

Valuing learning at work

How does learning enable strategy?

Learning becomes an enabler of strategy if employees are able to deliver the organization's future by advancing their own personal and career development. The aim here is to build on the prospects for engaging people in the change process and to explain how action learning might be used to maintain balance between personal and organizational outcomes. If employees are expected to participate in action learning and produce and implement solutions to work problems, they will want to know how they might benefit. An effective way of providing benefit is to recognize effort and outcomes by using professional learning credit as a currency that can be accumulated and banked. This is especially helpful if credit is awarded for outputs or applications so that the learner is in fact, tracking his/her own contribution to the organization's investment in learning.

What brings strategy and learning together?

Most writers accept that deeper-level learning arises from critically reflecting on one's own experiences. John Dewey was among the first to write on the subject in the late 1930s. Dewey's view was that learning triggers a reflective thought, beginning with an ambiguous situation that poses some kind of dilemma. From this 'felt difficulty', the individual locates and defines the problem. If logic prevails, the individual next considers solutions, with analysis of the many angles, followed by observation and experimentation and, finally, a decision to act or not on one or more of the possible solutions. If learning gives rise to a change in basic assumptions, it is commonly referred to as 'double-loop learning' in contrast to learning that doesn't challenge underlying assumptions, known as 'single-loop learning'. In essence then, to 'learn something' the learner must consciously experience a cycle of events, which begins when actions (and their results) become experiences and continues as the learner reflects on the experiences (what has been learnt?), then develops, plans and implements new or revised actions taking into account the outcomes of learning from 'doing' and 'reflecting'. The most fruitful approach to organizational learning is to focus on the ways in which individual members of the organization learn and on the conditions and requirements needed to sustain this.

How do we facilitate organizational learning?

For Peter Senge, an influential writer on organizational learning, the purpose is to continually expand the organization's capacity to create its own future. If this statement is to mean anything, executives must lead the way and set an example, by encouraging open debate at all levels on tough issues like re-generation and even re-invention - not only when it suits them to do so, but all the time. Here, what Senge calls 'mental models' are important - encouraging every organizational member to surface, challenge, adapt and personally own a mental model of what he or she could achieve by learning at work and thinking about what this might mean for the organization as a whole. For Senge this is one of five 'disciplines' that organizational members need to work on. The other four are personal mastery, building a shared vision, team learning and what Senge calls the 'fifth discipline' systems thinking, which serves to integrate the other four.

Senge's 'five disciplines' were presented as a key to building adaptability in organizations. But are they the critical ones? Senge presents no research evidence for this beyond case studies from his own consulting experience. Instead he attributes organizational learning (and non-learning) primarily to personal attributes of organizational members. Thus organizational learning is equated with individual learning and it is assumed that, if enough organizational members develop an ability to understand how the organization operates as a system, the organization will become more effective. Clearly, improving the effectiveness of individuals is valuable but unless the organization itself systematically captures and builds on individual insight, the organization will not see and feel the benefits. More to the point, unless personal learning is related in some way to the needs and strategy of the organization it will be of marginal value. So, is the personal learning of individual organizational members, or even of teams, sufficient by itself to produce enhanced corporate performance? One might conclude that it is helpful to nurture personal competence, but that it is certainly not enough to create and sustain an effective learning organization.

So where does this take us? First, a learning organization should focus on developing its competency to maintain and improve current performance and second, its ability to change or re-shape the organization to underpin future performance. This means that human resource development is not just about developing people, it is about building the capability of the organization to learn. These two aspects of competence development are interrelated but distinctly different. In fact, the development of employees must itself become a corporate competence.

Can we really embed and cascade learning?

In short, 'yes you can!' All that is required is a willingness to champion the role of learning in operations and strategy execution, sufficient projects for people to work on and a carefully crafted learning design, with appropriate briefings for every output, each in some way related to desired outcomes. Is it really as simple as this? Well no it isn't - managers tend to share a scepticism for learning which in itself is an emotive word. For many it conjures images of irrelevance and even failure, often as far back as primary school and, for hands on managers, the word 'learning' brings to mind other negative connotations. Typically these include preconceptions of hours spent studying theoretical content that has little use or application and examinations that prove little more than information that has been pre-loaded in short term memory can be regurgitated under examination conditions. At worse, this scenario fills would-be learners with horror - in fact, even those who did well in the mainstream education system - from school through university - rarely speak favourably about their experiences of formal learning. Do managers really have to undergo this kind of ordeal in order to obtain externally recognized qualifications at work? If they do, then few will volunteer - except perhaps those who feel the need to chase after qualifications to gain promotion. The majority of successful managers are good at doing and delivering for their employer and they rarely need convincing that action learning respects the ways in which they like to work. Consider for a moment the following table:

Table 1: What are executives expected to do?

Drive for results	Demonstrate a passion to compete against a standard of excellence
Show courage and conviction	'Live' personal beliefs and values to ensure the success of the business
Think strategically / innovate	Think constantly about the broader perspective in order to visualize the way forward
Remain curious	Able to 'read' and interpret factors that will affect the business and re-align with these
Interpret people	Demonstrate insight into the behaviour and interests of others
Understanding organizations	Able to read and understand the organization and others (customers, suppliers, etc).
Impact and influence others	Able to win others over in order to achieve results and support
Lead to win	Able and willing to inspire a team to achieve overall business objectives
Build capability	Able to recognize and respond to both personal and subordinate learning needs.

Source: Adapted from the chairman's list of international competencies, UK multinational.

Each and every competency listed in the left-hand column of Table 1 is an 'active' one. Second, in this organization, executives are expected to ask questions (remain curious) and build from what works and from the resources around them. In fact, only a questions-driven learning process will allow busy people to customize their personal development so that they can demonstrate these competencies. If your organization has the courage of its convictions and the determination to combine strategy and learning, it is possible to use credit accumulation to drive both forward at the same time and formalize learning capture for mutual benefit. Interdependency and collaborative effort is also assured by the specific objectives and outcomes of learning. As a starting point, this type of cascade approach helps to create an ethos of sharing - both in terms of learning and responsibility for delivering the outputs on time and to specification. Beyond this, the case for embedding the process flows from the return on investment yield that invariably arises.

References

Dixon, P. *Futurewise: Six Faces of Global Change*, Harper Collins, London, 1998.

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- A learning organization should focus on developing its competency to maintain and improve current performance and on its ability to change or re-shape the organization to underpin future performance. It is also about building the capability of the organization to learn.
- Individual effort can be recognized using professional learning credit as a currency that can be accumulated and banked. This also helps the learner to track their own return on investment in learning.
- Collaborative effort helps to create an ethos of sharing and interdependency in terms of learning and responsibility for delivering outputs on time and to specification. Beyond this, the case for embedding the process flows from the return on investment yield that invariably arises.