

Improve the Impact of Learning: *Key Actions Leaders Can Take to Improve Learning Application and Development*

People learn best when they have active support – when and from whom they need it. When parents take an active part in their children’s schoolwork, those children do better in school. The same rule applies for professionals in the workplace: when leaders support their direct-reporting employees or protégés in certain ways, people learn more and apply what they learn to obtain desired business results.

Research¹ by Broad and Newstrom (1985), Feldstein and Boothman (1997), Del Gaizo (1997) and many others have found that people learn best when the learning is supported actively by those to whom they report. The concept provides common sense for the parent-child or manager-subordinate relationship: *if the lesson I am to learn is valued, and it offers the promise of greater reward for my having learned the lesson, then I will learn and apply the lesson to the best of my ability.*

But what does "active support" look like? What might managers do to communicate their investment in associate learning to greatest affect? For starters, they can simply meet with the learner prior to and soon after the beginning of a learning cycle². In fact, Robert Brinkerhoff and Max Montesino (1995) reported that learners who had "before/after" discussions with managers enjoyed significantly higher levels of learning transfer, fewer barriers, and more practice opportunities than learners who had no discussions with managers.

Equally important research³ shows that when a learner is exposed to a new idea *one time* about 75 percent is retained for one day, 25 percent is retained for 48 hours, and after 16 days as little as 2 percent is still retained. However, when using spaced repetition, if you are exposed to an idea *six times*, for example, up to 62 percent is retained for 15 years to a lifetime (think: learning your multiplication tables or exposure to advertising slogans).

Active support is critical whether you are a manager or need to report to a manager about your learning. If you want to get more value from your learning investments then discuss goals, application and the kind of support needed before and after every learning event. Sustain the learning, even if it is tied to a single event, to ensure you apply it to improve your results.

Businesses with high performance goals are seeking ways to create organizations where people grow as individuals while contributing to the development of others. **Such organizations need *Learning Leaders who continually improve performance and add value to their relationships by helping others fine-tune key skills, abilities and outlook on life and career.* These leaders do not limit themselves to traditional methods of management, learning or coaching.** They understand who they are, where they are going and how they will get there. PERFORMANCE DEVELOPMENT NETWORK recognizes the importance of leader support and the significant impact learning can have on individual, team and organizational performance.

¹ Contributions by The Hile Group, 1998, and Schenck Development Group, 2001. Revised 1/21/2002

² By “learning cycle”, we mean each time you initiate an effort toward a new developmental goal or toward learning some new knowledge, skill or behavior.

³ Research Associates Corporation, Reading, PA

While training focuses on acquiring new knowledge and skills, it does not always lead to new behaviors or desired results. Improved performance and increased success requires ongoing development geared toward specific measurable goals, attitude change and new habits. Clear goals that align with a business and personal need, the use of spaced repetition and ongoing support among Learning Leaders is critical to getting desired results from any learning initiative, whether it is a workshop, certification exam, professional conference, ongoing development, temporary reassignment or other activity.

Do you want to get more value from your learning investments? Then discuss goals, application and the kind of support needed before and after every learning event. Have a learning plan that aligns with business need for the year, for the organization, for each strategic business unit, and for the individuals in each unit.

Key Actions Leaders Can Take Before a Learning Cycle

Following is a basic format and menu of prompts/questions/suggestions that leaders can use to shape pre-learning conversations.

- Ø Meet with the employee⁴ before the learning cycle.
 - a) Review the employee's goals and development plan.
 - b) Review the process agenda, learning objectives, key ideas, or any course material available.
 - c) Discuss areas of focus needed by the learner, the team or business.
 - d) Select possible goals/action steps that can be pursued through learning and practiced beyond the workshop or other opportunity.
 - Consider the roles of the participants, peers, customers and other stakeholders, and you, the learning leader.
 - How can they best implement key ideas or skills back at work following the event? What kind of support will they need?
 - e) Discuss mutual expectations from the learning opportunity. How might this pay off for the learner and the organization?
 - f) Discuss barriers to achieving learning objectives or application; brainstorm solutions and develop strategies to work around the barriers.
 - g) Make a business case for learning and change. How does this learning cycle support business needs?
 - h) Discuss what kind of support, and from whom, the learner will need following the session.
 - § Consider the target audience, if others are involved, and potential for support from other learners.
 - § Discuss ways the leader, peers and other stakeholders can support the learner before, during and after the event.
 - i) Discuss what kind of support, and from whom, the learner will need following the session.
 - j) If the participant has been asked to complete any pre-work, review it closely. Assist with providing information needed for questionnaires, case studies or other advance fieldwork. Ask questions related to the learner's goals and performance as you have observed it, perhaps offering insights and examples.

⁴ We use the terms *learner* and *participant* interchangeably to mean an employee or business associate involved in any kind of workplace learning or developmental activity. In addition to classroom-style training, learning takes many forms including but in no way limited to special projects or assignments, on-the-job training, involvement in coaching or mentoring relationships, and much more. In much the same spirit, we may use the term *course* but mean any venue or opportunity to learn or apply something new.

- k) Reduce job pressures (initially) to allow learner to prepare for and fully participate in the learning cycle.
 - Re-assign current work assignments.
 - Re-prioritize current work assignments.
- ∅ Pre-schedule another discussion immediately following the learning cycle.

Key Actions Employees Can Take Before a Learning Cycle

- ∅ Discuss your learning goals with your manager.
- ∅ Create your own Performance Agreement
 - a) A self-generated performance agreement acknowledges your commitment to improving performance and not because you are a poor performer. In fact, one way you become a star performer is to consistently create and manage your own performance agreement!
 - b) Your agreement places the focus of your learning squarely on results...results that align with the goals of your manager, your business unit or team, and your organization.
 - *If your organization or unit does not have clearly written goals, then create a balanced scorecard to ensure your goals are balanced to meet business needs in **management, customer, financial and growth** categories.*
 - c) This makes your accomplishments measurable and matter-of-fact but visible.
 - d) If written well, your learning goals will have built-in ROI measures.
- ∅ Suggest quarterly, monthly or even weekly coaching meetings with your manager, a coach or mentor focused on specific goals and behaviors.
- ∅ Plan for feedback to and from your manager and team following each learning opportunity.
 - a) Describe your current behaviors or performance.
 - b) Describe the situation, challenge, goal (who, what, when, etc.)
 - c) Describe the actions you propose to take
 - d) Describe the pre-determined results you are addressing and possible obstacles, rewards and consequences
- ∅ Request the opportunity to conduct mini-sessions sharing the information from your learning with your team and facilitating key activities.

Questions for Leaders to Ask (& Learners to Answer) Prior To a Learning Cycle

- ∅ "Let's talk about what you know about the learning role or event in which you are to be involved. What experience have you had with [the topic]? What questions are you taking with you into the experience?"
- ∅ "What among your current skills will link with the skills you are developing?"
- ∅ "How might you improve performance (own, team, department, organization) with the learning you're about to do? What is the benefit in our having you develop this knowledge and skill?"
- ∅ "What new attitudes or habits might you need to develop to help you be successful?"
- ∅ "How does this opportunity connect with our business need? With current goals/objectives? Why do you think you should learn more about this topic?"
- ∅ "What will success look like? I mean, what will we see that will show us that we found the right fix for a particular performance gap or goal?"
- ∅ "Who do you understand our stakeholders in this investment to be? To whom do we need to demonstrate success?"

- Ø "How can we make sure that you will have a timely opportunity to practice and apply what you are about to learn? What among your current job responsibilities will offer you the opportunity to apply what you will learn? What projects do we have coming up that might fit this bill? What activities outside of your daily work might contribute to your developmental goal? What support do you need from me in ensuring your opportunity to practice?"
- Ø "How will we know that you learned something? How will we see that you are applying/transferring the skills effectively? What ideas do you have for how we should measure your transfer of learning (e.g. from the workshop to the work floor)?"
- Ø "When and where will you present the highlights of what you will learn/discover to the rest of us?"
- Ø "Here is the support that I can and will offer when you return to the job and begin transferring your knowledge.... What more or different can I do to support you?"
- Ø "Let's firm up a meeting time for after the session, so we can revisit this conversation. At that meeting, I would like you to catch me up on what you have learned and to talk about your ideas/plans for application. For now, we will plan for that to be a one-on-one meeting, but also be thinking about anyone from the organization who you would like to attend that meeting, too. Thanks very much, in advance, for your time on this. Enjoy the learning."

"The conventional definition of management is getting work done through people, but real management is developing people through work."

--Agha Hasan Abdei, President, Bank of Credit and Commerce International, Luxembourg

Key Actions Managers Can Take [or Learners Can Prompt] After A Learning Cycle

(*Ideally, these actions are set up prior to the learning opportunity.)

1. Manager and participant meet during and after the learning cycle.

- a) Review learning content, key ideas, what was learned.
- b) Discuss areas for action.
- c) Select a manageable set of goals/action steps. Create a specific **Action Plan** (AP) in writing. Include detail of:

§ Desired results	§ Monitoring/feedback opportunities
§ Performance measures	§ Incentive
§ Timeline	
- d) Discuss barriers to achieving the AP; brainstorm solutions or develop strategies to work around the barriers.
 - § Discuss how to modify ideas learned (i.e. in a workshop) into practical solutions that address actual work objectives.
 - § Practice spaced repetition that shows support and reinforces learning.
- e) Discuss ways the manager, the employee and other stakeholders can support the new behaviors/goals.
 - Use the language of the training or other learning to reinforce the content and main ideas.
 - Agree to meet frequently to assist with accountability of Action Plan.

2. **Set up a coaching schedule.**
 - a) Schedule brief coaching sessions (2-4/month) for several months after the learning cycle.
 - b) Use these coaching sessions to review AP progress, provide spaced repetition of key ideas, give feedback, recalibrate goals/action steps, do additional problem solving or brainstorming, address questions, celebrate success, and to set new goals to continue long-term performance.
3. **Provide opportunities to practice new behaviors/skills and to work on the Action Plan.**
 - a) Provide assignments that support new behaviors/skills/goals.
 - b) Create situations that will allow the learner to practice new behaviors/skills.
4. **Ask participants to design “Job Aides”.**
 - a) Create reminder tools (cards, stickers, posters, data sheets, etc.), checklists, action guidelines, etc., for use by the employee or in the team.
 - b) Ask the participant to create such reminders (“cheat sheets”) for you, as well.
5. **Schedule “Training Briefings” by learners for their co-workers.**
 - a) Ask participants to deliver a brief presentation drawn from their learning.
 - b) Participants could share:
 - § Outline of content
 - § Key ideas training emphasized in training
 - § Most important points/ideas/tools the participant got from the program
 - § Ideas they feel could be applied in their team
 - § Personal goals or action plans they have committed to as a result of the learning, even their own AP
 - c) Offer the opportunity to facilitate peers in learning key activities.
 - d) Discuss any peer support necessary to achieve the Action Plan
6. **Reduce job pressures (initially) to allow learners to make changes and work on the Action Plan.**
 - a) Re-assign current work assignments.
 - b) Re-prioritize current work assignments.
 - c) Revise current policies and procedures that are inconsistent with new training recommendations.
 - § Start with work team/unit policies and procedures, and then begin addressing policies and procedures at higher levels in your organization.
 - d) Update your expectations for that employee’s performance to reflect the new knowledge/skills learned.
7. **Create a “tickler file” to use with the learner.**
 - a) Include items or activities to maintain focus on goals, measurements of success and rewards or recognition such as:
 - § Reminders of action steps,
 - § Description of desired behaviors,
 - § New expectations
 - § Request status updates on the employee’s AP
 - § Inspirational quotes and supportive feedback to keep the employee motivated
 - § Additional statements of support to let the employee know you are serious about follow-through, etc.
 - § Any agreements to reinforce concepts and prompt the participant to positive action.
 - b) Use automated software when possible or link these reminders to pre-scheduled events/activities that relate to the applied learning.

- 8. Specify how you will support the learner's success, reinforce learning and prompt the learner to positive action.**
 - a) What goals or changes in behavior can you initiate to support the participant's forward progress?
 - b) What ideas from the participant's learning could you apply to foster a better learning (and applying) environment?
 - c) What new ideas from the learner are you willing to apply?
 - d) What goals or changes in behavior can you commit to that support the participant's forward progress?
 - e) How must you change your use of language and action to reinforce the implementation of key actions?
 - f) What will you do if the participant successfully accomplishes the Action Plan and produces the desired performance?
- 9. Ask the learner to be a coach for others.**
 - a) As the learner demonstrates proficiency in the subject/skills of the training, ask them to be the "local expert" for current employees struggling with this issue or for new employees joining the team.
- 10. Support trainee "reunions" or continued contact with other learners, when relevant.**
 - a) Provide formal opportunities for participants to get together with other participants to discuss the program, what they learned, problems implementing the material and possible solutions, success stories, etc.
 - b) Support and encourage informal networking between training participants.
 - c) If the learning provides an ongoing commitment, help the employee balance the new commitment with other work priorities.
- 11. Give positive reinforcement.**
 - a) Notice, recognize and reinforce new, desired behavior and progress toward the AP.
 - b) Create an awards or recognize program to recognize/reward *every* employee who completes (or makes significant progress on) their AP.
 - c) Acknowledge the learning and the degree of follow-through (application) on the employee's annual performance appraisal/evaluation.
- 12. Be a role model for applying what you learn.**
 - a) *Show* your employees that you value learning by:
 - § Pursuing training, development and other learning opportunities yourself.
 - § Sharing (at least some of) your AP with your employees.
 - § Following through on your AP in ways visible to employees.
 - § *Listen* for opportunities to learn from your employees.
 - b) Be the living example of continuously learning and applying new ideas to improve your job performance.

Be a Learning Leader!