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How training can add real value to the business: part 2

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Abstract

In his first article the author argued that a number of myths have emerged due to an over-reliance by the training community on the Kirkpatrick levels of evaluation. This included: beliefs that learning is the responsibility of the trainer; that statistics prove learning; that good course evaluations prove learning. The author proposed that learning should be seen as the responsibility of the learner and that proving learning is integral to the process of learning. He went so far as to say the role of the training officer and training manager will not exist in five years' time and that we should be seeing the emergence of effective facilitators who accept that learning is inextricably linked to action and the job. Here the author extends the argument first by adding to the myths with myths four and five which lead to the argument that there are two main areas for future focus, mentoring and the accreditation of work-based action learning as the new form of evaluation.

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Myth no. 4 – real learning takes place in the classroom

Evaluation at the level of learning (Kirkpatrick level 2) (Kirkpatrick, 1996) concerns the extent to which the learner is able to recall learning after the event. If this concerns knowledge recall this may be easy to assess. However, in organisations the focus of learning is increasingly on skills development and behavioural change. For these aspects of learning the old model does not hold. Such learning is most personal and difficult even for individuals to judge for themselves. I have often been fascinated that when organisations have run follow-up days, say three months after a course, how people will recount learning that was never even covered on the original course. What is happening here is a misattribution of the learning to a particular event.

In terms of behavioural skills and management training it is possible to see short-term changes in capability over a period of classroom based training. This is only part of the learning process though, tackling knowledge and skills over a short period of time. The true test is whether such learning leads to sustained changes in behaviour and leads to action. Many studies have shown the significant attrition rate in learning over an extended period of time.

Over the last 12 years I have asked over 3,000 managers about the most significant learning experiences in their lives. None have quoted training courses, business school or classroom based training. The overwhelming majority quote job based experiences, periods of rapid change and specific individuals who have helped accelerate the learning process through effective, and often informal, coaching or mentoring.

This supports the views of Wenger (2000), who suggests that learning is a social process often emergent in communities of practice and through the conveyance of tacit learning. He shows the difficulties in prescribing what will be learnt. Revans (1984), founding father of action learning, has also stressed the significance of managers learning from each other in learning sets. He suggests that real learning comes from insightful questioning about work issues rather than “programmed knowledge” alone. He says “there is no learning without action and no action without leaning”.



Myth no. 5 – there is a direct correlation between management education and business improvement

Many organisations have continued to invest in management education without even attempting to measure the impact on the business. In some cases individuals are allowed to apply for company sponsorship for external education but there is precious little attempt to engage in discussion about what is being taught and how it can be applied back in the organisation. A review of recent research (Collier and Wade, 2002; Hirsh and Carter, 2002) into the value of management education and management development reveals some interesting challenges for the future:

- The motivation for management education usually comes from the individual in order to meet personal career needs through achievement of qualifications (e.g. the business school MBA).
- The management education agenda is driven by a normative model with a predetermined syllabus without input from the business.
- There is no evidence of a correlation between attendance on external business education programmes and improved business performance.

A coach or mentor connects learning with action

If we accept the limitations of off job courses in leading to sustained behaviour changes, what else should be done to support learning at a level deeper than knowledge and skills acquisition? There has been a growth in coaching and mentoring over recent years and I have researched the impact of mentoring upon learning (Hale, 2000). I found that effective mentoring can be seen as the missing link between off job training and action in the workplace.

Here are some quotations from people who have described how mentoring helped them achieve insights.

I came to understand why my approach sometimes does not have the desired effect. These insights came from my mentor challenging me to question my style and way of working.

I got an opportunity to discuss how she (mentor) handles people management issues such as discipline and personal issues – we would go through what-if scenarios.

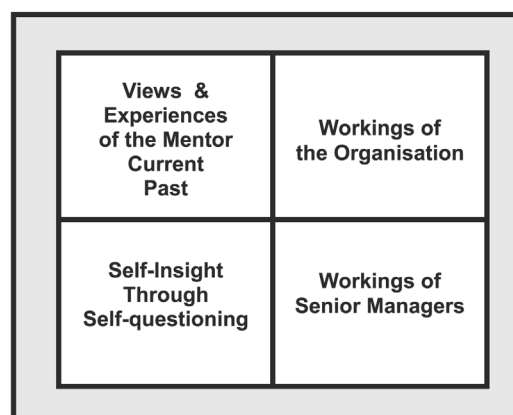
I have done a college diploma but it is good to be working with someone who is very influential in effecting the direction of the business and seeing how they think and operate.

It was clear from the research that mentoring was able to help in the development of self-confidence where the mentor would push the person they were mentoring into action where they may have otherwise been reticent. Such confidence would be built through effective preparation and debriefing. Additionally a good mentor was able to help the individual make connections between skills developed through off job courses and application in the real job situation.

It was clear that mentoring could help the development of insights (see Figure 1). Insights begin more with the individual, emerge for the individual, assisted by the effective mentor, and are personal. The development of insights is less plannable than course based skills development. Whether or not they emerge will depend on real-life circumstances and experiences.

The role of HR and training departments should be to facilitate, not control, mentoring relationships. I have seen HR and training staff, with the best intentions, try to engineer such relationships by forcing people into a mentoring “system”, rather than facilitate and support good mentoring. Similarly with the growth of centrally driven coaching “systems”, I have seen attempts to systematise relationships rather than create a culture where they can flourish. Ironically in attempts to set up formal coaching and mentoring, it is

Figure 1 How mentors support learning insights



Source: Hale, IMCA (2000)

easy to ignore or fail to see some of the best coaching and mentoring relationships that have already developed informally within the business.

Provide a system for recognition and accreditation

Business school programmes may help the individual employment proposition but they do not lead to improved business performance. The time has come to challenge the old thinking that business schools are the owners and protectors of business knowledge and content. Given the accelerating rate of change, managers working on real business challenges in their organisations are often facing challenges that have never been faced before, anywhere. Rather than send managers to the business school, invite the business school in to look at the real business challenges you face and ensure they work collaboratively on the business agenda. Do not allow them to hijack the internal management agenda with their own redefined syllabus, faculty and content led programmes.

The organisations I work with through my activities with the International Management Centres Association (IMCA) have shown there is another approach to providing access to recognised professional management qualifications which also support and measure outcomes and business impact rather than inputs.

IMCA is the global association for the accreditation of work based learning and follows the action learning principles of its inaugural President, Professor Reg Revans. In recent years IMCA Vice President, Dr Charles Margerison, has argued that we should revisit the original case presented by Revans who suggested that the key to effective learning is the formulation of the question based on business problems and issues (Margerison, 2001). This has been supported by IMCA's Dr Alan Mumford (1991), who has suggested that questions should take their rightful place before programmed knowledge.

IMCA have developed a methodology whereby business or leadership questions are defined by the organisation and the participant in a learning programme. This has now been well tested in organisations in, for instance, the finance, pharmaceutical and education sectors. The approach has worked

particularly well when working with managers who are experienced in their career and are aware of the business or leadership questions they need to address. They are not "puzzle questions", for which there is a predetermined answer. They are "problem questions" that have many dimensions and alternative ways of responding via work based action learning. In order to have substance the business question must be one that is vital for both the organisation and the individual to solve.

Managers investigate the problem, explore options for action and take action. They then reflect on and write up their learning covering the following:

- (1) *The work situation* – this requires a clear description of the problem, or opportunity, and the stakeholders.
- (2) *The action* – this involves an outline of what was done by whom, when and the reasons for the action.
- (3) *The learning* – this is a record of what was learned about the task, and also what the individual learned about themselves and others en route.
- (4) *The applications* – this is an outline of what applications occurred as a result of the learning and the implementation of the action plans.

A credit accumulation system is used whereby participants can, over time, tackle questions based on the training/development, career and business issues they face. As credits are accumulated they can be presented for professional management awards at management certificate, diploma and masters level.

Additionally questions can be linked to off job training courses as shown in the examples below. Here the question forms a link between the course and the real work environment. The person on the course is required to take action and in writing this up is able to build credits towards an internationally recognised professional management award.

Examples of questions linked to existing training programmes

Business leadership

Based on your understanding of the principles, theories and trends in leadership, and your own development and experience as a leader in your

organisation, what is your own model of leadership? How are you applying this currently in your job? Identify a real leadership challenge you face and describe the approaches you have considered, the action you have taken, the impact on the business and your learning about leadership and about yourself

Using communication skills to influence

What does effective communication and influencing mean to you? Identify a specific situation where you can review the effectiveness of your influencing skills. Based on your theoretical understanding of the subject, develop a plan to influence in this situation more effectively. Report back on your experience of implementing this plan through reference to actual meetings and events. Explain what you would do differently based on your learning from this situation.

Call to action for trainers

- (1) Make participants responsible for identifying and consulting the stakeholders who stand to benefit from training and development they are taking part in.
- (2) Encourage them to identify how they are currently adding value for themselves, their job, team, organisation before, during and after a training and development process.
- (3) Help them to capture learning that is taking place in the job situation through effective facilitation, learning logs and peer learning sets.
- (4) Transform the training department from a team of officers and administrators into a team of consultants and facilitators with the political and business skills to oil the wheels of learning.
- (5) Ensure trainers practise what they preach by sharing their learning based on their work activities.
- (6) Support informal learning processes such as coaching and mentoring without introducing rules, forced relationships and bureaucracy.
- (7) Interchange people between staff HR and training functions and business functions.
- (8) Establish a system of evaluation through accreditation that assesses outputs from learning not just inputs.
- (9) Identify the vital business questions that should be tackled and support individuals and teams in tackling these questions.
- (10) Keep asking others and yourself how they/you are adding value at a personal, team and organisational level.

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