

Learning Longevity

By Rob Zell

I've worked in several organizations supporting schools, restaurants and retailers, and in every one the question is always, "How do we make the learning stick?" In schools, the goal is to help students retain information and prepare them for the next phase of their lives. In business, the goal is to be prepared for challenges in the workplace. In this paper we'll look at three elements that will improve the impact of your learning interventions: first, what should learning departments do to impart knowledge; second, what should learners do to enhance their retention; and finally, what should managers do to reinforce learning.

Four Techniques to Make Learning Last

1. Build a Better Mousetrap

Learning organizations spend countless hours figuring out the best way for people to learn new knowledge and behaviors that will drive the success of their business. Unfortunately, many organizations get stuck in a rut and find it difficult to break out of their routine of delivering training the same way, time and time again. They produce job aids that look like other job aids for unrelated tasks or add more workbooks to their existing curriculum. The problem isn't maintaining an internal brand; the problem is that, given the available resources, it is often easier to use an existing model than to branch out into new territory. For example, the job aid created to help new employees navigate the company intranet is not necessarily the best template to use for other skills.

2. Start with the End in Mind

It doesn't matter if you are training project management or selling skills, the same set of rules apply to create highly effective training materials.

1. Identify the behavior that you desire and ask what the person needs to know to perform.

2. Design tools that present the information people need in a way which appeals to multiple learning styles.
3. Provide learners with a chance to process the information and try it out through problem solving or experimentation.

This is a very high level look at the task of designing the right training tool and there are many steps in between.

3. Provide a Total Solution

You may have an elegant solution in mind, but to really serve the organization you should look at the whole performance picture. What obstacles keep people from performing? Are there barriers in terms of time, technology or other resources? Is the desired behavior currently being rewarded or is it unknowingly punished? For example, while working for a retailer, we identified that employees rarely moved onto the sales floor to provide service or suggestively sell. The operations team came to us wanting more “Selling Skills” training. As part of our review of the performance, we gave the operations team feedback that the highest priority in the store was placed on “reducing the wait time in line,” and customers often became agitated if employees on the floor didn’t open a new register. So, along with training materials, we also recommended a dedicated floor person and staffing solutions that would keep them on the sales floor helping customers. We also recommended making a change to the Mystery Shopper questions such that on peak nights, the presence of a floor person was a critical success measurement.

4. Don’t Get Caught in a Rut

Learning organizations often go back to the well of ideas when presented with a new challenge. There is comfort and stability in using the tried and true methods: they are easy to use and modify; they are familiar to management and to the end users; and they have proven effectiveness. As long as you have sound success measures in place and you can prove the value of the training, there is no concern. But if you do find yourself in a rut and you seem to be training and retraining the same skills, you should consider challenging yourself and your learning team to develop some new ideas or explore new spaces.

Reflect on the solutions you have provided your organization in recent months. Do they target the desired behavior or did other non-relevant info sneak in? Are there other factors contributing to poor performance besides lack of training? Are you delivering a hammer because in the past you created great hammers so you keep modifying the hammer design?

The Demise of the Passive Learner

Challenging the organization to examine the processes and solutions it creates is a good starting point to developing better learning interventions. Even if the learning organization has put forth their best effort, the solution will fail if it falls to an unprepared or unwilling audience. The challenge for all of us is to rethink how we as learners should prepare for the learning experience and apply what was learned. Learners in an organization need to think about their own behavior and re-invent themselves as active learners.

Prepare Yourself

As learners, we have an obligation to show that the investment of time and resources has a payoff. In other words, learners don't consume learning for the sake of learning. We have to own our development plan and look for ways to incorporate what we learn into our daily activities.

1. One critical element to successful learning is knowing how we best learn and apply information. Are you a visual learner? Be prepared to create mind maps and take notes as images of what you see. Learn best by listening? Maybe you want to record the session to listen to later. If you are a kinesthetic learner, keep a small squishy ball handy to fiddle with and be an active note-taker. Arming yourself with some basic knowledge regarding how you best process new information can help you plan ways to apply new information and get the most from the experience.
2. Learning is not an event. As learners we owe some due diligence to the process. In your favorite journaling tool (notebook, binder, Outlook), jot down some thoughts on why you have enrolled in the learning experience, what you hope to gain, how it benefits your current work and how it might improve your performance. What knowledge or experience do you have that relates to the topic? When you enter the learning with your own point of view, you engage in the content as an active participant rather than a passive one.

Enjoy the Experience

Think about the learning experience as a chance to reinvent yourself. How often do you have the chance to try and fail without repercussions? A quality learning experience should give you the opportunity to explore the content, roll it around your mind and apply it to build skills in a safe environment.

Close the Loop on the Experience

Once the session is over, it's time to start applying and sharing what you learned. Here are some things you can do to add permanence to your new knowledge:

1. Take your new knowledge and skills and purposefully apply them to your work. One basic tenet of adult learning is that we learn by applying our prior experiences to new information.
2. Blog about your experience or share it with the team over lunch.
3. Build a new process map and post it in your work space as a visual reminder.
4. Involve your manager or peer group.
5. Ask others for input. Ask others to respond to what you have learned and give them a chance to weigh in. When we broaden the experience pool by involving others, we come to a more robust understanding of the content.
6. Plan your own follow-up. Most of us use some type of software that allows us to plan to-do items and create checklists. Create some personal items and schedule them 30, 60 and 90 days out. Schedule time with yourself to check in on your progress. Think about what you recall and what you have used.
7. Consider previous challenges and obstacles. How could you have used your new-found knowledge and skills to overcome them?

The learning activity itself is rarely the magic bullet that fixes everything. It can be a very powerful experience that adds to your productivity and effectiveness, if you participate in the right activities and take an active role in your own experience.

As part of a forward thinking learning organization, take some time to help learners prepare themselves. Establish prework or activities that prepare them for the session or intervention. This advance ground work will help make the ground more fertile to the new ideas and behaviors you are trying to instill in the organization or business unit.

The Manager as the Student

If the learning solution is elegant and effective and the learner is actively engaged in the learning process, the intervention may still fail to meet expectations. Training organizations, now more than ever seek, to justify their work through ROI (Return on Investment) and ROE (Return on Engagement), so failure is not an option. The training will fail if the environment to which the learner returns does not support the concepts and behaviors taught. The person most responsible for the environment is the manager.

Be Laser-Focused

As a manager, your people are constantly looking for opportunities to learn and develop themselves. Whether they state it in their development plans (as mandated by HR) or keep it rolling in their subconscious, we all want to be the best at something. Your job is to help your team get there, without diverting your own attention from being laser-focused on the goals of the organization and how your team contributes to those goals. There is rarely warm, fuzzy time to send folks away to training when you have reports to create, products to manufacture, clients to satisfy and budgets to meet. It is critical, therefore, to do two things:

1. Be constantly aware of the goals of the organization and how your team contributes to meeting those goals.
2. Grow your people in ways that help contribute to those ends.

Tune in to the potential you see in your employees and their own goals and align their needs to the business. Look for ways to give them opportunities to be better and contribute in a way that makes your team and the organization better. Does this sound self-serving? It shouldn't. Think about organizations that rely on employees to be highly focused, demand constant improvement and have high standards for how success is measured. How about NBA basketball teams? As I write this, the NBA finals are underway. Consider how those organizations view talent development, even in their star players.

Get Help from Experts

Your organization probably has a training team just waiting to help you be more successful. Granted they may feel understaffed and can't offer all the classes you want or need. Nevertheless, they are experts in the field of learning and can probably offer you options for informal methods of helping your people grow, without formal classes or courseware. They can probably help you set up mentoring sessions, job shadowing and special projects. They can help provide learning resources and draft objectives and outcomes that you can use to demonstrate the power of learning and its impact on your work group.

Don't be fooled in to thinking that learning only happens at a learning event. Some of the best learning comes from actually working at something new and different. This might mean you need some coaching on how to help your people process and get the most from the experience.

You Don't Have to Be the Expert

One of the hardest parts of moving up the management ladder is change. You were probably promoted because you were the fastest developer, the most accurate auditor, the most analytical financier or the most profitable salesperson. Your promotion has taken you from those ranks, and now you process reports, communicate goals and track budgets. You've stopped doing the work and started leading the work. It was great when you were still the expert, but times change. New hires have better info, faster tools, new ideas and different perspectives. That's a normal part of growing in an organization.

Part of leading is knowing when to turn over decision making to the team. Let them be the experts. Be a learner yourself and have your people demonstrate what they know and what they've learned so you can be better at leading and showing off how great your team is. Work to understand what they bring to the table and they will continue to want to grow and develop to be better. When you create an environment in which employees have the confidence to stay informed and look for improvements all the time, you build a stronger, more effective team that gets results. The team that gets results looks good and makes you look like the leader you want to be.

When you create the right atmosphere for learning, you foster a team that seeks constant improvement, that shares knowledge and that strives for success. To be effective, learning can't be something that is done to you or to your employees. Learning must be something that teams embrace and leverage for competitive advantage.

Conclusion

An effective learning intervention relies on three elements: the solution, the learners and the environment to which the learners will return. Depending on your part in the process, you may have an impact on one or more of these elements. As you consider how to best improve performance in your organization with a learning solution, consider how to prepare each element for success. By effectively managing all three elements, you will create longevity in your learning solutions and show true value to the business.

About the Author

Rob Zell is a veteran of the learning trade with over 16 years in both academic and business environments. During his career he has designed, developed and delivered learning content for IT, field operations, support staff and trainers in the restaurant and retail industry as well as in schools. His primary focus has been on improving operational results by developing management and communication skills. As a consultant he has managed all phases of the learning development cycle from analysis through evaluation for projects involving technical training, leadership development and strategy implementation.

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