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ARE YOU TREATING YOUR LEARNERS AS ADULTS OR CHILDREN?

Creating effective learning environments for senior leaders

Organisations spend millions of pounds annually to change cultures and behaviours but often fall short of making those changes stick. Why is that?

How can it be that with more than fifty years of leadership development theory, experimentation and research in our industry, we still find ourselves with the perennial problem of development programmes not delivering the lasting change that organisations and individuals are looking for? Enjoyable? Yes. Engaging? Yes. Though provoking? Yes. Delivering lasting change? Not consistently.

Unfortunately, it's an all too common story in many organisations. What is it that gets in the way of making lasting change and getting the learning to stick in a way that leads to genuine, long-term behavioural change?

Perhaps the issue how training is delivered, rather than what is being delivered?

The heart of the issue

Organisations are run, managed and led by people. Those people are adults, they are individuals, they are self-aware (well most of them are), they have their own histories and experiences that drive their choices and behaviours. They belong to multiple systems each of which has its own values and beliefs – be that family, national culture or religion to name but a few. Yet in the majority of organisations they are treated and managed as one homogenous group, with very little time and money spent on understanding each of them as individuals. Understanding their individual preferences, biases and motivations.

The same goes for the learning and development programmes they receive. The drive for results and constraints on time and budget lead to design and delivery that is aimed at the average person, the most common type of

delegate or the majority that sit in the middle. We're not great at differentiating, unless that means simply altering the content for different layers within the organisational hierarchy. Do we focus enough on how these individuals need to learn?

Are we treating our learners as adults or children?

Whether they would like to admit it or not most organisations take a very traditional teaching approach to training, or **pedagogical** one. Pedagogy comes from the Greek *paid* meaning 'child' and *agogos* meaning 'leader of.' More literally translated as the art and science of teaching children.

Here are the key assumptions about learners in a pedagogical approach:

The need to know: The learner only needs to know what they need to learn in order to pass or be promoted along a scale or hierarchy.

The learner's self-concept: The teacher sees the student as dependent on them; therefore the learner's self-concept also becomes one of a dependent personality in the process of learning.

The role of experience: The learner's own experience is of low worth as a resource; it is the teacher's experience that counts or that of the curriculum designer, author, PowerPoint producer. It is all about transmitting the experience and expertise of the teacher to the learner.

Readiness to learn: The learner only becomes ready to learn when the teacher tells them it is time and necessary to pass and be promoted.

Orientation to learning: The learner sees

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Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking it.

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Malcolm S. Knowles

The Adult Learner, 1973

learning as acquiring subject-matter content so the experience is designed around the logic of the subject-matter.

Motivation: The learner is motivated by external motivators; feedback about a remedial need to improve, the teacher's approval or disapproval, promotion along a scale or other external pressures.

If you examine the assumptions made about learning in this traditional teacher-directed style, you can see many ways in which organisations take this approach and perhaps why so many of their people do not respond well to it nor learn effectively from it. It's not surprising to see why so many people dread going on training courses or programmes where they feel like they are going back to school.

They might engage in the process but will they learn and change as a result?

Creating an effective adult learning environment

There are several theories of learning and development that are more specifically directed towards the adult learning environment. These came to prominence in the last part of the twentieth century – Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – promoting the need for physiological and psychological safety needs to be met before deeper learning can occur; Kolb's Learning Cycle – describing the

flow in the learning process; Bloom's Taxonomy – focusing on the different layers of complexity of learning from simple knowledge acquisition and understanding through to genuine analysis and evaluation; and Knowles' Andragogy or Adult Learning Theory – exploring whether adults learn in a different way to children in its simplest form.

Do we genuinely focus on the learning environment as being the key to successful learning? There are two elements here that need focus and attention to be successful in achieving the desired learning outcomes and they relate to the **physical environment** and **psychological environment**.

Physical environment plays a hugely important role in creating a space where people can easily access the learning on offer. How often do we select spaces and venues based purely on the bias of cost and geographical location? Both are important, but neither have much bearing on the the learning process.

However, the following can have a huge impact on the quality of learning: temperature; ventilation; range of refreshments; amount of space; comfort of seating; amount of natural light; external noise; degree of privacy; shape and layout; whether it's indoors or outdoors and quality of resources and equipment. These things may seem simplistic but there is large body of research from neuroscience, psychology

If we can approach programme design in a way that reduces the risk of anxiety, embarrassment, boredom and focus of attention but promotes a feeling of safety then we will be helping learners to anchor their learning with positive emotions.



As a person matures his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centredness.



Malcolm S. Knowles

Andragogy in Action, 1984

and education on all of these factors which points to their ability to positively or negatively impact on the experience of the learner.

Psychological environment is the influence we have over how learners feel. Studies from neuroscience show us that new knowledge is often best held in the memory alongside specific positive emotions. Therefore if we can approach programme design in a way that reduces the risk of anxiety, embarrassment, boredom and focus of attention but promotes a feeling of safety then we will be helping learners to anchor their learning with positive emotions.

There are many ways to pay attention to this overlooked but important area and different areas of psychology can help us here. The **Behaviourists** would approach this by ensuring an effective contracting process with the group, by understanding the individual intrinsic/extrinsic motivators, assessing the organisations climate for learning and how it rewards its learners. The **Cognitivists** may focus more on ensuring a sense of orderliness, creating clarity of communication and language, identifying clarity of organisational and individual goals, allowing the system to be an open one and encouraging experimentation and celebrating failure as part of the learning process. Finally, the **Humanists** show us the need to create an environment which promotes feelings of safety, a caring atmosphere, accepting of difference, trusting of each other and the process, respectful of alternative views, allows collaboration to flourish and builds group

loyalty. In essence a way of creating a sense of 'adulthood' in the programme.

And, of course, to create an environment of psychological safety, openness and encouragement of failure, there needs to be a genuine culture of learning within the organisation.

Has your organisation created a genuine learning climate?

Depending on the answers to the questions below, your people will have a particular view on the extent to which they believe their organisation genuinely values their individual learning:

- Is your L&D policy framework central to the company strategy or is it on the periphery?
- What is the management philosophy? Is it driven by more mechanistic training programmes or does it develop more organically with a humanistic approach?
- Does the organisational structure support learning? Is it very hierarchical where access to learning depends on your level or is it a matrix where learning is more self-directed based on local needs?
- Financial policy – what % of resources are allocated to learning and is it viewed as a capital investment or an operating cost that is cut at the first sign of hard times?
- How does the reward system support learning? Is it used as a stimulus, for example for promotion purposes or is learning seen as the reward itself?

It is therefore vital that L&D leaders perceive their senior management, and especially the executive team, to be the initial target within their 'student body'.

Positive	Negative
Proactive consultant	Reactive teacher for remedial interventions
Advocate for learning	Managing logistics to enable programmes
Stimulator for learning	Administrator of programmes
Agent for change	Provider of learning experiences
Treats whole organisation as the client	Clients are selected individuals

How is L&D perceived by the executive team?

And depending on which side of the table below your department sits will dictate how learning is viewed in the organisation.

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How should we better treat our learners?

The people in any given cohort on a programme are all individuals and will have a variety of important individual differences that need to be accounted for:

- Personality and where they sit on the introvert/extrovert spectrum, whether they are risk-takers or cautious, and the degree to which they can focus and be attentive.
- How they deal with ambiguity, levels of anxiety around learning and their tolerance to frustration.
- Their cognitive levels, be that general mental ability or more specific controls such as the way they prefer to collect and organise data (visual vs. haptic, visual vs. verbal and simplifying vs. generalising).

- Their prior experience of learning environments and the subject matter.

It is also useful to heed the differences in subject matter, for example an unknown and highly technical subject would be difficult to learn through self-directed learning; similarly understanding and changing personal behaviour patterns would not work well following an online pedagogical approach. It's clear that not every subject matter can be taught in the same way.

These factors are all crucial to understand and utilise in the design of the programme. If we pay close attention to them we can move towards creating a learning culture that is fit for the adult learner.

Compared with the pedagogical approach, a more adult learning environment may look like this:

The need to know: The learner should know why they are undertaking learning, what it is they need to learn and be clear on how they are going to go about the learning process. The learning environment should provide the opportunity to ask those questions in an open and engaging way.

The learner's self-concept: The learner needs to feel they have a high degree of autonomy in the process and that the best outcomes come when the learning is largely self-directed.

The role of experience: The learner's prior experience should be used as a valued resource in the process including any existing mental models that they may hold about learning and the content of the subject matter.

The alternative of 'education for the masses' may well be fun, engaging and thought-provoking but rarely leads to lasting change.

Readiness to learn: This is acutely important. Have they been told that it is time to learn or have they chosen to due to life related issues, or the developmental needs of a specific task ahead.

Orientation to learning: Are they approaching learning from a more problem-centred standpoint or is the learning very much contextual to their own personal situation?

Motivation: Have they been told they need to learn (extrinsic forces) or does it have a more intrinsic pay-off for them personally?

The way forward

With all of this information what can L&D and HR do differently? How can they help their senior leaders learn in way that makes outcomes stick?

Here are four steps as a place to start:

1. Pay more attention to the existing culture for learning in the organisation. If the climate for learning at that holistic level is not right, then that is the problem to solve in the first instance. Does the executive team genuinely value learning for its people? A good test of this is the degree to which they individually invest in their own personal ongoing CPD!
2. Don't accept that the cultural change only needs to happen in the lower layers of the hierarchy. If we were all braver and more challenging of the executive team and the need for their own behavioural change then we would get far better buy-in from the rest of the organisation. Do they lead by example? If not, then we need to challenge that.
3. Pay closer attention to the people on our programmes. They are all individuals with specific needs. This process does take time and money, but if we genuinely want to see lasting changes, then that is the way we must approach our learning design and delivery. The alternative of 'education for the masses' may well be fun, engaging and thought-provoking but rarely leads to lasting change.
4. The places and spaces you select to run your programmes matter. They affect the quality of the outcomes more than we give it credit for. If we want real learning to take place, then we must make sure we are creating more inspirational learning environments.