

Lobstermen

Description:

George Johnson has been a lobsterman on the coast of Maine for more than 40 years. In that time he has been one of the highest performers in the fishing community where he lives. He enjoys the freedom of being on the water and the experience of turning hard work into successful results. His son Carl sometimes works the "back of the boat" while his father pilots. Carl makes it clear that understanding what successful performers do, what they know, and how they think about their work can be difficult for others to grasp. Others have tried to achieve George's success by copying him, but with limited success. High performers such as George are often carefully watched by others who have a difficult time understanding the factors that account for their success.

Key Words:

- "... the crows ..."
- "... no explanation ..."
- "... a difference from the back of the boat to the front ..."

Suggested Uses:

This video illustrates how high performers can derive competitive advantage from knowledge and practices that are difficult to emulate. It can be used to explore the role of learning as a non-replicable competitive advantage. It also offers parallels with the strategy and strategic decision-making of firms and the effects of experience, observation, and past success on subsequent strategic choices.

I. Learning

Use the video to illustrate issues of individual and organizational learning.

1. What does learning mean in this context? Why is it difficult for Carl to learn what George knows about lobstering?
What are the tacit knowledge and the explicit knowledge in this situation?
2. How does the dilemma of learning or transferring knowledge in lobstering compare with learning within organizations or in other work roles?
3. How do organizations deal with situations where an expert is unable to articulate critical learnings?
4. What are the differences between individual learning and organizational learning?

II. Strategy

Use the video to illustrate organizational strategic decision making.

1. List some of the strategic levers George uses to be a high performer (e.g., discounting past experiences of others, experimentation). Can these generalize to other work situations?
2. What role do competitors play in this market? How does George deal with competitors?
3. To what extent are the strategic problems in this context different from or similar to those faced by CEOs of firms such as General Electric or Xerox?

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