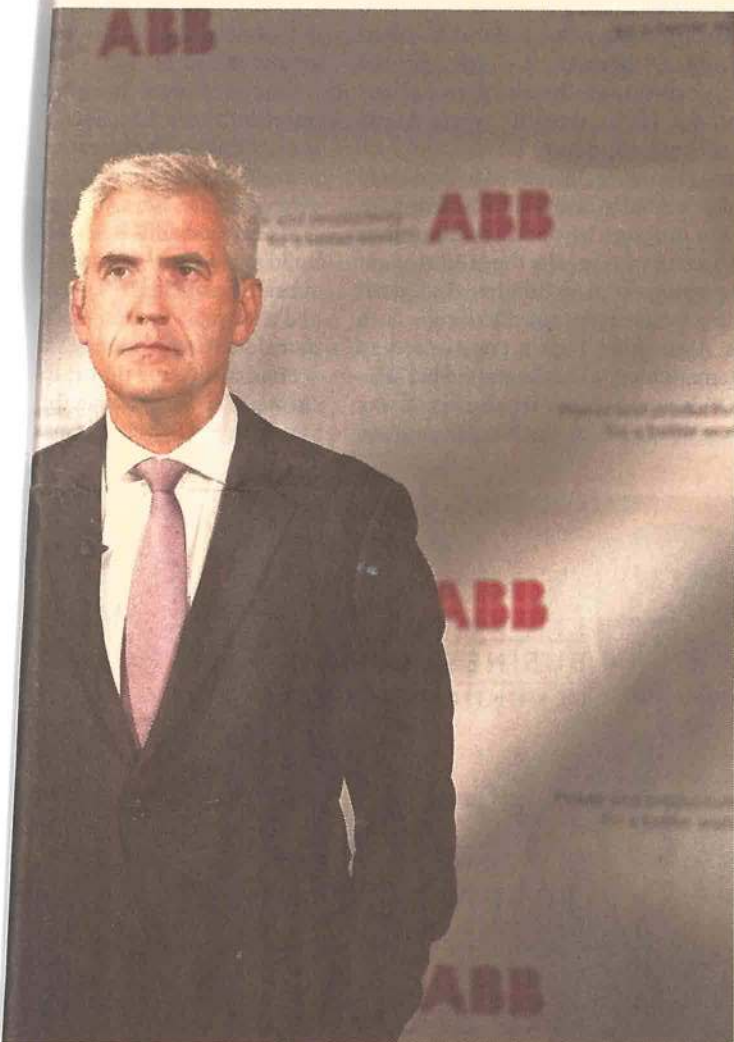


CEO, ABB



Germany, 1964  
**Education**  
 Masters in business administration  
 engineering from the University of  
 Stuttgart  
 PhD, economics, University of  
 Stuttgart  
**Work**  
 1992: Lecturer in business  
 management, University of Stuttgart  
 2002: Various roles at AT Kearney  
 2003-2005 Consultant, Roland Berger  
 2005-2009: Head of corporate  
 development, ABB  
 2009-2013: Head of discrete automation  
 motion division, ABB  
 2013: Chief executive, ABB  
**Interests** Sailing, saxophone

assumption is that Cevian would prefer a sale. But it is not clear that will be the outcome of the portfolio review, which will be announced in October – especially given the precedent Mr Spiesshofer set with the robotics division.

The power grids division is “a number one business, which is much better organised today”, he says. What is more, the division faces just the sort of complex market environment in which the ABB boss appears to revel. While emerging markets are investing in infrastructure, energy policies are changing radically in Europe – Germany, for instance, is closing its nuclear power plants – with huge knock-on effects for transmission systems.

“We are entering a decade of probably the most dynamic changes in the power grid that we have ever observed in mankind’s history,” says Mr Spiesshofer.

He has made sweeping changes within the company by streamlining ABB’s organisation. “ABB used to be a

Working smarter

Develop mental agility with a plunge into the learning pit

MIRANDA GREEN

We all think we understand the learning curve, but have you heard of the learning pit? More to the point, would you be able to clamber out?

Colloquially, the phrase a “steep learning curve” is used to describe grappling with something new and difficult quickly. In fact, the traditional learning curve is rather reassuring. The line zooms upwards as it plots understanding against time, illustrating rapid early success followed by a plateau of mastery. But learning experts now feel this instantly encouraging model may be of limited use.

A traditional learning curve might accurately describe learning a new language when we already speak two or three, for example, but not a completely new task: imagine an accountant having to learn computer-aided design, or a designer doing a first business plan.

To develop resilience and mental agility, the experts argue, we must train ourselves to cope with challenges so tough that we are temporarily plunged into confusion “below the line”: the learning pit. The learning pit graph illustrates a zone beneath the X axis, before the learner travels back up towards a Eureka moment (see chart below).

Guy Claxton, a cognitive scientist at King’s College London, believes we can “learn how to learn” by understanding that a period of disorientation where we try to process conflicting ideas can be extremely

beneficial. Extreme and unusual difficulties can develop what Carol Dweck, a psychologist, termed a “growth mindset” — in which we use our experience of setbacks to develop an armoury for future battles.

For Professor Claxton and others who study the way our brains process new information and gain understanding, we can become resilient by embracing what he calls “the joy of the struggle”. He argues we all need cognitive fitness at work, “where you are constantly faced with complex, novel problems.

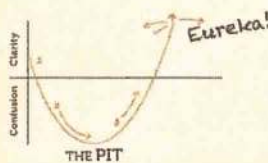
He cites groups of Australian schoolchildren who were given an exercise to label their own journey out of the learning pit, building up mental toughness and ingenuity: “When asked how they will feel next time they are in the pit, they say, ‘well, next time we will have the strategies to cope.’”

Management tributes

What would you like your team to say about you when you leave a management role?

Professor Gareth Jones of the London Business School, a former head of human resources at PolyGram records and the BBC, told an audience a few days ago that the highest compliment he received was: “You weren’t too bad, you didn’t get in the way.”

Rather than running formal feedback exercises and getting “a scripted response”, he advises managers to try to get a feel for the day-to-day texture of their team’s work: “smell the gravy, feel the cloth!” he urges. And his name for this accessible, available style of leadership? “Management by walking about.”



The learning pit  
 www.jamesnottingham.co.uk

workingsmarter@ft.com

ere is a common glue — where you scale, where you have technology, competencies you can use across the