



WORKERS LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR WORK THROUGH THEIR WORK

WORK THAT STRETCHES: THE BEST TEACHER

Can you think back to one great personal learning experience? It may have been in childhood when you realized you could ride your bicycle without training wheels or a parent's guiding hand. Or it may have been when you finally understood the basics of solving quadratic equations. It could have been more recent — for example when you were involved in a debrief after a tough project and realized through the process that the project had taught you some very useful new skills.

If you can identify a great personal learning experience (and I would be very surprised if you can't) can you remember where that learning occurred?

I have asked these questions to many groups of people over the past few years. The answers given are remarkably consistent. Around 80 percent say that their great learning experiences occurred while attempting to complete a specific task. Around 20 percent say it occurred in a classroom, seminar or workshop — in a formal learning context.

These results are not terribly surprising. Research indicates that we develop the vast majority of our “know-how” through experience in the context of work, not through learning “know-what” in content-rich but experience-poor formal learning environments.

These facts raise some interesting questions for training and development professionals.

Learning through Work

If workers learn more about their work through their work and have greater learning experiences through experiencing work, then training and development professionals need to re-think some of their approaches. Training departments need to develop strategies to make best use of learning opportunities where most of the learning happens, in the workplace.

However, one thing is certain. Simply lifting traditional training models into the workplace won't achieve results. If we are to fully exploit the power of learning through work we need to focus on changing mind-sets, and on helping individual workers, and (more importantly) their supervisors, to look for opportunities to make work a continuous learning experience.

This requires supervisors to be constantly on the lookout for “work that stretches” for each and every one of their team. That's what good managers do. Good managers look to challenge and

stretch and, by so doing, they actively support their team's development as individuals and as an effective and high-performing team.

For example, it may be that a new project is starting. The supervisor needs to think of this as a potential learning experience for her team. Rather than giving the lead to a team member with a long track-record of successful projects, she could ask a less experienced team member to lead, and get the more experienced member to act as mentor.

Alternatively, she may seek out opportunities for job shadowing, job swaps or stretch assignments for her team members — activities and challenges that can be woven into the workflow.

Networking as Learning

Active encouragement of networking is another excellent development driver that supervisors can call on. No individual or team has all the answers. Every worker will benefit and develop through building effective and resilient social networks at work and beyond the walls of their workplace. A solid network will provide far greater learning and impact than any number of formal training courses.

The benefits of a good network are not only realized in increased performance and productivity, but also in the availability of the experience of others that can be brought to bear on challenging problems at the point-of-need. In my CLO role, I continuously exchanged ideas and discussed challenges across my network both inside and outside the organization and, in return, obtained support — from strategic advice to practical ideas. In return, I helped other CLOs out.

The “work that stretches” approach may require a supervisor to accept a degree of risk that she may not be used to — for example, it's always easier to put faith in a “safe pair of hands” — but the overall rewards will far outweigh that risk. Using challenging tasks and encouraging social networking in the workplace will not only fast-track learning and development; it will build teamwork and job satisfaction faster than 100 training courses.

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