

Blurring the lines between learning and working

By Andrew Simon

Performance and Learning

As a discipline which is concerned with the performance of people and organisations, the field of Human Resource Development is richly textured by the variety and complexity of performance driven learning methodologies. Action learning, facilitated mentoring programs, executive coaching and individual learning contracts are just some examples of effective methodologies which address the twin objectives of any effective work based learning program: performance and learning.

Indeed these twin objectives are what distinguish learning in organisations from other spheres of learning, even though these methodologies may be used in other spheres.

For example, individual learning contracts with learning objectives precisely linked to an individual's performance targets within a performance management system, can engender superior performance in an organisational context and also be used to guide learning for personal enrichment activities in a social context. This is not to suggest that these methodologies are neutral vessels. For they are not. Each methodology is grounded in its own philosophical orientation with its own unique history of conception and development, which collectively give it its unique form and structure, and is thus never value neutral.

Rather, what this does suggest is that the values which underpin these methodologies such as self-direction, egalitarianism and attention to contextualised needs appear to be values which progressive organisations espouse, allowing these methodologies to achieve the fundamental principles of learning in organisations. Traditional methodologies such as formal classroom and even Internet based, content oriented courses and programs have their place, but remain expert centred and generally inflexible to the demands of contextualised, learner centred, performance related challenges.

Individual learning contracts, facilitated mentoring and action learning are all methodologies, which can be highly contextualised, learner centred and performance driven, and their effectiveness in large and small organisations is well documented and substantiated. They form a rich collection of methodologies, which can be used to achieve the twin objectives of learning in organisations.

The problem however, with learning in organisations is not so much a lack of methodologies. Indeed the variety has often resulted in faddism for which the human resource field is unfortunately notorious. The real problem appears to occur when learning activity is carried out in an unintegrated, piece-meal and unsupported and often unrewarded fashion.

Learning methodologies for all their intrinsic effectiveness and attractiveness to learners can only facilitate sustained enhanced performance if they are well supported. Learning processes need to be embedded in the very structure, process and systems of the organisation, so that learning becomes ubiquitous and a 'natural' part of work. Indeed, the common distinction between work and learning is an unhelpful one as it implies and reinforces the false sense of mutual incompatibility and irrelevance between learning and work, when in reality this is clearly not so.

Learning as a way of working

One possible way of thinking about learning methodology in the context of the organisation is to view it as a way of working. This is a change in perspective, and requires a practical framework, or an architecture, which facilitates the blurring of the artificial divisions between learning and work. Such an architecture would facilitate the redefinition of learning to mean a work activity and to provide the infrastructure for seamless work-learning integration.

For learning to become work activity, and for work to become learning activity, organisational systems such as work flow, organisational design, reward and remuneration, organisational communication, leadership, etc. would have to be intimately understood so that learning processes can be embedded into these systems in appropriate ways.

As a simple example, an Action Learning program would obviously need to be constructed around a performance problem, in order to become performance driven and thus highly relevant learning. But for it to become a natural way of working or of problem solving, Action Learning would need to be tied to and supported by the organisational performance and rewards systems, its leadership and values system, its organisational communication systems, its culture and so on.

A lack of practical integration with existing or improved organisational systems reduces the chance that such effective ways of working will continue independently.

With the concept of organisational learning architecture, the focus of HRD activity is not with the compilation, transmittal and assessment of content but of designing and shaping flexible learner centred methodologies and organisational systems, to form an integrated, holistic, mutually reinforcing

system. HRD practitioners working with such a conceptual framework in effect become 'organisational learning architects'.

Architecture for learning

The notion of learning architecture is of course not new. Laurie Field argued for an integrated approach to managing learning in organisations in 1995 and Peter Senge talked about systemic ways of thinking as a discipline for the learning organisation.

The concept of learning architecture builds upon these ideas to provide a useful and powerful analogy for a holistic and systemic approach to organising and managing learning in organisations.

Designing an effective organisational learning architecture is a strategic but responsive activity, which recognises the reality that divisions between learning and work are artificial and that learning is as a part of work as work is a part of life.

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