

## **LEARNING STRATEGY AND SUPPORTING LEARNERS**

**by Stuart Emmett.**

**“If companies were opposed to learning, then new recruits would have to learn nothing as every thing would be like it is, every where else. A Company opposed to supporting learning is logically, therefore, impossible. Unfortunately however, not every company would seem to operate logically”**

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.

Learning in fact, is neither a passive activity nor an automatic process. Whilst it may seem to be a passive activity once something has been learnt, learning actually requires taking an active approach as learning always involves doing and involves thinking. However some people believe learning is purely a matter of applied common sense. Whilst it is certainly sense, learning is often not an activity that is very common.

The importance of doing and thinking in learning are seen in the following definition of learning:

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

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

Learning and change are therefore directly connected and inter linked. Change is always an automatic output from effective learning. However effective learning needs encouragement and support and, this is not always an automatic input.

Senior managers have much to gain in their organisation by giving encouragement and support for learning within their companies. Employers surely need people who can think and people who can, above everything else, learn. Employees who can do this are actively using their minds and brains, and are mentally fit. Some of other reasons why a company might want to encourage learning are as follows:

- To stay in business
- To remain competitive
- To be a leader in the specific business area
- To better serve the needs of its customers

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- To increase profitability
- To be a role model for its suppliers
- To prevent mistakes
- To avoid repeating mistakes
- To benefit from all the knowledge the employees have to contribute
- To raise the companies collective intelligence
- To create a motivating work environment
- To attract and retain outstanding employees
- To build on the companies strengths
- To support the growth and development of its employees
- To become better at what they do
- To help its employees learn how to work together more effectively
- To change the culture of the company

### Learning and Senior Managers

Learning is however, not always an automatic process in companies. One of the reasons for this is that senior managers often under estimate the effect their behaviour has on the commitment of others. Managers always do provide a role model that gives out a powerful message. For effective learning in an organisation, managers must therefore demonstrate an interest in and support for, any form of learning. Without this encouragement and support, individuals may not learn and may not apply the learning at the work place. Management active "buy in" is therefore vital to gain the success of applied learning in the workplace.

Additionally senior managers will often feel that they and the organisation are committed to developing their people. After all, the annual report probably says they promote learning in the organisation. However the reality maybe different, for example, comments at the 1999 Institute of Personnel and Development Harrogate Conference by David Lee, (Director of the Professional Development Foundation), notes a belief/practice gap in companies where "senior managers promoted learning, but, engaged in no personal development themselves".

The message then to any level of influencing senior management has to be:

- to model learning
- to demonstrate actual learning
- to support learning.

Until this happens then the view of other managers and the staff can give a different picture. Staff for example, often do not see managers enquiring what new skills are needed and investigating how these can be obtained. Once a development programme has been agreed upon, staff often do not see any involvement from managers in discussing progress, visiting courses or

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providing support. Furthermore, staff also often feels they rarely receive from their managers, praise, or recognition of the learning effort involved, much of which can be in their personal time.

Companies can do much to support individuals in their learning. Companies no longer speak of offering jobs for life. Perhaps they need to sponsor a change from the concept of "earning a living" to "learning a living".

### **Learning is Important.**

Learning is needed to keep up with all changes and developments in the world and in business. The rate and speed of change is dramatic and those who remain in the past can quickly have outdated knowledge and skills. Competence is not a constant and therefore development must be dynamic. After all, the only thing certain about the future is that it will be different. Therefore, learning is fundamental to "tomorrow."

This is not to say that all developments are "good". But new developments need to be examined. Often the "best" way will eventually be the simplest way – but only after they have been examined, thought about, then used and applied. Learning involves developing skills and competencies in response to the future and to the problems we face. Learning is fundamentally about us doing things better, differently and successfully.

### **How to learn**

Just about everything we know, do, and believe about, has been learnt. Learning is a unique and personal process and is not always a formal process. After all what two individuals have followed the same path to get them to where they are today?

It is often normal for us to do many things without thinking about them. This can be called 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 drive without thinking about the very many complex things we do. Until perhaps we have an "incident", 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 when mistakes were a normal and accepted part of learning? You drove slowly; missed gear changes, used kangaroo petrol, clipped corners, got frustrated, thought you would never do it, etc. But with encouragement and support you kept at it and "passed". Now, you drive "unconsciously" for most of the time.

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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, we had to do it and make controlled mistakes.

### **Learning involves never ending "doing"**

Learning experiences need to involve action and 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 and is one part of the learning cycle. 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 for as one "project" ends, it leads onto other "projects".

### **Learning is active**

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

Learning involves us in all of the following:

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

Motivation is needed to get us to do something - a decision of our "will". As is said, "you can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink". We may for example, have been sent on a training course, but whether we learnt anything, was very largely dependant upon us. Learning is therefore preferably, something that we want to do and we decide to engage in.

### **Learning within Companies**

Company results come from the "mix" of:

- the products/services
- the use made of resources
- the customers/marketplace
- the competence and commitment of its people.

All are clearly important but competitive advantage is only ever going to come from the people. People are the ultimate answer as companies will only "win" if the individuals in the company are winning. Whilst the products, resources

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and the market are examined, experimented with and continually improved, what similar approach exists for the people? What is the investment plan/budget for its people? One / two per cent of the budget maybe? Yet how much is spent for example on product development and on marketing?

An organisation will only ultimately develop its competitive advantage through its people. It is individuals who do the learning in companies and are they are the only constant in all company learning. Furthermore, what proportion of peoples capability is used by organisations? An interesting question; where the answer nearly always clearly shows that there is vast potential that needs to be switched on and applied.

Whilst it should also be the responsibility for all individual staff to promote their own learning and to self-develop, individuals will often need encouragement and support from others in the workplace. When this is effectively provided and is coupled to the individuals personal motivation, then we have created a powerful stimulus for learning and for switching on of people's latent capability.

### **Applying learning within companies**

Learning for example will not always fully take place on training course sessions. Certainly, most trainers will "plant seeds" and will work very hard during the training sessions to ignite the fire, for the continued growth and development back when the learner returns to their own work environment. But, there are some necessary and needed conditions so this can happen. These conditions are often all about giving support and about managers "watering the planted seeds." If this does not happen then applied learning opportunities will be missed and time/ cost are wasted.

A person being developed needs the following from their managers:

- Identification of development needs
- A development programme
- A learning culture which fully understands how people learn and how to coach/mentor people. This culture should include support before and after the development programme. To help in this support before and after the programme, then the following is needed:

The set up (Support before a development programme):

- Think what work-based projects can be used to apply learning and benefit the business. This ensures focus
- Ask the learners to seek feedback on their current performance so that they come up with specific learning goals in this work based area
- Let them do a pre - task

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- Meet and finalise learning goals
- Stimulate interest in the programme within the company
- Put learners into learning sets/buddy groups

The set down (Support after the development programme):

- Evaluate the success by the success of the work based project
- Ensure specific opportunities exist with 2 days of the end of the programme
- Discuss learning
- Reinforce learning by letting them teach others
- Publicise the success
- Link rewards to the transfer of learning into the workplace
- Continue with successful learning sets by transforming them into improvement teams

Only when the above, set and set down, is successfully undertaken can the crucial transfer take place into the workplace and become effective applied learning that brings about the required planned change. Change must happen with individual people as; it is people who change one at a time.

### **And Finally**

Learning takes a conscious effort and learning how to learn is a skill that has to be developed. We all have our own preferences on how we learn effectively and efficiently. Finding out what these are is critical to the future of all companies and to every individual.

Any company that undertakes a "Learning to Learn" programme will inevitably become more efficient, more effective and therefore dominate their market. Learning to learn has to be the ultimate competitive advantage for a company.

Please 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." Please do be the person who commits doing something positive about learning and about supporting learning. Look at all the following and ask what would be the benefits if these characteristics of skilled learners were to be found universally?

- Recognises development situations
- Seeks out new learning
- Takes risks and innovating
- Seeks help and feedback
- Uses interpersonal competencies
- Is self critical constructively
- Filters and makes connections

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- Improves themselves and others
- Survives in a changing business environment
- Anticipates further learning opportunities

And finally for those that still remain “unconvinced”, please remember that:  
**“It was not raining when Noah built the Ark”**

**Stuart Emmett** is a freelance independent trainer and consultant who trades under the name of Learn and Change – Stuart believes that in times of change, it is only those who consciously learn, that will inherit, a successful future.

The themes in this article are more fully explored in his book “Improving Learning for Individuals and Companies” published in May 2002 by Chandos Publishing (Oxford) Ltd (ISBN 1-84334-030-5).

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