

LEARNING AND LIFE (AND CPD) by Stuart Emmett.

INTRODUCTION

One of the difficulties with learning is that many people think they already know all about it. They therefore think it is something they do not have to do. This view is however out-dated and a dangerous one to have in times of change, continual challenge, and new developments.

Learning in fact, is not a passive activity or an automatic process.

It may seem to be a passive activity once you have learned something but to learn anything requires an active approach. Learning involves activity, it needs thinking about, and it can be hard work. It is a very personal experience and fortunately, learning can be flexed and adapted to be fun and an enjoyable experience.

Some people believe learning is common sense - whilst it is certainly sense, it is not an activity that is very common. Consider the following definition of learning:

"Learning is the method and process which uses personal-power, knowledge and experience to:

- Make sense of things, (by thinking)
- Make things happen, (by doing)
- Bring about change, (by moving from one position to another)"

Learning is surely fundamentally about what every person needs to do and must do in a conscious way. So, please read on.....

WHY SHOULD I LEARN?

The answer is simple-so you can keep up with all changes and developments in the world and in business. The rate and speed of change is dramatic. Those who remain in the past can quickly have outdated knowledge and skills. Competence is not a constant. Development must be dynamic and not static.

The only thing certain about the future is that it will be different, so learning is fundamental to our "tomorrow."

This is not to say all that is changed is "good". But new developments do need to be examined. Often the "best" way will eventually be the simplest way – but, only it has been examined, thought about and applied, (i.e. it has been actively learnt).

Learning involves developing skills and competencies in response to the future and to the problems we face. Learning is not just about obtaining qualifications, but is fundamentally about doing things better and doing things differently.

ACTION TIME

- What were you doing five years ago?
- What were you doing three years ago?
- What were you doing one year ago?
- What are you doing today?
- What do you expect to be doing in one year?

Your responses will clearly show what has changed in your life.

Now ask yourself:

- What new knowledge and skills were needed to get you from “the past” to “the current”?
- How do you now think differently?
- What do you now do differently?

Just about everything you know, you do and believe about, has been learnt.

People should not rely on their employer to sponsor and support an individual learning. It is good if they do, but different companies have different approaches to learning and development. Leaving such an important decision to someone else is dangerous. Remember that it is your development. A Company only develops and learns through its people. It is individuals who do the learning in companies. Individuals are the constant in companies learning. It is therefore clearly the responsibility of individuals to promote their own learning.

Self- development is a unique and personal journey. Many opportunities are available. It is therefore important to learn how to manage and how to lead your own development and to cease total dependence on others to do this. As a skilled learner, you will then be able to:

- Anticipate learning opportunities
- Recognise development situations
- Seek out new learning
- Take risks and innovate
- Seek help and feedback
- Use interpersonal competencies
- Be self critical constructively
- Filter and make connections
- Overcome barriers to learning

ACTION TIME

Ask yourself the following question:

- Why do I want to learn?

Your response and thinking is very crucial to you being an effective learner.

WHERE TO LEARN?

We can and do learn anywhere and anytime. Learning activities can take place in many different situations. Learning is not just about courses and qualifications, but includes informal and formal situations such as the following:

Informal (or unstructured) learning could be:

- work experience projects
- coaching and mentoring
- job rotation and work shadowing
- planned reading
- attendance at ILT meetings
- using multi-media resources

Formal (structured) learning could be:

- attendance at courses, conferences and seminars
- distance learning with feedback or some form of assessment
- studying for a qualification
- undertaking research
- coaching and mentoring
- job rotation and work shadowing

Learning does not always have to be with an outcome that is upwards, such as a promotion; but it can be about broadening your skills, knowledge and/or competence at all levels.

Learning can also result from making mistakes, as long as you do not keep repeating the mistake-as then-you are not learning!

Indeed, most learning comes from our own experiences and not from others wishes or commands or dictates.

HOW TO LEARN?

Learning is a unique and personal process. It is not always a formal process. No two individuals have followed the same path to get them where they are today.

We do many things without thinking about them. This is what academics would call being unconsciously competent. But when we first learnt something, we were incompetent and our learning had to become a conscious process. Think about driving a car. After we have done it for some years, we then drive without thinking about all the very many complex things we do. Until perhaps we have a near miss, then we think about how we drive...for a short time...then it becomes an automatic activity again...until... the next "incident".

However, do you remember when you started learning to drive? You drove slowly; missed gear changes, used kangaroo petrol, clipped corners, got frustrated, thought you would never do it, etc.

Yet, now, you drive "unconsciously" for most of the time.

Driving is a useful analogy for how we learn. We never learnt to drive a car by reading a book or watching someone do it. Reading and watching may have been a part of the process, but, to learn how to drive, you had to do it!

Learning experiences must therefore involve doing. A Chinese proverb states: "I hear and I forget, I see and I might remember, but when I do, then I understand." The "doing" is very important for learning. Being active is central to learning. Are you, for example, completing the Action Times?

To help you on this "doing" please do appreciate that learning is a cyclical process. This is shown below:

- We start by gaining experience-we do something
- We then think about the experience and try to understand it-we reflect
- We then make a choice-we reconsider
- We then decide what to do next-we revise
- We then do something again

Learning is therefore cyclical and a never-ending spiralling process. Once one "project" ends, it leads onto other "projects".

Learning is an active process. There is no self-learning without your action. Learning and doing and changing, are all inter-linked and inter-connected.

Learning involves you in all of the following:

Knowledge → Skills → Motivation → Doing
"I Know" → "I Can" → "I Will" → "I Do"

You will see that motivation is involved. This, very simply, involves using the "carrot" or the "stick." These are needed to get us to do something. Learning is always a decision of our "will". As is said, "you can take a horse to water, but cannot make it drink". You can for example, be sent on a training course, but whether you learn anything, is very largely dependant upon you.

Learning will take your conscious effort and learning how to learn is a skill to be developed. Continuing professional development (CPD) can help you with this skill. CPD will certainly make your learning, a conscious process.

WHAT IS CPD?

Continuing Professional Development is:

“The systematic maintenance and improvement of knowledge, skills and competence throughout a professional’s working life”

“The process by which a professional person maintains the quality and relevance of professional services during their working life”

CPD is your commitment to ensure that your knowledge and skills are maintained in a changing world at a suitable level. CPD is about maintaining standards of competence and professionalism. It puts the emphasis on you taking responsibility for developing and directing your own career. It is the conscious updating of your professional knowledge and the improvement of your personal competence throughout your working life.

Professional career development standards require that you are able to explain:

1. How wider environments affect your career
2. The relationship between your aspirations and the labour market
3. The external sources of support that are available
4. The role of outplacement and support
5. The importance of self assessment
6. The differing and changing career needs
7. Mechanisms for evaluating career management

ACTION TIME

Can you explain how you “do”, all of these seven points?

Always remember it is your development and nobody else’s. Know one will force you to do it. It is all about being committed to your own growth and your success and survival in a changing and developing world.

WHY USE CPD?

The world is developing and evolving. For example:

- Rapid developments in technology,
- New and shifting markets,

- The economic situation,
- Greater emphasis on community and the environment,
- A more mobile international workforce,
- Preparedness for a promotion or a change of job.

All these changes place emphasis on the continuing need for an individual to be professionally competent.

Employers, clients, and the public require better standards faster and at a lower cost. CPD will help you to prepare for and cope with the challenges that will face you in the future world of work.

The time for self-development is now. The pace of change has never been so fast; we have never had access to as much freely available and high quality learning as now. If we abdicate responsibility for managing our own development, then for sure, we will be less valuable to those we want to work for in the future. An employer may not be interested whether you do CPD or not, as they know many other people are in fact, doing it.

To be interested in your self-development, will mean you move through the following levels of interest

- Level one. I have development needs, but am not interested in them.
- Level two. I have development needs, but I do not know what they are.
- Level three. I have development needs; I know what they are, but refuse to do anything about them, as it is not my responsibility.
- Level four. I have development needs, I now what they are, but I need a push to do anything them.
- Level five. I know about my development needs, I want to do something about them, but I do not know how to start
- Level six. I know about my development needs, I want to do something and I am doing something
- Level seven. I have no development needs.

ACTION TIME

Which level are you?

How will you progress to the next level?

HOW TO UNDERTAKE CPD?

Effective learning involves combining the two halves of learning, "Knowing How" and "How to" (or, combining knowledge and competence). As Albert Einstein has noted, "Learning is more important than knowledge." Both halves of learning are therefore needed as knowledge can become isolated without competence.

CPD will involve recording both knowledge and competence; so almost anything can count as CPD. Good and effective CPD schemes do not however mean that attendance on a course equates to CPD points- points should not mean prizes! True CPD, is reflective of active and applied learning.

Successful CPD schemes therefore require that you will keep written records in two areas:

1). Your record of achievements

This is a full record of the learning action taken and the respective outcomes

2). Your development plan

This looks ahead and states your objectives, with the actions and plans to achieve these outcomes.

GETTING STARTED

You will find it useful to consider the following key questions. To help on this, you might find it useful to review your last work based appraisal/development review. However, your personal plan may be different to this work plan and may consider a wider range of aspirations.

ACTION TIME-FOUR QUESTIONS

• **Question One. Where am I now? What is my Current Position?**

What is my current knowledge and competence?

• **Question Two. Where do I want to be, or where am I going?**

What is the Future Situation?

What outcome do I want at this time?

What is the target I want to aim at?

What direction am I being moved towards?

• **Question Three. How am I going to get there?**

What is the gap between where I am now, and where I want to be?

What is the knowledge and competence required?

What actions do I need to take?

What resources do I need?

What support do I need?

• **Question Four. How do I know I have arrived?**

Are there any intermediate steps?

What are the criteria that will tell me I have arrived?

What are the criteria that will tell me I am at the end of this current stage?

These four short questions can then be looked at in greater detail by using the following Steps 1-4.

Step 1 – Review

To start the review process, you should review your personal and professional experience. This will enable you to identify your interests and present level of skills and knowledge. Analysis of future needs will enable you to take account of current, future, job, and career requirements

From this, you can draw up a profile of your personal and professional competencies, skills etc. This will help you to identify and prioritise areas for development.

Step 2 - Set your Goals

To achieve your objectives you need to set specific targets. You may have medium or long-term goals, but it is best to concentrate on short-term ones that can be achieved in about 12 months. Many long-term goals can be broken down into a series of short-term ones. Balance your goals so that they include:

- Immediate job requirements
- Business and career aspirations
- Personal targets
- Family and personal considerations

Set yourself definite targets, in order of priority, that are practical, achievable and challenging. You will also need to set yourself realistic time scales with criteria to help you evaluate outcomes.

Step 3 - Development Activities

With advice from a mentor, and/or your employer if you need it, identify the appropriate learning and development activities that will meet your needs. Think about all the available opportunities for development as well as any preferences and constraints.

To meet your development needs and achieve your targets you can choose from a wide variety of activities, both formal and informal.

We looked earlier at the formal and informal development methods and activities. The choice of activity is up to you so long as it is part of your overall CPD plan.

Although most other activities will be planned, you should also recognise and take advantage of other learning opportunities. These arise, from day to day work experiences, unexpected challenges, and professional contacts.

Step 4 - Evaluate the Outcomes

In order to assess the benefit of your CPD activities, their outcomes should be measured against the objectives that were set in Step 2. You should aim to evaluate your development in terms of new and/or improved levels of competent performance in your work, and/or new areas of knowledge acquired.

You will want to ask yourself four questions:

- Have I achieved my targets?
Fully; partially; not at all?
If not, why not?
If not yet achieved, do I need more time?
- What improvement can I see already as a result?
Promotion or more responsibility?
Increased confidence?
Better working relationships?
- How else can I use the new skills and knowledge?
Improve procedures/quality of service?
Developing a new project?
Coaching/mentoring colleagues?
- What am I going to do next?
Continue with targets that need more time?
Work towards a higher level of competence?
Seek formal recognition/qualification?

In addition to this evaluation of your achievement against your targets, you should also reflect on the process: did the chosen method work for you? This will help you to decide which method to choose (or avoid) in future.

Having worked through these four steps, you are now well on the way to self-development. Ask yourself:

- How committed am I in progressing my CPD?
- Where am I currently limiting myself in progressing?
- What am I willing to risk so I can make outstanding progress?
- What have I recently succeeded in?
- What was special about what I did then?
- What evidence could I gather to show increased commitment to my CPD?

Finally, what next should you do? Some suggestions follow:

- Get a copy of a Personal and Professional Development Plan (PDDP) and complete it.
- Getting feedback is vital to your development, so talk to those you trust about your PPDP.
- Get a mentor who will confidentially help and support your CPD.
- Above all, do not be like the person who said " I was going to read a copy of The Power of Positive Thinking, but then, I thought, what good would that do." So, do commit to doing something positive about your CPD!
- Review the following characteristics of a skilled learner and ask when will you be able to identify yourself?

CHECKLIST-The skilled learner is able to:

- generate their own opportunities for learning, (for example attending a personally financed training course or by reading a book)
- recognise developmental situations, (for example seeing that a problem presents an opportunity to learn)
- be interpersonally skilled, (for example can get the "best" from a wide range of people)
- actively seek advice and feedback, (for example asking from "superiors", reporting staff ,360 degree feedback)
- filter learning and make connections between unrelated experiences, (for example, completing learning logs and reflecting on them)
- innovate and take risks, (for example, trying creative non logical tasks, which seem not to be a "natural" way)
- constructively be self critical, (for example, saying "I was wrong" and looking to do it differently next time and not going into a self blame mentality)
- overcome barriers to learning, (for example, forcing themselves into something they have not done before)

(Source: after [www. andrew.gibbons.co.uk](http://www.andrew.gibbons.co.uk). The examples are from the author).