Eight key learning skills

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I have become deeply concerned about the unhealthy dependence we adults typically have on others for our personal and professional development. To a large degree this is conditioned, as from school we are told what to wear, where to sit, and to treat the Teacher with respect as the source of all worthwhile learning. Not enough of us who call ourselves development professionals do much to free learners from the unhelpful shackles of passive participation, encouraging people to take what I call 'appropriate' responsibility for our own development.

As Charles Handy suggests, *learning is not automatic, it requires energy, thought, courage and support* (1). Ian Hinton stresses this even more powerfully when he wrote, *learning is not easy. It can be painful. We have to let go of cherished ideas and values...the alternative to learning is stagnation and death* (2).

This seems very valid to me - and the uncertain workplace so many of us spend most of our time within does not help us to be more adventurous, courageous in our learning habits for fear of the consequences of failure.

We face an uncertain age of redundancy and of fewer than ever long term careers, so it is essential that we all accept the responsibility of genuinely managing and directing our own development, for this is far too important to leave to anyone else. To do this we need to regain the lapsed learning skills we once used without inhibition. We have plenty of role models; they are typically between two and three feet tall. Learning is a skill, a meta competency that is an absolute requirement if we are to gain value from the development opportunities that present themselves in a constant flow. This article will summarise my thoughts on the eight learning skills essential for our development.

Learning skill one: The skilled learner anticipates learning opportunities

Most of us do not plan our learning. Okay, so we know when we are going on a training course, but that is not what I mean. Surely we learn much more from everyday work and life than from occasional training events that very often result in little or no development or application of learning. The skilled learner is prepared for informal learning, thus ready to take advantage of every learning opportunity that comes their way.

A skilled learner has developed an intuitive ability that enables them to see even a little in advance an opportunity to learn. The more ready we are to benefit from learning experiences, the greater will be the value we draw from these.

Learning skill two: The skilled learner recognises and exploits developmental situations

If you are prepared then you are far more likely to make good use of the limitless developmental opportunities that exist for us all. The trouble is, typically, our development is such a low priority for so many of us, that we tend not to consciously

consider the developmental value of most of the domestic and professional activities we undertake. As Handy says, *busy people often have no time for curiosity* (3). The skilled learner, despite all other competing priorities, has an insatiable appetite for curiosity. When we lose this, we lose with it our ability to spot and make the most of what I call the significant experiences that incrementally contribute to our development.

Our development is a continuous, incremental process, and the greater our ability to recognise potentially developmental experiences as they are happening the more likely some long term value will result. Unfortunately, many of the most powerful 'potentially' developmental experiences are, to say the least, far from pleasant. If we are to become skilled learners, we must reflect upon, and learn from things we would rather not. Indeed it seems to me that in this age when so often 'activity' not productivity is sought, there is all too little time for deliberate reflection, and as a consequence a lot of rich potential learning goes to waste.

Learning skill three: The skilled learner seeks out new learning

The more learning and development we seek the more we will find. No-one will ever show more interest in your own development than you do in your own. Our development is a unique and individual journey, so the more we are prepared to do for ourselves, the straighter and more direct will be the route to increased competence. If you passively wait for learning and development to come to you really will lose out to those who make the effort to find their own, for *in a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists* (4).

So why do we use learning in an insulting way? - 'you've got a lot to learn'. The skilled learner doesn't see a hunger to develop as in any way remedial or subordinate, indeed, those who spend a lifetime studying leaders, have shown the direct connection between leading and learning. After all, what is a leader if not someone whose learning is keeping them ahead of others? (5). Churchill put it well when he said *I cannot stand being taught, but I enjoy learning* (6).

Learning skill four: The skilled learner takes risks and innovates

I was told some years ago that 'if you always do what you always did, then you'll always get what you always got'. Think about it, it's true, and if we stay within our comfort zones of what we can do well then we never know how good we could have been if we had ventured out of them long enough to find out just how competent we can become. Regrettably, too many organisations stifle potential and penalise errors and mistakes that stop their people learning. Handy puts this more elegantly...*It may be true that we learn more from our mistakes than our successes, but organisations have in the past been reluctant to put this theory into practice". He goes on to emphasise this very important point by noting that "organisations are not by nature forgiving places* (7). Wonderfully put, and we know what he means don't we?

One of Peter Senge's five disciplines is 'personal mastery', and he feels that *there is nothing more important to an individual committed to his or her own growth than a supportive environment* (8).

It still disappoints me that so many organisations (many of whom claim to be Investors in People, 'learning organisations' or whatever), do so little to encourage individual

learning. All the more reason of course to manage our own, but what a terrible waste. Senge again makes the case for this far better than I can when he wrote *organisations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organisational learning, but without it no organisational learning occurs* (9).

The final point he makes above deserves further analysis. I have long believed that learning organisations happen naturally where they happen at all, via the collective effect of individual learning, they are never the result of proud pronouncements or even vast and sincere expenditure on training programmes. Training that does not lead to development through learning has no lasting value, so for organisations to gain from their investment in development, and to provide a learning environment, learning must be promoted and supported at the individual level - hence the crucial significance of this learning skill, for real development means movement into exciting, anxious activities and experiences that too few organisations manage in a mature manner, after all, *if you're not making mistakes, you aren't trying hard enough* (10).

Learning skill five: The skilled learner seeks and accepts help and feedback

There's a lot in this too. Some of us are better at asking for help and feedback than we are at taking it. If we confine ourselves to our self-perceptions we are losing out on the rich source of other's views of us. Few people are skilled and sensitive in giving advice and feedback, and that doesn't help.

It seems to me that most advice and feedback is expected to be taken, especially if asked for, but there is a rich dimension of development just waiting there for those with the courage to seek it. Skilled learners have overcome the temptation to 'yes but' when they hear what they would rather not, and reflect upon why people feel the way they do about us and the way we behave. Then they show they have learned from this by what they do as a result.

It is important to recognise that personal feedback does 'not' mean praise, criticism or advice. I wish there were more people out there who could find the time to give this crucial feedback skilfully. The skilled learner takes their development sufficiently seriously to seek these few folk out, and because they are so eager to learn, they will not feel wounded or defensive about what they accept is accurate feedback that provides the means to precisely target future their development efforts. It is the ability to give direct, specific, honest, objective and developmental feedback that makes a genuine Mentor such an asset - many skilled learners have taken the time to maintain at least one long term mentoring relationship.

Learning skill six: The skilled learner is constructively self critical

Those who learn best know themselves well, targeting developmental effort and precious time most accurately. This means not just trying to get a little better at the things that are already done really well, but being sufficiently honest with ourselves to tackle areas of relative weakness - perhaps prompted by some advice or feedback. It is possible to be harmfully or even destructively self-critical; the skilled learner doesn't get into these difficulties, focusing developmental activities on a sound diagnosis of real needs.

It is too easy to become unhelpfully self analytical, for taking Senge's advice once again, *the more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance* (11).

For the skilled learner however, the more 'ignorance' is found the greater the thirst to gain knowledge and more importantly, competence, for what good is knowledge that is not put to use?

Since February 1987 I have kept a hand-written learning log (12) to prompt reflection upon, and recording of my learning. This has become my most significant means of self-criticism, and at the time of typing this, I have written 1149 entries and over 850,000 words. Not bad for an extroverted, unstructured, disorganised person, with extreme Activist learning preferences. If we are sufficiently motivated, we can find the time to reflect on what we do well and what has not gone so well.

Learning skill seven: The skilled learner filters and makes connections

Those of us with undeveloped learning skills tend to find difficulty with applying what we learn from one context into another, at an extreme, seeing developmental events and experiences as discrete, unrelated and distinct. Those with more developed learning competences can see many uses for a single learning experience, and don't have a problem with adapting a rich learning experience to a different purpose or application. For instance, I see many people dismiss potentially rich developmental opportunities because they are 'private' or 'public' sector, or perhaps American, instead of making an effort to get beyond theses cosmetic factors, looking for, and often finding learning of real value.

In addition to making these connections, the more skilled as learners we become, the better we get at spotting those incidents, events and experiences that are 'not' worth investing valuable reflection and/or application time upon. This is a skill that takes a lot of time to develop, as the significance of a truly significant developmental experience may not be at all clear at the time. The skilled learner is a conscious learner, and, unusually, really does find the time to consider these issues amidst everything else that is going on.

Learning skill eight: The skilled learner overcomes barriers to learning

Skilled learners possess a motivation to develop that most of us lack. Somehow they find a way around the problems we all face when seeking to manage our own development. These problems might for instance be time, after all, are we not busier now than ever before? Other barriers may be a lack of support or interest, or of opportunity to apply what has been learned.

Motivation is a big issue. I do get asked a lot still, 'that's all very well, but what' in it for me?' Too often, people asking that question seem incapable of making the effort to genuinely steer their own learning journey, and don't realise that learning and development is a portable resource. Passive dependence on others for our development has little value.

The business case for supporting genuinely self-directed learning is as obvious, a favourite quote from Nancy Dixon that rings more true with each passing year puts this so well... *the viability of an organisation as a whole may rest on the ability of employees to continue to learn* (13). Never mind the interests of any current employer, our development is far too important to leave to anyone else, so I really do encourage you all to treat your development as a high priority, as the learners will succeed in the future at the expense of those whose learning skills are far less advanced.

References

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