



how managers really learn

- ▶ Sue Young argues that Training and Development will not be seen as relevant to success in business until it addresses the issues of how managers really learn, especially in today's complex business environment.

"Oh, don't worry, he's obviously just been on a training course, but he'll soon be back to normal..."

Much is written these days about the Learning Organisation. This is as much a function of how individual managers learn as the information systems and processes that companies put in place to enable transfer of knowledge.

Training and development you would think therefore should therefore be moving centre stage. Not so.

Most formal training and development activities are not generally regarded by line management as contributing to their career progression or longer-term success. Most training is seen as having a temporary effect at best.

"Don't worry, he's obviously just been on a training course; he'll soon be back to normal..." is a typical comment when someone returns from a training course.

Understandably, most managers are unaware of how they learn, nor do they stop to think about it. They just get on with it and, if something is not working, give up and try something else. Managers are usually focused on more immediate practical business priorities rather than taking time out to reflect on how they have developed, what works for them, what doesn't and why.

▶ Where Training Has Traditionally Come From

Traditional training either aims at:

- simple tasks that can be isolated and are narrow in focus, for example negotiation or presentation skills, or
 - acquiring and applying specific knowledge i.e. where there is a heavy emphasis on content or subject matter.
- what is required of me in this fast changing organisation where the job description I had a year ago doesn't seem that relevant?
 - how do I develop more general business awareness and then apply it in my role?
 - I know my approach as a manager works for me in 80% of situations but I know it doesn't some of the time, and I don't know why or what I should do about it.
 - how do I deal with the wide range of different people I have to work through, often of very different nationalities and cultural backgrounds?
 - how do I influence the many people I depend on for my results but over whom I do not have direct authority or control?

While valuable for certain requirements the limitations of this approach are where the nature of the learning is more complex. Traditional training approaches have proved not to be of great help with the following typical learning needs managers in organisations face today:





Recent developments...

have recognised the need to find different ways to deal with today's demands on people in business.

For example recent years have seen the advent of the "Change Programme", along with which goes a programme of events rolled out through the organisation, focused on communicating a strong "vision" of the direction the business needs to go in and what is required.

Cascaded from the top, where these programmes tend to fall down is on longer lasting results beyond an immediate boost to morale. At worst, if they are not followed through on a long-term basis, these programmes can in fact do damage to the credibility of the company's leadership and can be cynically written off as "yet another initiative."

'Competencies' have become increasingly widely used, both for business strategy and to provide performance benchmarks for individuals, against which they can receive specific feedback on their performance. This was, again, a step forwards in providing a framework to link individual learning needs to the needs of the business. However managers can be understandably sceptical of an approach that, if too rigidly applied, can over simplify for the complexities of the real world of management.

Daniel Golenz's concept of Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, brings an additional dimension to competencies. It promises to bring greater rigour to the assessment and development of areas that most people intuitively have always recognised as being central to success. Qualities such as the ability to take a longer term view, to manage conflict constructively, to be realistically aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses, have always been known to be important to personal effectiveness. Golenz promotes that these qualities can be learnt, thus bringing a potentially powerful tool to training and development in business.

"What is required of me in my role in this fast changing business?"



Impact of Today's Needs On Approaches to Training

Helping people to cope with the increasing complexities they face in learning to operate in their role is a challenge for business and HR specialists.

An analogy is that of learning to drive. You can break this down into its different components, yet this does not ultimately reflect the range of awareness and skills involved in driving a car. It is unlikely we would say someone is a good driver immediately after they have passed their test.

traditional training

- ▶ short term, one step
- ▶ competences
- ▶ skills, knowledge
- ▶ general theories, checklists, what works generally
- ▶ may come in useful sometime
- ▶ case studies of exceptional organisations
- ▶ it's a training course
- ▶ the leadership of this business doesn't know what it's doing

One criteria of good driving might be a high level of anticipation, or awareness of the infinite range of possible events you may need to react to and know how to react to in different ways under different circumstances. We often call this 'road sense'. The challenge facing organisations is how to help managers develop 'role sense', or how they can operate more effectively in their role in the business.



Towards Defining 'Development'

The dictionary defines development as "to come or bring to a later or more advanced or expanded stage; grow or cause to grow gradually".

A crucial aspect of development is that it is a step-by-step process. We cannot get to an end point without going through the stages en route. One stage builds on the previous stage. Development is a process, which takes place instinctively and intuitively and which embraces a complex, interrelating series of factors all operating at the same time.

- ▶ long term, progressive
- ▶ range of behaviour
- ▶ awareness of my strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ what can I use in my situation?
- ▶ how can I use this Monday morning?
- ▶ what's it like in this organisation?
- ▶ it's an opportunity to understand the nature of life in a modern organisation
- ▶ how can I contribute to the direction of this business role

a developmental approach

The extent to which we are able to learn and develop is a function of our awareness of this range of factors which come either from ourselves, or our environment.

For any training to be effective, it has to take account of these fundamental principles of how people learn - a developmental approach.



A Developmental Approach to Training

Rather than rigidly separating training and development, as some can do, a developmental approach to training is to design and run training events that inherently build in fundamental developmental principles:

The importance of motivating the 'learner'. If managers cannot see the relevance of a training programme or how it will help them, they are not going to be motivated to learn. Too often companies do not give sufficient attention to this and managers can attend courses because they've been told to go with no expectation that it will be useful. At worst they can be hostile, at best not ready to take responsibility for their learning.

Awareness as a pre-requisite to learning. When people don't even know there is a problem let alone what it is, they are not ready to consider or take in new information or perspectives.

People already know a great deal more than they think they know. When given the right environment and space, people have a lot of wisdom about what works and what doesn't. The learning issue is about opening up that awareness and then developing the ability to apply it.

Learning has to be seen as relevant both by the individual and the business - it cannot take place in a vacuum. This means starting with understanding the needs of the business and how this relates to what is required of people in their roles. One of the roles of development activity should be to help people interpret and make sense of what is happening in their organisation as it impacts on their role. This puts a responsibility on training and development professionals to really understand what is going on in the business in order to judge what is needed and then to help managers with their learning needs in that context.

People have to develop objective self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in order to learn how to extend their capabilities in more demanding business situations. That is, to be able to see themselves as they are generally seen by others. It requires a balanced acceptance of yourself, combined with the judgement to be able to manage yourself and be able to adapt behaviour according to the demands of the situation.



A Developmental Approach to Training continued...

You can't tell people what to do; you have to help them see what to do. This is partly creating an environment where their own natural awareness can be accelerated, and partly providing frameworks and experiences which help people make sense of it for themselves.

Learning and awareness takes place stage by stage. If people have not yet developed a certain level of awareness about themselves or their environment, anything they are told will miss the mark as it they will not be able to relate to it from their experience. You have to start with where people are in their experience and awareness and build on that.

Learning can be an emotional experience and there can be blockages to learning which have to first be overcome. For example fear of failure can be a major blockage to learning for some.

For some senior managers who have developed a style where they have established themselves as the authority on most issues, public acknowledgement that they do not have all the answers can be difficult. For this reason, as HR professionals readily recognise, some senior managers are "untrainable"

Individuals have to take charge of their own learning. Part of the objective of any programme should be to build a foundation of awareness and confidence which enables individuals to be more capable of managing their continuing development.

There is another factor which is operating in business which leads to this as a prerequisite. In today's complex business organisations, where no one person has all the answers and there is more freedom needed for individuals to scope the answers for themselves, the ability of people to be self directed and not wait to be told is essential. A developmental approach is directed towards helping people take more charge of this.

Learning is unique for each individual. Critical to a developmental approach is recognition of the need for a high quality of attention to individual needs. Any group development and training activities should have built in to them the opportunity for the individuals to make sense of the experience in terms of what it means to them personally. This places particular demands on the design of development programmes and places particular demands on the tutors.

In Conclusion...

in designing and developing training and development programmes, HR professionals need to bear in mind the fundamental principles of how people learn.

Too often a great deal of money is spent on programmes which are then imposed without taking sufficient account of the way people operate, thereby not achieving the training objectives, either for the individual or the organisation.

It comes back to the old adage "You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink". With people this will always be the case, but at least by taking more of a developmental approach you can greatly increase the likelihood of real learning taking place.

