The seven sins and ten virtues of learning

FROM LEARNING TO NATURAL BEHAVIOURS

by Mike Griffiths and Alison Tisdall

The 70-20-10 principle of executive development is well established. We all know that only ten percent of a professional's learning should come from event-based training and will need reinforcement in the workplace. E-learning initially appeared to be a great way to underpin this with generic and customised Apps and VODs, Comps and Quizzes to shore up learning. So why do we still hear that companies are not seeing the results? We complain that much of the learning is lost and fails to show up as new skills and behaviours at work. The urgency and challenges of business today demands that we look again at how learning is embedded.

At the heart of the problem is that many learning interventions by themselves do not translate into sustained behaviour change. For over twenty years, our team has delivered leadership and professional development programs that for some clients inspired their teams and transformed business results. However for others, despite rave reviews of the learning experience, provision of aide-memoires, alumni refreshers and easily accessible tools, combined with the very best intentions of the delegates, the learning did not embed into systemic behaviour change across the organisation.

Why and how do organisations allow much of the investment to be lost while others successfully translate powerful new ways of working into habits?

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The brain doesn't work that way

One major flaw lies within our assumptions around the biological workings of the brain. The ability to digest and recall information is no guarantee of behaviour change. Information is stored in the neocortex which is the wrong part of the brain to achieve this.

We behave in ways that are consistent with our attitudes and values. Any shift in attitudes is developed in the emotional limbic brain. The way to engage our limbic system is to develop approaches that encourage us to reflect on our attitudes, engage our self-awareness and practice, review and see benefits derived from our new fledgling behaviours.

We often bump into the myth that it takes just 21 days to form a habit. While it takes this time to replace one mental image with another the research tells us it takes longer to lay down the neural pathways that will embed meaningful behaviour change. Even simple eating, drinking or activity behaviours take, on average, 66 days, (the range is 21-254 days), to condition a new behaviour and make it automatic.

What then for the disciplines such as emotional intelligence, learning agility, accelerating team performance, challenging conversations and handling paradoxes? How might we better embed these behaviours in the workplace over time?

The seven sins of learning and development

These seven organisational missteps erode the impact of executive development:

1. Training is still treated as a distinct event rather than part of an overall learning intervention

2. Learning doesn't sufficiently take place in the real world or in the real habitat where the executives are working

3. The link to executing strategy and building a professional's career is unclear

4. The application of new skills and behaviours is not being applied at the point of need basis

5. Business results are being asked of participants that could already be delivered with 'business as usual' capabilities. The lack of stretch targets means there is no need to rewire old habits

6. Managers think that the development applies to their staff and not to them

7. A lack of practice and coaching ethos in the organisation's culture

The ten virtues

These missteps contrast with the best practices exhibited by organisations that truly embed learning. We have identified ten types of learning that are necessary to engage and sustain behavior change and maximise the investment of professional development.

❶ Put in context

Participants need to know the 'why' before the 'what'. Make the strategic mandate and rationale clear in advance. Link the professional development to the company's mission and vision and ideally to specific initiatives that are core to their role. Explain what's possible from this initiative for participants, the team and the company. If this is not clear, people lose interest and the learning won't stick.

❷ Personalise

Have managers work with their staff to translate any corporate performance gap into individuals' growth and learning objectives. This personal balanced scorecard creates ownership and alignment. It's also vital to work with any learning partner to maintain this link in the design and delivery of an intervention so that participants can work with the partner on their own personal development progress.

❸ Promote

Find ways to raise the profile of the development initiative so that participants recognise it's not just a one-off event. Finding active senior sponsors to champion and co-lead learning intiatives makes a huge difference and link to strategic themes in the company. We noticed a 40% rise in demand for a program that was championed by the CEO rather than L&D and that changed its name from 'Design-led Product Development' to 'Solution Mindset Training'.

❹ Focus on the present

This can only be done by increasing people's self-awareness and helping them to evaluate their current commitments in the light of attitudes often derived from the past. By asking people to focus on their attitudes in the present and on what is driving the way they feel, we can help to review what's in the way to ultimately create new behaviours.

❺ Increase awareness of how we learn

People have very different learning and decision making styles that are often not catered for in training. Introvert auditory participants need time on their own and then the opportunity to interact, whilst extrovert visual learners want pictures and examples that they can review with others against their own experience. There is also a proportion of kinaesthetic learners, (around 20% of executives) who learn best when they are moving, (we would say fidgeting) in some way. We have proven many times that matching learning approaches to different individuals, for instance providing time to reflect in a journal and for walk and talk sessions help learners engage and keep their minds open and responsive.

❻ Dialogue in groups

Dialogue (from the Greek Dia-logos literally translated as "through words and meaning") can create a true exchange of ideas and meaning and is a powerful trigger to change. It provides feedback from others and an opportunity to test assumptions and try out new approaches with people. All people are innately drawn to interact in some way and at different times and we have found that real change cannot happen without interaction and a chance for people to express where they are, what they think and feel and why. Whilst this may not look as efficient as imparting content through one way e-learning, it provides a sense of shared reality and belonging which can only take place collectively. This is core to sustaining behavior change.

❼ Provide personalised feedback

Providing one-to-one and peer-to-peer feedback helps accelerate learning. The research of the educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom highlighted the huge impact on learning from regular personalised feedback. Working on an individual basis one can create an atmosphere of trust and openness where individuals often become more truthful with both themselves compared to being in a group. Once this trust is attained, change in individuals and teams can be remarkably rapid and sustained. We have found that short regular feedback conversations between managers and their staff as well as peer-to-peer are very powerful ways to sustain good practices, build confidence and maintain conditioning behaviours.

❽ Continue habit changing practices

There are several activities to foster habit forming including:

• Managers walking the talk and practicing and embodying the learning.

• Aligning manager and team members' metrics and expectations.

• Providing appreciation and encouragement to participants.

• Keeping alive an aspirational future for the professional so that they can see the long-term benefit.

• Having coaching conversations to surface and reconcile conflicting assumptions and beliefs.

❾ Committing sufficient time

It is tempting, during the enthusiasm of any learning initiative to set ambitious goals. However, after a day or two back in the daily demands of life, the motivation wanes and we slip back into our automatic habits. Habits only change when we practice a specific new behaviour over a sustained period of time. By taking the time to demonstrate to ourselves that change can be achieved, we trigger improvement in other aspects. For example, getting someone to improve their ability to empathise may also have a significant effect on improving their relationships and self-esteem.

❿ Action learning

Action learning is the immediate application of group learning to real and current business challenges and opportunities. We advocate its use in program design as it's a great way to ensure the outcome of learning interventions are applied and translated into commercial value.   Action learning though, is a discipline and requires companies to find live and business critical opportunities and challenges, create dedicated small teams from delegates and support the application through structured coaching and facilitation.

The result?

We've found that as a result of applying these 10 virtuous approaches is that an average 70 - 80% of the tools and insights get embedded into the processes of our client organisations and continue to be applied 12 months after any training. Organisations accelerate the time taken to achieve results and are better able to track the benefit of the training investment.

Time perhaps for their learning and development teams to shine their halos and secure that market share…

"The end of learning is action, not knowledge"

- Peter Honey

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