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Experiential Learning: The Missing Link Between Education, Training, and Development AND The Work Environment

By

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“The new work of managers is all about creating the enabling conditions for continuous learning, which is best done by supporting the informal communities in which it most effectively happens.” – Peter Henschel, Director Emeritus, Institute for Research in Learning

Maximizing the intellectual capital of the company must be a vital part of the everyday strategies businesses put into place for the workforce. The investment that any organization places against its greatest asset...its people...must pay big dividends. According to Chief Learning Office Magazine, the average company spends \$3.7 million dollars every year on learning and training. Regardless of the amount spent, it is important to know that what you spend on training is effective and meaningful and that it changes the behaviors of the workforce in order to meet the demands of your business.

Learning has to be focused on delivery of new knowledge that translates into behavioral changes that are related to real life business situations, not textbook theories. Experiential learning is perception-based versus theory-based. For this reason and many more, more and more companies have begun to utilize customized experiential learning instead of traditional training methods. There is no question that the speed of change is the motivation behind organizations becoming “learning organizations”.

Training programs in most companies today rob the company in two ways. First, because formal training programs developed and delivered by traditional training groups are ineffective in helping the company and its employees succeed in meeting their goals, they waste large amounts of money and time. Secondly, by creating the illusion that formal training programs meet the company’s learning and learning activities from their actual work, companies miss opportunities to improve individual and company performance, fail to meet or exceed stated goals, and they fail to create real competitive advantage.

Experience is the best teacher. Well-delivered and planning programs are more effective when they satisfy the following:

- Information and knowledge are shared and therefore individuals are motivated to acquire the knowledge and information
- The focus on the course directly relates to real business issues that cause individuals to want to work as a team in problem resolution
- The course combines several forms of learning including audio, visual, physical, print, etc.
- There is time for reflection and roundtable discussion
- The course draws from previous life and business experiences
- Learning occurs through exchange with other participants in addition to the learning that is extracted through the formal delivery

Learning, in general, can be effective and efficient if there is a 5-step process:

- L=Leading
- E=Evolving
- A=Acting
- R=Reflecting
- N=Nurturing

Learning requires self-leadership. It is what motivates a person and drives them to personal growth. Employees are committed to continuous learning when the environment fosters the acquisition of knowledge. A certain level of emotional intelligence is needed to optimize that learning experience. It is an evolution of what you already know that builds on beliefs and experiences.

Continuous learning is how we evolve and get closer to optimizing our strengths and dealing with our weaknesses. In the post development process that accompanies an experiential learning program, participants are challenged to identify their plan of evolution. It is not enough to employ the new learning once and then to let it go. It is essential to practice and build on the learning; this is the evolutionary aspect of learning.

The choice to acquire new knowledge brings the power to develop and put power into actions. Actions bring the learning to life. Development of the action plan requires an accountability partner. This person becomes their “watch dog” to help in behavioral change in order to reflect the new “style”. Soliciting feedback from the partner will play an integral role in sustaining change.

In order to incorporate the new learning into the fabric of who you are, you must be willing to take time for reflection. It is the hardest element to master in the learning process. Most people don’t want to slow down long enough to think about their behavior, let alone journal it or record it in any type of format. Reflection enables close examination of scenarios and behavior examples that occur during a time period. In the experiential learning programs that we offer, we challenge the participants to capture information and not just mentally.

To sustain long lasting impact, participants must be willing to nurture the new learning. When you acquire new behavior, or learning, you must continually refine the learning by nurturing it. Nurturing is sometimes referred to as self-coaching. Self-coaching requires commitment, energy and focus. You nurture the new learning by tying all the pieces together through self-leadership, evolution, action and reflection. Bringing it all together is a true learning experience that will stay with employees throughout their entire lives.

This process does work for anyone who is willing to make the effort.

Experiential learning is “knowledge, skills, and/or abilities attained through observation, simulations, and/or participation that provides depth and meaning to learning by engaging the mind and/or body through activity, reflection and application”. It is learning by doing. David Kolb’s model of experiential learning focuses on four key elements:

1. Concrete action
2. Observation of and reflection on the action
3. Conceptualization around the reflections
4. Experimentation with new, more effective behaviors

Experiential learning is collaborative learning. In the business world, self-directed teams have totally replaced hierarchical structures. These teams must be able to achieve results by learning from each other, building on each other’s ideas and learning from their mistakes. This is why building collaborative, stretch point teams is so critical to any organization that wants to experience breakthrough success. Creating the bridge between education and the workplace is one of the key elements of this type of learning. Success in today’s economy will only come to those companies that are able to foster environments where learning produces innovation and creativity.

Learning also occurs from different sources. Case studies, roundtable discussions, and coaching is the combination most preferred because this combination is more effective. The intent is to leverage the individual experiences and strengths for the benefit of self-development as well as group development.

The process includes a lecture phase, a demonstration phase, a practice phase, and lastly a review stage. These four stages provide the opportunity for participants to engage, digest and process new information. These elements allow for participants to produce an effective action plan for behavioral change.

To make your employees “partners” in your business, get started today in experiential learning. The experiential learning models will help support your ongoing business strategies, improve employee morale, and create an innovative environment to meet the changes in business today and in years to come!

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