

Information Note

Learning Styles and Methodologies

Contributor:
Lucy Maxwell-Scott –
Independent consultant

Overview

When looking at the provision of training and development opportunities, the following elements are essential to ensuring the best end result:

- Identifying and taking account of the learners' own preferred learning styles
- Identifying the type of learning methodology most suited to the knowledge, skills or behaviours to be acquired or developed
- Identifying the type of learning methodology most suited to the learners' preferred learning styles or areas where learning style needs to develop
- Looking at the learning cycle and ensuring all stages are covered in the learning intervention

Learning Cycle

Kolb et al (1974) defined the following Learning Cycle



- **Concrete experience** – this can be planned or accidental
- **Reflective observation** – this involves actively thinking about the experience and its significance
- **Abstract conceptualising** – involves generalising from experience in order to develop various concepts and ideas that can be applied when similar situations are encountered
- **Active experimentation** – testing the concept or ideas in new situations. This gives rise to a new concrete experience and the cycle begins again.

Learning Styles

When looking at an individual's learning style a number of good tools exist that can be used. Two of the better known are:

- Honey & Mumford's Learning Styles (1986)
- Myers Briggs Type Indicator

Honey and Mumford

Questionnaires can be obtained from Peter Honey's website, www.peterhoney.com, or publications. These help individual's to assess their learning styles (we all tend to have more than one) from the following classifications:

- **Activists** like to leap on a bike and have a go. They learn by doing. Like new challenges and experiences, will try anything once.

- **Reflectors** like to think about things before having a go, and to learn by watching other people try to ride bikes. Like to analyse, observe, think it through, and sleep on it.
- **Theorists** like to understand the theory and to have a clear grasp of the concept before having a go. Like to analyse, create frameworks, think conceptually.
- **Pragmatists** like to have some practical tips and techniques from someone with experience before having a go. Like to try out new theories and ideas and see how they work in practice.

Myers Briggs Type Indicator

If you and your staff are familiar with the MBTI, it can provide useful pointers to individuals' preferred learning style and methods.

For example, people with a preference for **introversion** will benefit from reflective space and good preparation materials to support their learning. Conversely people with a preference for **extroversion** will benefit from more interactive and experiential forms of learning.

Using Learning Styles to Support Learning

Mumford (1994) identifies the following stages to self-managed learning:

- Identify individual's learning style
- Review how their learning is encouraged or restricted by their learning style
- Review their core learning skills of observation, reflection, analysis, creativity, decision-making and evaluation and consider how to use them more effectively
- Review the work and other experiences in which they are involved in terms of the kind of learning opportunities they offer
- Look for potential helpers in the self-development process: managers, colleagues, trainers or mentors

- Draw up learning objectives and a plan of action (a Personal Development Plan or Learning Contract)
- Set aside some time each day to answer the question 'what did you learn today?'

Linking Learning Styles to Organisational Culture

It is possible that the predominant culture within your organisation may be reflected in the preferred learning styles of your managers or staff.

For example, if your culture is analytical, reflective and theoretical you may have managers and staff that share these qualities and therefore their learning style may fit most closely with Honey & Mumford's Reflectors and Theorists or MBTI preferences for Introversion and Thinking.

Alternatively, if your culture is practical, pragmatic and hands-on, the predominant learning style in your organisation might be Honey & Mumford's Activists and Pragmatists or MBTI preferences for Extroversion and Sensing.

Resources

Publications

The Learning Style Inventory, Kolb DA (1981), Boston, MA:McBer

The Manual of Learning Styles, Honey P and Mumford A (1986), Maidenhead, Horney

Websites

www.opp.co.uk	MBTI
www.myers-briggs.me.uk	MBTI
www.PeterHoney.com	Peter Honey
www.ruby.3.dircon.co.uk/training	Peter Honey
www.tcm.com/trdev	Peter Honey

Methodologies Overview

When looking at providing training and development it is important to consider the whole range of different types of learning methodology rather than the traditional focus of training provision. Methodologies include guided reading, shadowing, coaching, mentoring, action learning, special assignments or project work. Which methodology is most appropriate will depend on the following considerations:

- The particular knowledge, skills or behaviours the learner aims to acquire or develop
- The level of knowledge, skill or behaviour the learner already demonstrates
- The learner's preferred learning style
- The resources you have available (people, money, equipment, opportunity and time)

Example A – Senior Policy Officer

Needs to learn about employment law in order to ensure your employment policies are legally compliant. Has very little prior knowledge.

Learning style is predominantly Reflector and they have an MBTI preference for Introverted Thinking.

Methods chosen are seminar and background reading followed by opportunities to put the learning into practice whilst receiving mentoring from an external employment law specialist.

Example B – HR Officer

Needs to increase knowledge of employment law in order to provide advice and support to managers in handling difficult employment situations. Has good interpersonal skills.

Learning style is predominantly Pragmatist and they have an MBTI preference for Extroverted Sensing.

Methods chosen are shadowing of Senior HR Officer internally (with well developed knowledge and skills) followed by delegated project work combined with close supervision.

Learning Methodologies

Induction

Induction is essential to prepare and support a new employee's transition into the organisation, or an existing employee's transition into a new role. It is provided on the job by line manager and includes access to selected colleagues and background reading.

Coaching

Coaching uses day to day work as a learning experience by questioning and giving feedback and guidance. It may be carried out by line manager or other member of staff with appropriate expertise, or by specialist external consultants.

Shadowing

Shadowing enables an employee to increase their understanding of an area of responsibility or specific tasks as well as their awareness of different ways of working and relating, through observing another individual performing their job on a day to day basis. Shadowing may be internal or with another organisation where role and culture compare well.

Planned study/reading and reflection

Study and reflection offer opportunities for reading about and exploring a subject, which can trigger new ideas. This may also include e-learning. The individual manages their own study and reflection time and will need to be given structured opportunities to put their learning into practice.

Structured placements and visits

Placements, such as job rotation/job swap within your organisation or visits to other organisations, can bring new insights into different ways of working and the stimulus to learn from other people's practice.

Planned work experience

Work experience such as delegated project work or taking on a new area of responsibility, can develop the individual's skills and thinking. Clearly structured supervision and support, possibly including coaching or mentoring, should be provided.

Training courses and seminars

Training can be useful to increase knowledge and understanding, strengthen existing skills, develop new ones or to explore new areas. These may be run by your organisation or may involve attending external events. It is important to provide real opportunities for the new knowledge and skills to be put into practice as soon after the event as possible. Delays can result in loss of enthusiasm and confidence or forgetting the learning.

Secondments

Secondments provide opportunities for individuals to have working experience outside of their usual role and skills area or within a different organisational environment, thereby broadening their skills and understanding and enabling them to bring fresh ideas or approaches into the organisation.

Mentoring

Mentoring can provide learning opportunities for the mentor as well as the mentoree. The mentor has the opportunity to think differently about their own area of expertise and ways of working/relating. The mentoree is provided with guidance and advice that is separate from their line management relationship and can broaden and challenge their thinking. It is important that

that the mentoree has a say in the choice of mentor and that the two individuals have a confidential and mutually respectful working relationship.

Shared learning forums

Shared learning forums such as Action Learning Sets or Practice Forums, provide opportunities for individuals to learn from each other's knowledge and experience and from the dynamic of group interactive thinking, problem solving and support.

When choosing your learning providers, whether internal managers or other colleagues or external specialists, consultants or training organisations, it is important to consider how well they fit with your organisation's values, desired culture and ways of working.

Useful resources

More information on the advantages and disadvantages of the above learning methods can be found on the VSNT0 website www.voluntarysectorskills.org.uk under Management Development.