

Work-Based Learning in Practice

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The dominant method of developing employees in North America is through training. In the case of management training, billions of dollars are spent annually in the U.S. mostly on classroom instruction. The focus of this effort is on the delivery of a broad range of conceptual knowledge and skills in the various fields and functional disciplines of management. Besides classroom instruction, the other predominant mode of developing managers is through experience. In particular, it is thought that mastery of an interdisciplinary, interfunctional field like management is best achieved by exposure to diverse challenges in corporate life normally through the judicious mapping of assignments.

Unfortunately, classroom and real-world development experiences are typically provided independently as if there were no need to merge theory with practice. Work-based learning, on the other hand, deliberately merges theory with practice and acknowledges the intersection of explicit and tacit forms of knowing at both individual and collective levels. It recognizes that learning is acquired in the midst of practice and can occur while working on the tasks and relationships at hand. As Wenger (1998) suggests, if we believe that knowledge is something that is stored, be it in a library or in a brain, then it makes sense to package it and present it without distraction in a succinct and articulate way to receptive students. However, if knowledge is viewed as arising as much from active participation in

the very apparatus of our everyday life and work, then we have to expand our conventional format of the classroom and, indeed, interpret the workplace as a suitable locus of learning.

Although there is now a rich source of knowledge to help us understand how work-based learning occurs and may be facilitated, we need a model which might integrate the many traditions underlying its construction. In developing such a model, we need to incorporate two dimensions fundamental to the process of work-based learning: theory and practice modes of learning and explicit and tacit forms of knowledge (Raelin, 1997). Since theory can be viewed as a frame in which to challenge the assumptions of practice, it makes most sense as a mode of learning when combined with action. Indeed, the connection between the teacher's intentions and the students' understanding is best achieved through action. Practice, meanwhile, is the process by which individuals acquire and practice artistry (Schön, 1983).

Besides theory and practice, the other dimension which we need to incorporate to build our model is the distinction between explicit and tacit forms of knowledge. Work-based learning requires an epistemology of practice which seeks to explore not just the explicit instructions and guidelines available in the workplace but also the tacit processes invoked personally by practitioners as they work through the problems of daily management. Explicit knowledge is the familiar codified form that is transmittable in formal, systematic language. Tacit knowledge is the component of knowledge that is not typically reportable since it is deeply rooted in action and involvement in a specific context (Polanyi, 1966). In other words, although individuals may be knowledgeable in what they do, they may not have the facility to say what it is they know (Pleasant, 1996).

There are two levels of activity in which to learn through work. One may learn at an individual level as the intersection between the learning modes and knowledge forms challenges personal frames of action. However, learning in the workplace requires an extension of learning out to the collective level defined as one's co-workers be they within or even outside the present work unit. The exhibit accompanying this article (see Exhibit 1)

displays two matrices which depict four learning types at the individual level and four at the collective level. Due to space considerations, the following account is not designed to provide theoretical treatment of each type but rather to give the reader a flavor for the model in practice. The learning types will be highlighted as they are noted in the text.

The model has no set sequence since learning modalities are dependent on any number of conditions, such as the readiness level of the learners, the strengths and preferences of the facilitator(s), or the past practices of the sponsoring unit or organization. As a rule of thumb, however, if the learners are uninitiated, it is more threatening to expose them to their tacit assumptions than have them articulate their explicit beliefs. This is especially the case if the assumptions under review might expose learners to their psychological defenses or to their emotional or personal reactions to others. Hence, programs might start by having managers critically analyze a set of **conceptual** treatises in an area of interest, perhaps it might be different perspectives of leadership. Discussions might initially be kept at the theoretical level within the study group but participants might be encouraged to individually **experiment** in their own work setting with some of the ideas brought up.

Meanwhile, discussions can gradually shift from the purely conceptual level to reflections regarding the use of the ideas in practice. Participants might even be encouraged to bring in **experiences** from their own jobs to verify or challenge some of the theories under review. During these components, participants should be encouraged to persistently observe themselves and others in practice and try to become sensitive to why they perform in certain ways. In particular, they should try to **reflect** upon what tacit theories are actually used in practice, how these theories match against the new theories introduced in the program, and whether people actually behave consistently with whatever theories they espouse.

It may be difficult for some participants to engage in the reflective components just described without the assistance of a partner and/or a mentor. These “helper” roles can be

critical in encouraging participants to try out new workplace behaviors and learn from their experiences. A program called “LeaderLab,” sponsored by the Center for Creative Leadership deploys three helper roles; a process advisor, represented by a staff professional who meets with the participants in person and by phone during the three-month experience; in-course change partners who work with one another to experiment with and reflect upon classroom experiences; and back-home change partners who help the participants transfer off-site lessons into the work site (Burnside and Guthrie, 1992). Another complementary tool to help participants reflect more on their individual development is the journal. Journal writing provides an opportunity for participants to break their habitual ways of thinking and doing through reflective withdrawal and reentry (Lukinsky, 1990). Journals help participants distill lessons from experience and help them track their learning, be it from important lessons, trends, or patterns (Cell, 1984). What makes the journal or log effective is the discipline it imposes on participants to systematically reflect on their experiences.

Program development can advance to another level of activity in which participants are asked to intentionally practice some of the new ideas introduced. One way to foster this type of learning is to work on projects in the sponsoring organization which might represent either problems in current operations or opportunities for functional improvement. The identification of projects can be handled using conventional **applied science** methods. A learning consortium group made up of six major companies in a large New England city uses focus groups to prioritize the most critical areas for managerial and corporate development. Group members come together on a monthly basis to discuss the chosen topic while attempting to carry out changes in their back-home corporate environment precipitated by their learning experience in the group.

Participants can work on projects either as an individual working with current staff or as part of a team. In either case, they can supplement their learning by meeting in **action learning** teams as a way to help them debrief their real-time experiences (Pedler, 1991).

Learning teams tend to meet periodically, for example on a monthly basis, and serve as a supporting mechanism for both individual and project development. Plans and actions taken in the project are subjected to inquiry about their effectiveness. Participants may review how their theories were applied into practice. Participants may be invited to present their project. Besides a presentation of results, however, participants may be required to prepare a project report detailing the learnings and competencies addressed in the experience as well as any constraints which may have blocked proposed interventions.

General Electric's Executive Development Course is a month-long experience during which time promising executives assemble into teams to work on a specific assignment. The assignments vary by topic from year to year and although sponsors get a completed project at the end of the month, the real issue for GE's Leadership Development Center at Crotonville is the value of the learning experience more than the assignment per se. The way it works, according to Greco (1997), is half of the month is spent preparing for the project - making contacts, clarifying objectives, etc.- and the other half doing the field work. If the subject is quality, one team might investigate quality from a vendor perspective, another team might focus on manufacturing quality, a third on benchmarking. At the conclusion of the program, the teams present their proposals to the CEO and other officers.

Project groups need not assemble organizational strangers to work on problems outside their work area. Intact work teams can participate in development programs to help them become more of a **community of practice**. Communities of practice recognize that their very effectiveness rests on their members' ability to learn from one another. Participants in such groups not only learn to observe and experiment with their own collective tacit processes in action, but, while doing so, seek to improve their own performance. There are many so-called "team-building" methods available to help intact groups work toward higher levels of insight and performance. Teaching participants how to become process observers of their own interactions can accelerate development by

exposing team members to each others' potential contributions as well as to the team's overall needs. Another method to help participants work toward a community of practice is through the process of dialogue which helps team members think as well as act together (Bohm, 1985).

If the learning community is willing, members can continue to engage their collective consciousness through the process known as **action science** (Argyris, 1982). More than the other types, it calls for the deliberate questioning of existing perspectives and interpretations and thus seeks to make explicit the constituent elements of our assumptive worlds. The practices of action science can vary in threat from scenario analysis, wherein participants explore the actions of hypothetical characters, to critical incidents wherein they have the opportunity to face the assumptions framing their own practice through an analysis of events in their lives that are remembered for their emotional significance (Brookfield, 1992). For example, participants may be asked to describe an event as a manager that made them feel a real "high" of satisfaction and fulfillment and one that made them feel a real "low" of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Repertory grids and metaphor analysis can also be used to help participants bring to the surface their otherwise tacit personal constructs (Kelly, 1955; Deshler, 1985).

As readers might conclude, there are many options and practices that can be used with individuals and groups in work-based learning. Perhaps the hidden variable throughout this account is the role of the facilitator. The model requires the coordination and skilled practice of a competent facilitator if it is to be actualized. However, the directness and substance of any intervention can vary on the basis of the needs of the group as well as the facilitator's preferences, skills, and comfort level. For example, some facilitators might see their role as merely acting like a "mirror" to illustrate conditions in the learning team in such a way that participants learn by themselves and from each other. In other cases, facilitators might see the need to present some technical knowledge which is essential to problem framing, propose various inquiry modes, or even model

reflection-in-action. Participants might even be introduced to the theory behind the various learning styles depicted in the model of work-based learning. While fluid, the model's transition links between styles and levels must be approached in practice with both care and skill. Hence, facilitators need to be frank with participants about their intervention approach and, if possible, attempt to anticipate and inform participants when transitions are advised.

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Exhibit 1

A MODEL OF WORK-BASED LEARNING
(Individual Level)

Forms of Knowledge

Modes of Learning	<u>Explicit</u>	<u>Tacit</u>
<u>Theory</u>	Conceptual- zation	Experimen- tation
<u>Practice</u>	Reflection	Experience

(Collective Level)

Forms of Knowledge

Modes of Learning	<u>Explicit</u>	<u>Tacit</u>
<u>Theory</u>	Applied Science	Action Learning
<u>Practice</u>	Action Science	Community of Practice