, the efficient manager should devote a large portion of his time and effort to interact with his team, with the purpose of offering guidance, coaching and support and sharing productive didactical means and effective strategies of mediation.

Transcendence

In order to transcend the work situation in a mediating approach, the manager must be oriented to needs and objectives that exceed and go beyond the immediate need that may have generated the interaction and should, therefore, provide his employees with the necessary means to generalise their learning experience, so that the latter may become able to apply the elements acquired in other work situations and other contexts in future circumstances.

In other words, an interaction that ends the moment a problem situation is resolved or a manager who is content once the immediate and sometimes urgent need that has spontaneously emerged is satisfied, would not reflect the value of transcendence in a significant mediated learning experience.

In addition to its long-term effect, and provided it surpasses the satisfaction of basic needs, transcendence is also a means for the development of an enlarged need system, that is, in turn, essential to promote adaptability and an autonomous learning potential, to elicit intrinsic motivation and to acquire and consolidate metacognitive skills.

In his interaction with his employees, even when the immediate and direct purpose of his intervention consists in solving a technical problem, the manager should consequently orient his mediation towards transcending needs and help his team gain new insights that may contribute to the expansion of their need system and their personal growth, turning them gradually into autonomous thinkers and efficient 'problem solvers'.

Mediation of meaning

The mediation of meaning, which consists in charging the mediated know-how or professional knowledge with a meaning, be it universal or personal, and impregnating work situations and experiences with values that exceed their inherent attributes, multiplies the energetic motivational components underlying the performance and productivity of the worker.

The specific extrinsic meanings and values, which are of course chosen by the manager in accordance with the determined work culture within which the mediated learning occurs, are responsible for the intergenerational cultural transmission, imparted and intercepted through the communication channels established in a mediated interaction.

Employees who apparently demonstrate a lack of commitment, motivation and readiness to invest time and energy in the cause of their organisation or for the benefit of their colleagues, often arguing low remuneration or exclusive investment in the company's profit, are often the clear reflection of the failure of their managers to mediate meanings and attribute values to their work experiences.

By the same token, other parameters of mediated learning, such as the mediation of the feeling of competence, the mediation of sharing behaviour, the mediation of challenge, through the search for novelty and complexity, and the mediation of a feeling of belonging, should be discussed and analysed, as each of them bears equally important implications with regard to the qualities of the manager-worker relationship.

The mediating role of the manager

Now, beyond the conscious intention underlying his interaction with his employees, the transcending character of his contributions and the meanings and values attributed to the organisation activities, what are then the specific aggregated contents the manager should mediate as he interacts with his subordinates?

In *Mediating Management*, the specific contents that represent the aggregate value of this cognitive approach consist in the mediation of thinking skills, indeed of cognitive and metacognitive functions necessary for effective and autonomous professional practice.

Instead of contenting himself with the transmission of techniques and procedures that lead to the production of the product or the provision of the service, the manager should take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself in the workplace to mediate the various functions and cognitive strategies as well as the metacognitive abilities that form the basis of autonomous thinking and professional practice.

In *mediating management*, the approach that seeks to advance the employee and promote his thinking and learning faculties, becomes the number one goal of manager- employee interactions.

Practical activity

To help illustrate how this important goal may be attained in a more meaningful and insightful way, we would like to invite the manager, reading this article, to engage in a brief three phase experience with a carefully chosen task from the adult version of Feuerstein's cognitive intervention programme, so as to instigate both challenge and motivation and also to shed some light on a few of the practical aspects of the manager's mediating role.

In the first phase of our experiment you are about to be presented with a task, which may prove quite complex and demanding, accompanied by a set of instructions and asked to carry out part of it spontaneously.

Then, in the second phase, we will analyse some of the cognitive functions and thinking strategies that are necessary for an efficient treatment of that task.

Finally, in the third phase, you will be asked to complete the remaining part of the task, while consciously applying the cognitive functions and working strategies we would have analysed and reflected upon in the preceding phase. Following this activity, it would be interesting to compare your performances in the first and third phases, both in terms of objective efficiency and of your subjective feeling of competence.

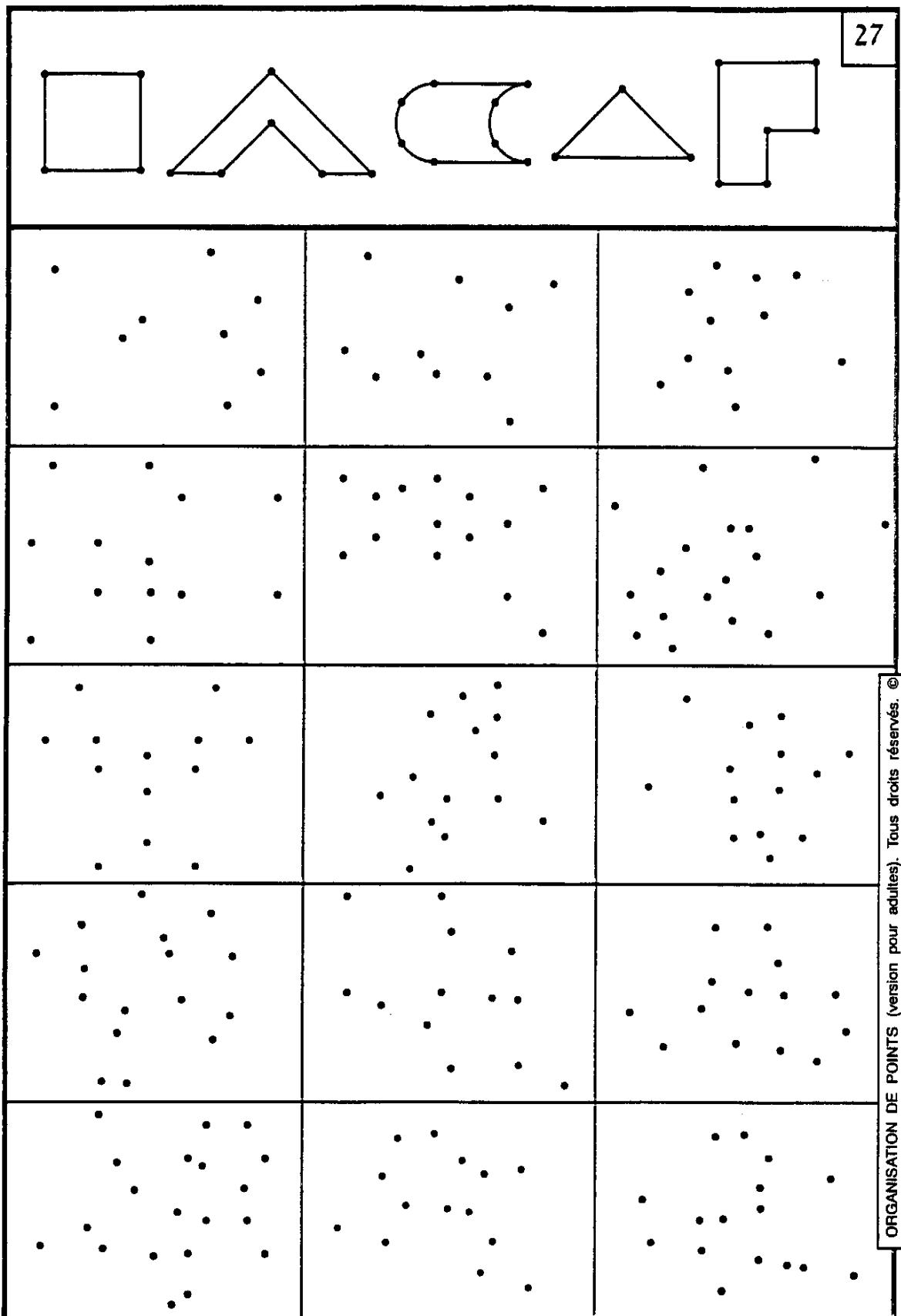
Phase 1

Please read the instructions below and for the next 10 minutes solve a few of the exercises displayed on the following page. Please use a pencil, proceed from left to right and from the top to the bottom row, do not try a new frame unless you have completed the preceding one, avoid using your eraser too frequently and refrain, in your search for figures, from rotating the orientation of the page.

Instructions for Organisation of Dots (Adult version), page 27

1. Reproduce in each frame 2 or 3 different figures of the model
2. Conserve precise shape and size of each figure
3. Ignore changes in orientation and figures overlap
4. Make use of all dots in each frame
5. Do not use any dot for more than one purpose

**Organisation of Dots
(Adult version), page 27**



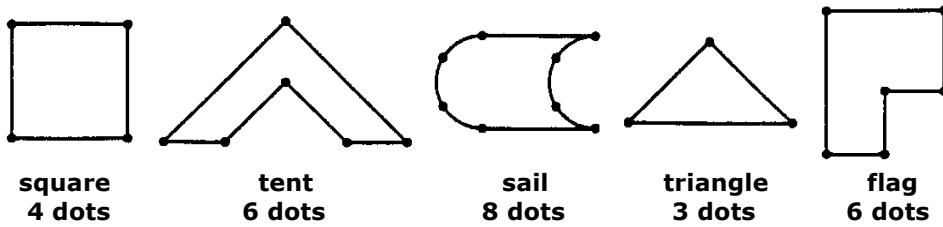
Having had a first experience with this activity, we would like to ask you, dear manager, how you feel about your performance. If you were efficient and managed to draw with precision and with no erasures the required figures in more than five or six frames, the positive sense of completion and the feeling of satisfaction and competence you surely have are justified, as you were successful in accomplishing a very unfamiliar task of quite a high level of complexity, which is often considered challenging and demanding by high functioning and initiated individuals. If, on the other hand, you have found the task difficult, had to try and err several times and ended up with only one or two successfully accomplished frames, any feeling of incompetence or frustration you may have should soon vanish, since your difficulty with such a peculiar task, the type of which is frequently used in psychometric testing, in our mind does not contradict in any way any otherwise very high competence you most probably have in many other more practical problem solving domains; and also as you may rest assured your second experience with that same task, in a short while, is bound to be successful and gratifying.

Phase 2

We will now undertake to analyse and draw an inventory of the essential cognitive functions and strategies underlying the efficient solution to this task, most of which, we are positive, have already occurred to you in the course of your first experience.

* **Labelling and verbalising** - To be able to identify the different figures in the model and to keep aware of the mental process leading to the solution of the task, let us first assign universal or associative labels to each figure and refer to these labels to facilitate a clear communication of ideas as well as a precise internalisation of the model.

* **Summation of data (summative behaviour)** - In the process of gathering the data to perform the task, taking note of the number of dots each figure is made up of, makes the definition of the problem easier and will be helpful later on in determining the composition of each frame.



* **Analysis of essential characteristics** - The next step in gathering the data consists of a thorough analysis of all the essential and permanent characteristics of each figure:

square - 4 equidistant dots producing 4 equal sides, 4 right angles and two pairs of parallel lines

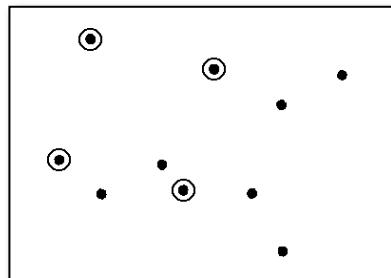
tent - made up of 2 *isosceles* and *right angled* triangles differing in size on a common basis

sail - two sets of 4 dots producing two *parallel curves* and two parallel straight lines

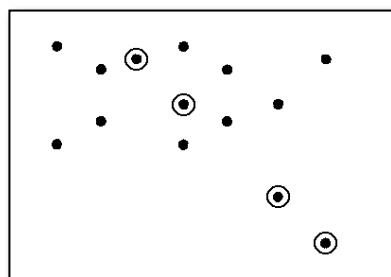
triangle - isosceles and right angled

flag - the only *asymmetric* figure in the model, it is made up of 2 sets of 3 *parallel sides*, vertical and horizontal

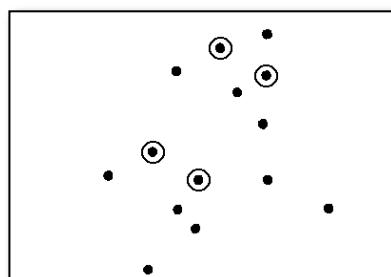
* **Selection of points of reference** - Having analysed the various figures, we can now select for each of them efficient points of reference, reflecting the most particular and therefore the least frequent characteristics, to assist us in identifying the complete figures which are hidden in the amorphous cloud of dots:

square

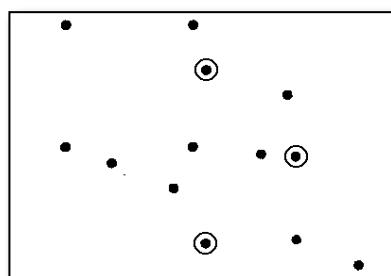
any two equidistant pairs of dots producing parallel sides and 90 degree angles

Tent

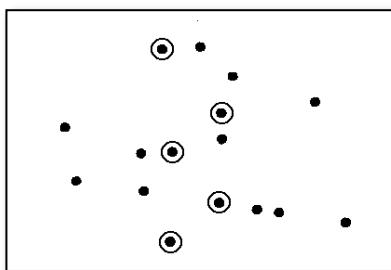
two equidistant pairs of dots on a straight line

Sail

either the 4 inner dots producing a narrow prolonged rectangle or the 4 outer dots producing a larger one

Triangle

two equal sides producing a 90-degree angle (simple but tricky figure - should be the last to be drawn in the frame)

flag

four small sides undergoing 90-degree changes of orientation

*** Inference of implicit data** - The major source of difficulty of this task being probably the lack of initial knowledge as to the specific two or three figures hidden in each frame, you may have discovered the simple strategy that may help determine from the outset, to a significant extent, the composition of figures within each frame.

Have you thought of counting the dots in each frame? Well, this additional piece of information will prove extremely helpful in clarifying what we should be looking for. Instead of trying and erring and wondering whether we are unable to locate the figure we are looking for because it's not there or because we haven't been systematic enough in our search, the overall number of dots in the frame would help us infer the combination of figures we ought to be looking for.

Hence, 14 dots in a frame would indicate a combination of sail with either tent or flag and 20 dots would inevitably mean all of the sail, tent and flag are there. By the same token, an odd number of dots would imply the existence of the triangle whereas an even number would exclude it.

*** Planning (determining sequence of steps)** - On the basis of the additional information inferred from the explicit data of the problem, we can proceed to plan our solution and establish the sequence of steps to be followed. It would be more efficient to start with the figures we know with certainty to be embedded in the frame and then proceed to determine the alternative complementary ones. Similarly, knowing the triangle could mislead us to use part of the dots we should reserve for the square or another combination of figures, we had rather deal with it last.

*** Systematic exploration** - Once we have established a plan of action, our search for the relevant figures should be conducted very systematically, to avoid blocking and to increase efficiency. In our attempt to identify and locate the selected points of reference we may carefully scan the entire frame first horizontally, then vertically and finally in diagonals. Alternatively, we may apply a different approach, proceeding in virtual concentric circles from the centre to the periphery. Whatever the approach we prefer to adopt, a systematic exploratory behaviour is an essential prerequisite for a thorough investigation of all of the alternative configurations existing in the field.

*** Conservation of constancies and visual transport** - Since an important aspect of the task consists in a precise conservation of form and size across variations in orientation, we should retain accurately, by means of verbal mediation, all the essential and permanent characteristics of the different figures and ensure their conservation along the process of visually transporting them from the model to the frame. As we were instructed to refrain from rotating the page, we can facilitate the identification of the differently oriented figure by means of a detailed analysis of the whole figure and a systematic reference to each essential feature.

*** Forming and confirming hypotheses** - In our exploration of the various configurations of dots in a frame, any identification of the selected points of reference should be considered a hypothesis, which still needs to be confirmed prior to the actual drawing of the identified part of the whole. We would thus avoid recurring trials and errors, which end up in repeated erasures. Whenever we fail in confirming a hypothesis and end up rejecting it, let us keep a record of it before resuming the systematic process of forming new ones, so as to avoid considering it again.

*** Comparison of hypotheses to model** - Comparative behaviour is of course a major requirement throughout the process of forming and confirming hypotheses. The way to verify each hypothesis we have formed is to compare it to the model, with the essential characteristics of the various figures serving as parameters.

Phase 3

Most of the cognitive elements we have just analysed have undoubtedly occurred to you in the course of your first experience with the task and you must have consciously made use of them in the process of carrying it out. Some others, you have probably applied intuitively, without being fully aware of either what you were doing or why you were doing it. One or two of them, we dare assume, may have never occurred to you and you were not aware of their usefulness.

We would like to ask you in this third phase, to resume your work and complete the remaining part of the task, while applying methodically this time the various strategies we have analysed and keeping aware all along the process of the mental operations and the cognitive functions underlying your behaviour.

To end this brief experience and assuming you have followed our instructions and accomplished the task, please take a short while to reflect on your performance following the insight elicited through the analysis of the mental process underlying the task as compared to your initial functioning. We contend that, to one extent or another, you have most probably experienced a change, both in terms of efficiency, i.e. rapidity, precision and accuracy and of your subjective feeling of control and competence.

In a real life situation at the workplace, and since the mastery of any specific professional task, cannot in itself achieve the goal of producing a durable structural change in the worker, another indispensable part in any mediated interaction, consists in creating *insight* and reflective thinking by means of extracting the cognitive components of the activity, formulating them, in generalised terms, into principles or rules, while mediating to the worker the orientations that are necessary to bridge these elements and apply them to a wide diverging range of work situations, as well as life situations beyond the work environment.

Conclusion

In the work environment, when the manager interacts with his employee, to discern, for example, the sources responsible for an error in carrying out a given task, the mediating experience we have just illustrated, shows the possible contribution of the manager for the learning potential of his employee and the benefit obtained by the conscious analysis of the cognitive components underlying the solution of the problem.

The manager would also have helped in the formation of the habit of applying appropriate and effective strategies to other problem solving situations, thus promoting the learning potential and the autonomous performance of his subordinate.

To conclude this brief reflection, we would like to share with the managers our conviction that, similarly to the teacher-student relationship, also their relationship with their employees and their work teams should be reconsidered, so as to reflect the essential and necessary conditions that are typical of the mediated learning experience. Their relationship should be shaped with the aim of promoting the quality and effectiveness of their professional practice and their managerial function.

As a leader aspiring to attract his followers and achieve the transcending goals of his leadership, the manager of the organisation should always bear in mind his essential role as a guide and a mediator that seeks to better his employees, both professionally and personally, and promote their learning potential, consciously and intentionally offering himself as a source of illumination and inspiration for his entire work team.

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