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To Learn—Or Not To Learn

Adult Learning for Managers

How to Use Learning Research for Managing
Adult Learning in Companies
4 Principles for Learning Design

E-book

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To Learn - or Not to Learn

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Introduction

If you are like most professionals, you *know* perfectly well where your weaknesses are – whether it's communication, team motivation, time management, your perfectionism, more complex issues like tending to making excessive demands on yourself..., or delegating accountability rather than tasks. And yet somehow, you don't get it sorted.

Does this sound familiar? As interesting as the question “What conditions the learning that precedes behavioural change?” may be, the question “When and why do we *not* learn – even when all evidence seems to point in the same direction?” appears to be even more relevant to me.

Many of my clients report to have read x books about “their topic” already, and don't really believe that yet another one will bring the breakthrough. Maybe you have also experienced **post-training trauma**: for a few days or weeks after a seminar (or book) the feeling persists that you **SHOULD** do something with it, until the feeling wanes and you give up, and everything would seem almost back to normal except that you can't shake a lingering feeling of disappointment in yourself. If this sounds just like your story, despair not, for you are entirely normal! Why is that?

Fortunately or unfortunately, we are not trivial machines! We simply can't expect ourselves to show different behaviour based on a simplistic “new input equals new output” model. We are talking about a quite special case here: learning that guides and shapes future behaviour. Behaviour is **NOT** primarily determined by what we know, but

by our attitudes, belief systems, values, and ultimately, self-image. Tough stuff! Try replacing this model by a metaphor that comes a little closer: Imagine your much-loved boat at sea, prepared by you for a rough night. You anchor it in several places, say five points in a neat circle, so you can be extra sure that your precious boat is well secured against the storms ahead. Even though many different forces (in human behaviour-opinions, experiences, inclinations, attitudes and all the rest) will act against each other, as long as the ropes resist, there is basically not a lot that can rock the boat.

How to move beyond post-training trauma?

Change – excuse the slight oversimplification – works more like this:

(A) You reinforce the desired behavioural direction (by insight, reflection, and especially new goals, plans) AND

(B) At the same time cut free one or two ropes on the opposite side, which up to now have kept the whole system in balance. As the pressure increases on one side, the other side is allowed to yield according to its nature. Now you can almost touch change – things begin to rearrange, and move towards a new balance.

The rational bit (A) is no issue – for deep down you know what you need to tell yourself anyway. Favourite absolutely non-threatening statements are “I really should do x”, “it's time I did x” - all just paraphrases of “nice to have” – i.e. no chance of any of this ever happening. Unless, of course – you decide to tackle (B). But not so fast: One of the many challenges here is that the new behaviour doesn't really “fit” you – and the problem is, *you know it...* This is why a tough re-evaluation of those ropes is a crucial step – for it helps in finding out what isn't really linked to you any more – (“dated patterns” so to speak). As this is really the one tricky bit, it makes sense to work with a professional here.

Many years of my personal experience confirm that after a few sessions, not only do people know exactly where they are going - even when they start out with little more than a clear notion that they “can't (or don't want to) go on like this” -, they know what will get them results, fast. Not maybe, or in theory, but for real, because they have already covered part of the distance. My clients are surprised time and time again how close they are to attaining their cherished goals all of a sudden - so they replace them with bigger goals (I am not joking). This is particularly rewarding since they have typically already spent many months or even years latently brooding over some issue before our first meeting.

But of course there is a type of scepticism around that is characteristic of our cultural backgrounds (certainly of the German one!) that more often than not will have us believe that expert know-how and perfect systems are all we need to be good managers, as if the people would somehow miraculously fall into place, once the

processes were sorted out. Well, guess what – this is NOT going to happen. These issues are here to stay – until you decide that you are ready to add a second pillar to your managerial effectiveness: that of people management SKILLS. This is a skill set (as opposed to a talent) that everybody can train and develop just like a muscle – although talent is great of course! Just don't wait for that talent, or worse, compare yourself with someone else. My clients' "pre-s" and "post-s" are quite dramatic! Ask for a few testimonials to illustrate this, you don't have to take my word for it.

It was Einstein who said that we could never solve problems at the level of thinking that created them. This is the key to most change that works. After changing your way of thinking about a problem (I can't stress this often enough), there is room to create solutions. In this phase it makes sense to look for new, better information. For this, you don't need a coach. But the principles included in the following section might come handy!

How you can benefit from Learning Research

Research areas in this exciting discipline range from pedagogic principles of facilitating learning (see below), and personal and situational conditions we can control in order to get the best possible results, all the way to neurological and neurobiological prerequisites conducive to what we call learning. Finally, they have all come together – for the teaching and learning that we do and expect from others is still based on sadly inadequate and dated theories.

A lot of what we can still see happening in today's schools in many places directly contradicts the most basic principles of what we know by now – like assessments and grades in primary school, or the 45-minute learning cycles we call lessons.

See for yourself how much you apply the following principles - when you lecture, coach a co-worker, or address your team. (I know some of you already do, not only previous clients so maybe just think of someone else!) The best thing about these principles is that they really work, AND motivate at the same time. **This is what you can DO:**

- Entice the willingness to make a serious effort by making them create their own learning goals;
- Confront people with problems and issues that allow them to succeed;
- Believe in people and take them seriously (no matter how experienced or inexperienced they are);
- Communicate a basic security that allows everybody (including you) to take a risk;
- Create learning phases, intermitted by pauses for one's own thoughts and personal experiences

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No matter if you want to apply these principles to a managerial or parental role, they only need slight modification. One well researched neurobiological finding that can make a huge difference to your learning at zero cost: get enough SLEEP – especially immediately following a learning experience. The “automatic download” from the hippocampus (where emotional, situational content is stored short-term) into brain centres of the cortex that allow long-term retention, happens while we sleep, “on autopilot”. I cannot recommend Prof. Manfred Spitzer's books on this captivating topic enough. They are informed as well as highly readable – in English for example “The Mind Within the Net: Models of Learning, Thinking, and Acting” (published by Bradford Books).

In my work, I apply a few more principles that I can highly recommend for human communication in general. The following three can be relatively easily applied in everyday management situations:

- ☑ Use **powerful learning aides** like laughing, exaggerating, and provocative thoughts. You may also wish to use different styles that do not only cater for the auditive, but also provide enough visual and kinesthetic cues;
- ☑ **Create a pull for information** – first let people define their specific questions, where they are looking for advice or input. It makes no sense to offer unsolicited advice anyway because people aren't going to listen properly (unless you are in a hierarchical superior position and want them to do things your way of course. This has some results.) Finally, and this is the most important one: never just work on recreating a pre-problem situation but
- ☑ **work towards strategic, future goals**: envision a new level of service or performance, a sizeable relief etc.

Then of course, in my consultations, there are dozens of more advanced principles that are not as easy to apply in a managerial context. They constitute some of the added value of working with me. And as the mental preparation is immediately followed by several weeks of practice before the next coaching session – intermitted by regular brief reflection – results are imminent. I have literally never worked with a client who didn't reach or exceed their goals in our cooperation. And these goals are sometimes pretty steep!

*By the way, this view really affects – or at least should affect– the foundations of the training industry (which is fortunately learning, slowly...). If you are managing a training budget, you may wish to learn more to make sure you invest your money wisely!

The Big Difference: Presenting Knowledge or Facilitating Learning

The purpose of learning facilitation is to guide the learners to agreed-upon destinations, which are the learning outcomes. Whether with individuals or groups, the facilitator's role is one of earned trust and honor. The facilitator knows the subject area, absolutely, but more than that, s/he is concerned with helping the learners know and apply the subject matter. The facilitator's goal is not simply to inform, but to equip the learners for self-development and growth, for continual learning about the subject to the point of mastery. This fundamentally affects focus, control and credibility

Focus

With facilitation, the focus is on the learner. In a presentation, the focus is on the presenter. The goals for the presentation are to cover the material and to showcase the presenter's expertise and skill. Conversely, in facilitated learning, the focus is on the learner. All of the facilitator's behaviors, and the activities are centered on helping the learners learn and apply the content. The goal here is simple and profound: Make the learning and application happen.

Control

By definition, an excellent presentation results in the audience being informed about the subject matter and taking away useful information. Because the presentation centers on the presenter, that person is in control of the subject and how the audience engages with the subject. *There is no guarantee that the learners will use the information or learn from it.* For a facilitator, content expertise and presentation skills are the threshold, the proverbial foot in the door for a learning experience. Without these ingredients, the potential facilitator is not even considered for the job. Effective facilitation, however, only begins with content expertise and presentation skills.

A facilitator gives up much of the control of the content to the learners, and shares responsibility for the learning with them. As the guide, the facilitator establishes the climate, learning structure, and flow of the learning. The learner has a lot of flexibility in asking and responding to questions, engaging the facilitator and peer learners in discussion. Because control is jointly held between the facilitator and the learners, so, too, is accountability for learning. As the learners gain more control, the facilitator must increasingly use listening, questioning, and coaching skills to build on the learners' experiences. Presentation occurs at the thinking level. Facilitation occurs at multiple levels: thinking, feeling, intuitive, physical, synergistic, and emotional—all of which the facilitator must respond to, keep track of, and invite learner involvement in as the learning event proceeds. And the paradox is, the more control that is given to the learners, the more real learning occurs.

Credibility

Facilitators derive credibility from more than subject matter expertise. Whereas content expertise and control provide credibility for presenters, what facilitators do with these components is what creates credibility for them. Facilitator credibility derives from the ability to create and sustain a supportive learning environment and link the learning to the learners' jobs. It comes from the facilitator's interpersonal handling of the group process, keeping the spotlight on the learners, and the ability to be flexible and adjust the content to the learners' needs in the moment. It is how the facilitator engages the learners and helps them to self-discover the learning.

How Adults Learn

How is it different to be an adult from a learning perspective?

Mitchell, 1998, discusses these questions in some detail in his „Handbook for Trainers“. These two pages are an abstract of thoughts contained in or inspired by this book. When do people become adults? People are adults when they become self-directing, and when they accept responsibility for their own lives. As an adult, being self-directed becomes an important component of one's self-concept. *Learning* is the acquisition of new skills, attitudes, and knowledge. **Learning results in change.** For effectiveness, the emphasis must be on both the acquisition and use of the new knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes. Facilitation is the art of bringing the person together with the learning, by helping people learn through self-discovery. It involves techniques for learners to learn from each other in the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Adult learning is characterised by the following:

1) Readiness to Learn

Learner readiness is critical to success.

Without learner readiness, there is no learning. Resistance of participants needs to be discussed openly so that it can be addressed. One of the indicators for adult readiness to learn is when adults face situations requiring them to use new knowledge, skills, or abilities. Timing can be an important consideration: it is ideal to position the content as a requirement for success in the near future. It is important to avail follow-up and coaching at the right time also.

2) Active Involvement in Learning

Adults learn best when they are actively participating in the learning rather than being passive recipients.

People learn by doing. In the learning environment, minimize time spent in presenting content and maximize the time spent in practice and application through case studies, participant presentations, and so forth.

3) Self-Direction

Adult learners are responsible for their own learning and are capable of self-direction.

Although adults need some structure, they resist being told what to do. The facilitator must engage the learners in a process of inquiry and decision making and not just “give” information or knowledge “to” them. When introducing various instructional strategies, the facilitator must provide the purpose (links to their need to know) and the instructions, while giving them latitude to complete the activity.

4) Trial and Error

Making mistakes is how adults learn.

While success motivates adults and makes them want to learn more, they tend to remember mistakes and want to learn how to correct them. Facilitators must allow

participants to try new things, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. A safe environment for trial and error must be created. Likewise, the facilitator must be sure the successes are reinforced and that the learners capture those lessons learned.

5) Building on Experience

Adults learn by connecting new information with what they already know.

It is the building-block idea of moving from the known to the unknown. Because participants come with different backgrounds, the facilitator must discover what the participants know and build on that knowledge. Experience is a rich resource for adult learning. In any group of adults, there is a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. The facilitator can leverage the different experiences for a richer learning experience through facilitative discussions, case studies, simulations, and the like. The downside to experience is that the adult learner brings a set of presuppositions, biases, and bad habits that can inhibit learning. The facilitator must help learners examine these areas and replace them with new ideas, concepts, and perspectives.

6) Sensory Learning

Although adult learners use all their senses, individuals usually have a dominant or preferred sense upon which they rely for learning new things.

For practical purposes, learning facilitation usually addresses the senses of sight (visual), hearing (auditory), and touch (kinesthetic). Visual learners must interact with and apply content in a visual way: as much as possible, they must see what they are learning. This need can be met in a variety of ways, from graphics to the printed page. Auditory learners must interact with and apply content through listening and speaking. This need must be met by providing auditory versions of content (from lecture to music) and by providing multiple opportunities for learners to hear and speak to each other. Kinesthetic learners must interact with and apply content in a physical way. Although the obvious way to meet this need is to provide hands-on practice, this need can also be met by providing ways for learners to interact with content physically (from note-taking to drawing pictures). Effective facilitators “create a variety of sensory input because what isn’t clear when received by one sense often crystallizes through another”.

7) Less is More

Effective facilitators take complex or new material and organize it in a simple way for participants so they can easily understand and apply new information and skills.

Some trainers feel a need to cram all the content they can into a course; this very practice inhibits learning. Content should directly align with specific learning objectives; other content should not be included.

Four principles for creating learning programmes

If you are ever in a situation where you are involved in or consulted by others who are designing learning programmes, you may want to review your company’s planned activities with the following four principles in mind:

Principle 1 - Building on Theory

Theory is important to understanding—which again is an important prerequisite to learning.

Having participants understand why the learning is important and putting it in context makes things easier. Adults want theory presented in the context of the job and applicability to real life situations. Once they buy into their need to know, they will invest significant energy in the learning experience. The facilitator must demonstrate the value of the learning as it relates to the learners' personal or professional lives. A facilitator can tell them of the value, but it is better if the learners become aware of this through self-discovery of their gaps as they relate to the course content. Finally, debriefing activities should reinforce their need to know. The facilitator should bring examples and applications to life by making them directly relevant to the learners situations.

Principle 2 – Relevance for Practice

Orientation to learning is life- or work-centered for adults.

Adults want to learn things that will help them solve a problem, do a task, or prepare for a position. Therefore, a key ingredient is practice. Practice increases proficiency as well as the probability of retention, and is therefore critical to learning and on-the-job application.

Principle 3 – Give Feedback

Adults want and need feedback.

People like and need to know how they are doing. There are several ways a facilitator can provide feedback. A common and easily implementable way is testing.

Principle 4 – Respect Individual Differences

Adult learners have highly significant individual differences in styles and needs.

Every participant is unique and learns differently. Each brings different backgrounds, perspectives, and biases to the learning experience. Adults learn at their own pace. Not everyone is a fast learner. This variation can prove challenging for a facilitator. Particularly fast learners can be given lead roles in the program, asked to provide peer coaching, take on additional and more challenging tasks, present some content, lead group activities, and generally serve as a resource to others.

Individual differences become greater with age and experience. Some of these differences are learning styles, time and place of learning, and depth of knowledge and

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expertise. Facilitators cannot control all of these variables, but they can accommodate different learning styles and depth of knowledge.

Alter learning activities to accommodate learning styles. Through the expertise of the facilitator and leveraging the expertise of the group, a facilitator can bring more depth and job relevance to the learning experience.

When in doubt, use the old principle: do more of what works!
All the best for your training programme,



Annette B. Reissfelder



*As an executive coach with extensive international and intercultural experience, I have over 8 years of coaching experience with senior managers from different industries and varied backgrounds and professional targets. I have served as a one-on-one change agent with 40+ clients in board level/owner positions, and over 70 clients in board-1 and board-2 positions. I work in my native German, as well as in near-native English and Czech. I am based in **Hamburg/Germany** and **Prague/Czech Republic**.*

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