



Leadership Essentials

Learning

Leaders demonstrate ownership by taking responsibility for their own learning



Learning can be defined as a measurable and relatively permanent change in behaviour through experience, instruction, study, or being taught. Chris Argyris (1990) explains learning as “detection and correction of error” where an error means “any mismatch between our intentions and what actually happens.”

As a leader, you need to understand how people learn and the different types of learning methods used both inside and outside the workplace so that you are able to help your team members:

- Develop in their jobs
- Develop in their careers
- Perform better
- Take ownership of their learning

You also need to take ownership of your own continuous learning.

Growth Mindset

People with a growth mindset believe that, with encouragement and the right environment, intelligence can be developed over time. Effort leads to success, and attitude can change their performance, particularly by how they deal with setbacks.

This contrasts with people who have a fixed mindset, who believe that intelligence is innate and cannot be changed and that someone either has intelligence or they do not.

The discovery of fixed and growth mindsets has transformed our understanding of learning. Dwek (2017) showed that:

- Individuals who believe their intelligence can be developed outperform those who believe their intelligence is fixed.
- When individuals discover that it is possible to grow their brain and develop their intellectual ability, they achieve better results.
- When you are stuck, trying new strategies, seeking input from others, and thriving on challenges and setbacks are key to learning and improvement (not just your effort alone).
- By changing your mindset, it is possible to boost your achievement.

Personal Development Planning

People can have very different ways of learning, so someone else cannot tell as well as you can what learning activity is going to work for you, so you have to decide and plan it for yourself. Your manager is there to support, guide, advise and perhaps to coach you, but not to tell you everything you should do. There are three key questions in creating your personal development plan:

Where am I now?

Where do I want to be?

How can I get there?

What do you need to learn? You can use visualisation to help you decide on your plan. Pictures and graphics can be very powerful, and visualisation means having a vivid and detailed mental picture in your mind of an event, activity, or your desired result. Actively picture a successful outcome clearly in your mind, visualization works best when you are calm, relaxed, and willing to give yourself time to focus in peace, without immediate worries or distractions.

There are many different ways of learning at work. People can use almost any kind of relevant experience as a learning opportunity to gain knowledge or learn new skills or new behaviours. Opportunities vary from:

- formal to informal
- structured to self-directed
- on-the-job to off-the-job experiences.

Each one has advantages and disadvantages:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
On the job learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Inexpensive + Easy to do + Flexible to suit needs of learner + Little disruption to daily work + Development experience for team member giving the learning + Effective transfer of learning to job situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Person may be distracted by day to day work activity – Team members may not be skilled in helping others to learn – Team members may not see it as part of their role – Difficult to control quality – May not be consensus on which behaviours are to be reinforced
Formal structured training courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Standardised learning + Experience of a wide variety of external organisations + Potential option of qualification or accreditation is motivating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Expensive – Difficult for external providers to understand culture and needs of learners – Potential for impractical solutions – Difficult to transfer learning to work – May take months/years
Self-managed online learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Learner can go at own pace + Inexpensive + Easy to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learner may lose interest and motivation without person to guide them – Time allowed for learning may be wasted
Video-based learning from real life experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Individualised learning + Record to review strengths, weaknesses and development areas + Easy transfer of learning to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learner may find it intimidating or confrontational – Learner may lose confidence as a result
Experiential learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Working on real life issues + Fun + Easy transfer to job situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Takes time away from work – Can be difficult to evaluate
Coaching eg from manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Working on real work situation + One-to-one training and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Takes time away from workplace – Can be difficult to evaluate – Cost of coach's time

It has been suggested that most learning happens through the many informal opportunities to gain knowledge or new behaviours, for example:

- Overhearing a useful conversation between colleagues
- Using an internet search engine
- Watching and learning other people who do these things well
- Phoning or emailing a colleague in another workplace who may have the information you want
- Learning from mistakes
- Joining an on-line group who work in the same industry or sector that you do
- Reading books/ articles in trade/ professional magazines relating to the skills you are seeking
- Asking a colleague for information
- Watching videos recorded by 'experts'
- Reading blogs, top tips and other freely available information
- Volunteering to cover for a colleague's absence
- Trying a new task or activity in the work place

(Argyris, 1990)

Learning is also a social process and interest in social learning has grown significantly due to the rapid rise in information availability via social media. Sharing ideas and lessons learnt, listening to different perspectives and interpretations of knowledge is a good way of improving and testing your own understanding and helping you to put your learning into practice. Engagement in 'communities of practice' with people who have similar interests is a particularly good way to learn from others. The choice of method you decide to use will be determined by several factors including:

- An individual's learning needs and learning style
- The organisation's development strategy
- Culture of the organisation
- Available resources

(Ellingson & Noe, 2017)

References

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Dimensions of Leadership

The Institute of Leadership & Management's Dimensions of Leadership offer, often elusive, insights into great leadership. This is not a static representation but an evolving description of the complex nature of leadership activity.

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