Innovative Learning and development strategies

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A paper that demonstrates the need to continuously innovate and evolve new learning and development practices, in order to cater to today's generation of knowledge workers. The strategies mentioned here focus on effective learning practice as well as help in engaging and motivating workforce.

Profile of the Author
Hema Mani

Hema Mani has over 16 years of experience in leadership capacities in various Human Resources functions Staffing, Talent & Organization Development, Talent Management, Compensation, HR Operations, HR Legal, Employee Relations, Corporate Communication and HR generalist and has been the key task member in the HR leadership team in driving HR processes and linkages throughout the organization besides being a key partner in the business for strategic planning, growth initiatives, and PCMM assessments.

Strengths include operating in a global environment in matrix and virtual setups, strategy formulation and execution, learn ability and adaptability, designing and implementing organization wide processes, experience in organization design and change management, understanding of the high technology business, knowledge of statutory compliances and legal frameworks on HR front.

6 Sigma – Green Belt certified. Possess experience of working with global senior leadership teams, strategic people leadership & management, communication and networking skills.

Hema Mani, from the batch of 96 at Xavier Institute of Management and Entrepreneurship began her career at **BTI consultants (Kelly Group), PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Jain Group of Institutions, i2 Technologies, Honeywell Technology Solutions** and **Lennox India Technology Centre**, where she is presently the Head HR For the group in India.. As part of her responsibility in LITC leadership team, she spends considerable time in developing HR talent in the organization.

Additionally, Hema has driven a functional excellence mindset for HR - growing competence in areas such as leadership development, competency mapping, human capital planning, talent review and succession planning, and organization design and development work.

She has represented on topics of Human sciences in forums of IHRD and NHRD. She has also written a paper on Execution Excellence in HR which is compiled into a journal released by Indian Institute of Science. She is married with 2 children and settled in Chennai. In spite of her hectic corporate responsibility, she continues to engage with young minds in Human Resources and Organization Behavior and continues to share her thoughts on the subject in Institutions of repute. She is a life member of NHRD. Her other interests include traveling and travel based writing

Innovative Learning and Development Strategies

A Practical approach with illustrations

INTRODUCTION

Continuous learning and knowledge enhancement have become more important today than ever before. Upgrading and updating knowledge in many streams have also become more rapid owing to the continuous changes in technology, process and maturity of human science. Organizations today are faced with the challenge of continuously evolving with learning becoming a key anchor to this.

Professionals who have been managing the Learning and Development would have witnessed a huge transformation in the learning patterns among employees and would agree with me on the increasing challenge involved in retaining what is learnt and in motivating to improve the cycle of learning among employees. Through ages, one has seen several learning strategies evolve, and witnessed companies emerging with best practices in learning. We have observed theorists developing new models on effective learning and in very short time spans; we have also seen these new models, best practices and strategies becoming irrelevant and making way for more path breaking initiatives. Creating a learning culture among corporations has never been so challenging as now.

WHY SHOULD WE INNOVATE OUR LEARNING MECHANISMS?

So, what are some of these challenges that are coming in the way of companies to create an effective learning model? Let us examine some of these below:

1. **Clash of Generations**- the 21st century is witnessing amazing demographic and other dimensions of diversity all over. The baby boomers are ripening & retiring in large numbers and the and Gen Have come in with enormous ambition, and self-confidence. What this also means is that the learning pattern of both these generations are diametrically opposite each other, while the former is easy with class room and group sessions , the latter prefers more self paced learning . Former had the ability for focusing outside of work without, distraction remember those were the times of "no mobile phones/blackberries & laptops". The Gen X & Gen Y can only manage an attention span lesser than a couple few of hours on learning as their distractions and engagements are more frequent and different and hence demand small learning packages. Theory seems to have given way to experiential learning. Teaching has given way to facilitation and coaching.

	Traditionalist 1922-1945	Boomer 1946-1964	Gen X 1965-1976	Gen Y 1977-2000
Training	The hard way	Too much and I'll leave	Required to keep me	Continuous, expected
Learning style	Classroom	Facilitated	Independent	Continuous, networked
Communication style	Top down	Guarded	Hub and spoke	Collaborative
Problem solving	Hierarchical	Horizontal	Independent	Collaborative
Decision making	Seeks approval	Team informed	Team included	Team decided
Leadership style	Command and control	Get out of the way	Coach	Partner
Feedback	No news is good news	Once per year	Weekly or daily	On demand
Technology use	Uncomfortable	Unsure	Can't work without it	Absolutely essential
Job changing	Unwise	Sets me back	Necessary	Part of my daily routine

2. **Information age** & informed learners: has brought with it its own unique challenges. Today's trainers and coaches are more challenged to provide information that the learners do not already know about, since the learners these days already come in with good information and knowledge. What they probably require is more coaching on the application of such knowledge and information effectively at their workplaces. How is this a challenge?, well , companies are challenged to find trainers/coaches, who have enormous experience in the subject matter, who the learners will develop respect for and accept before learning and imbibing from such trainers and coaches. ..Guess how many do we have among our environment who can do that?

3. **Rapid advancements in technology** is building a wider wedge between knowledge and execution in many corporations. Traditional knowledge systems are unable to keep pace with Increasing innovation and discoveries of new frontiers in science and technology. HR professionals across the globe would agree that one of the major reasons behind talent deficiency is not necessarily on the numbers, but on the lack of the necessary skills and knowledge required by the company. A secondary challenge, emerging out of this rapid advancement of technology is that, such knowledge rests with a limited tribe of people who are close to such advancements. It is often a challenge for companies to spurn a cycle of learning

and make it effective across the organization. How many of us have witnessed products getting onto a sun-set stage or diminishing utility, because the key architect of the product has moved on to newer frontiers The question, therefore is: can knowledge network forums be the only answers to this?.

4. **Increasing talent turnover** in corporations pose yet another major challenge in retaining the learning's in an organization, thus affecting the fundamental knowledge systems. In very aggressive and often regressive mechanisms we have witnessed companies instituting retention contracts to ensure the talent stays with the organization for a period of time, so that the company can receive a certain amount of return on investments on the training provided. But the question is if the employee really understands this and thus contributes to the cycle of learning in a corporation.

It may be stated that the resolution to the most complex problem often rests in the simplest of solutions. So let us also look at the challenges described above through the maze of some of well-known models in existence for some time .

WHAT SHOULD WE CONSIDER WHILE INNOVATING OUR LEARNING STRATEGY?

Kolb is one of the most influential researchers in the field of learning. He mentioned in his works: "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". His theories present a way of structuring and sequencing to improve learning. He suggests that learning is cyclical and involves three stages

1. Sensing and feeling

2. Watching and reflecting

3. Thinking and doing

In his very early works, he mentions that individuals differ in their preferred learning styles and recognizing this becomes the first stage in raising the awareness of alternative approaches possible and helping them to become more flexible in meeting the varied demands of learning situations.

Why did I bring in Kolb here? His works greatly help us in formulating effective strategies to combat the multipronged challenges we are witnessing today and as described in the foregoing paragraphs of this article. With the expansion of higher education and increasing emphasis on access, diversity, retention rates and life-long learning, there is a good reason to explore the nature of different learning styles.

It is impertinent for companies to have a model of learning that is inclusive with a variety of learning methods, including independent learning, learning by doing, work-based learning problem-based learning and group project work. On the other hand, this is also assisting trainers and coaches to become more reflective teachers and turn experiences into learning. Learning must comprise concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. All these

follow in a cycle. It is believed that to make learning concrete, the learning cycle should be repeated several times and the learner has to go through spirals of learning.

The second important factor is observing the preferred learning styles of learners to help identify a homogeneous population that will make learning effective. The two primary drivers to determine the learning style are depicted in the following diagram:
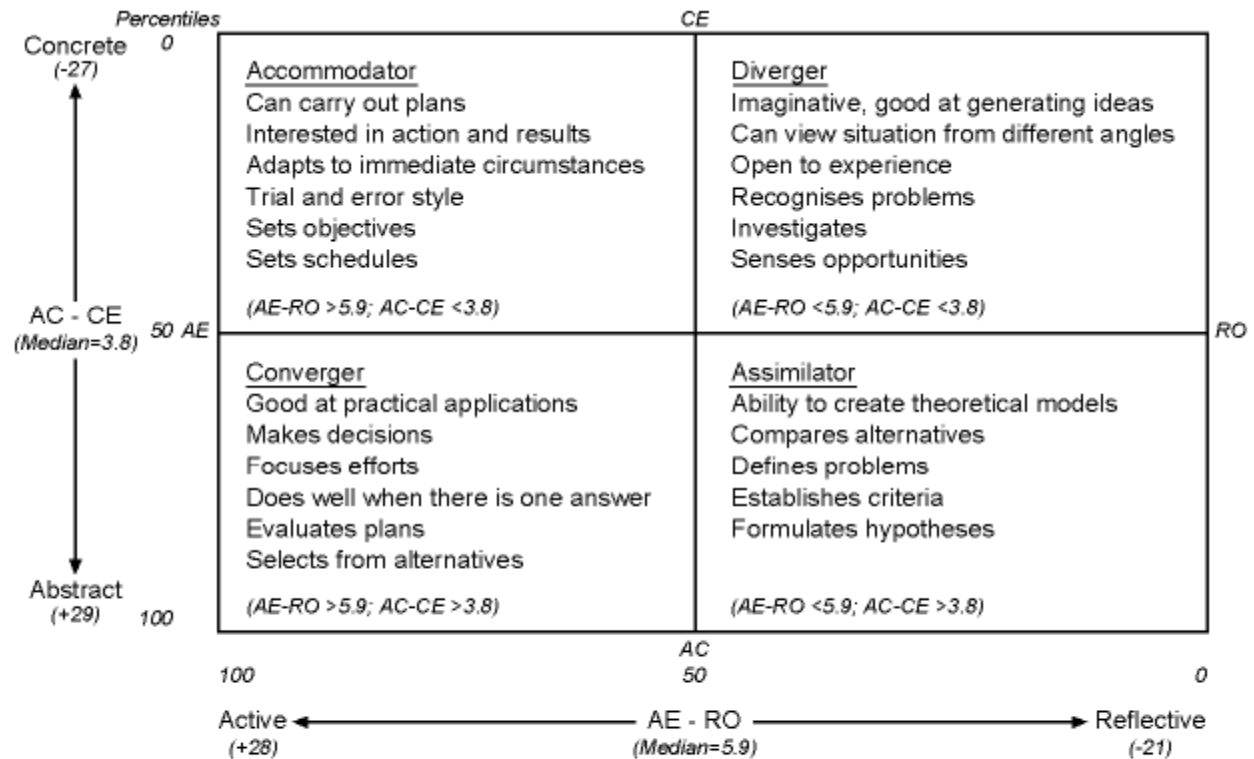
Source: Adapted from Kolb (1984, 86) and Gibbs (1988, 20)

Note: Individual scores can be compared with the standardised percentile scores based on a mixed sample of 1446 adults between 18 and 60 in a survey undertaken by Kolb (1985). The average education of the sample was two years of college. The four learning styles have scores above or below the AE-RO and AC-CE medians. Thus convergers, for example, have an AE-RO score >5.9 and an AC-CE score >4.3 (though any individual can only obtain an integer score), whereas divergers have scores below these median values and often have negative scores.

Here is a brief on how learning styles differ and why it is important for us to understand before we implement a good learning strategy

1. *Divergers* - view situations from many perspectives and rely heavily upon brainstorming and generation of ideas.
2. *Assimilators* - use inductive reasoning and have the ability to create theoretical models.
3. *Convergers* - rely heavily on hypothetical-deductive reasoning.
4. *Accommodators* - carry out plans and experiments and adapt to immediate circumstances.

The particular choice of learning style reflects the individual's abilities, environment and learning history, According to Kolb, learners learn better when the subject matter is presented in a style that is

consistent with their preferred learning style. Left to their own devices, employees tend to do what is easiest for them, which is to use their own learning style.

"The aim is to make the student self-renewing and self-directed; to focus on integrative development where the person is highly developed in each of the four learning modes; active, reflective, abstract and concrete. Here, the student is taught to experience the tension and conflict among these orientations, for it is from these tensions that creativity springs."

SOME EXAMPLES OF INNOVATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AT WORKPLACE

Given the understanding of the various challenges in learning and interspersing it with the study of learning patterns, let us view of some of these innovative strategies in learning and development, we have witnessed.

1. **Empowered Work group sessions**- these are voluntary group of likeminded professionals who come together to share knowledge and best practices in select areas. The group encourages participants to continuously share, coach and facilitate learning, taking turns in the learning process as both learners and coaches. In this model, there is no identified coach/trainer; it is believed that everybody in the group will have something to offer to the group that can benefit everybody. One of the basic requirements of a successful work group is that the group shall trust everybody for the learning one share within the team. Secondly the group shall participate in the learning in a harmonious pace. I have personally witnessed satisfaction in such workgroups, as it is an empowered and voluntary group, which is not forced into learning. Such workgroup encourages formation of knowledge neurals and networks within the company, and since the learning is voluntary, the knowledge is more richly embedded and applied at work

   Illustration: In a major corporation (name kept anonymous), voluntary group of employees meet once every week and discuss on a technology platform. The group began small and today has network across a larger part of the organization. Every member plays the role of both the coach and the learner. Group learning is a major highlight of this method. Problems are shared and the group together attempts to work on the solution and the group is enriched with a new methodology or learning.

2. **Technology intervention**- This is an age of heavy social networking. Our traditional familial bonds and team groups have made way for comfort over the virtual world. It is an interesting observation that teams may not enjoy a close bond at work in a formal atmosphere, but enjoy a virtual relationship that is cut off from work. They exchange a lot and share a lot over the various social networking sites. I recently met with a trainer, who combines classroom sessions with interactions over a face book page, post the training. Hesitation to enquire upon a subject matter is often embedded in the fear of humiliation or embarrassment, and we as trainers often find that some people do hesitate to inquire during a classroom session. When such employees are subjected to a combination of social networking, we find that such employees often come out in the open and discuss their thoughts without inhibitions. Social networking has proven to be a useful platform to

help employees who hesitate on group learning. Their individualism spikes up in the social platforms, mainly because it provides them the comfort of privacy. No wonder also that personal coaching which is done virtually is slowly becoming huge success among employees.

Illustration: in one of the soft skills programs conducted over 2 days, the group which finished the classroom training felt elated that they were chosen for the training. The facilitation was fun and good, and it gave them some tips on building their interpersonal skills. The trainer further set up a facebook page on this subject for this group. Each one enrolled and began voluntarily sharing information on this subject. The group came close to each other, trusted each other and began to coach at workplace.

3. **Combination of classroom training and mentoring**- one of the key challenges we discussed before is ensuring sustenance of learning and application of learning at workplace. This is more challenging when the learning is more behavior change focused dependent. While employees enjoy the classroom sessions mainly because the trainer is effervescent and conducts the training with experiential activities, the training halo leaves them after a brief time before the employee engages back with his normal practice. I as a trainer have tried this and encourage the readers in their trainer, to follow up the training with peer mentoring post the training. Peer mentoring, allows the group to stay in touch outside of the training. It ensures that the learning phase is more extended beyond the classroom and forces a commitment from the participants to consolidate their learning.

Illustration: I recently did a session on time management. While my batch of participants identified that the training was useful for them and that they did need to undergo this training. I often found that they slipped back to their earlier practices very easily. I therefore introduced pairing within the group and encouraged them to do peer mentoring. I encouraged them to identify improvements in their partner constantly, when they observe them at work and continuously improve each other. This was well appreciated by the group and the group learning was more enhanced.

4. **Wikipedia & SharePoint's**- Teams and groups of employees often come together in a company to contribute to a project or program that demands a homogeneous set of skills and competencies. They often create records of their project progression and maintain records of their review documents. In one of the organizations, employees were encouraged to share their challenges while executing their projects or programs to the whole group and seek answers to their challenges. While this is an old Japanese lean technique of sharing the problem, this group used a social networking platform to share and pose their challenges, such as Wikipedia's, share points, team sites. This way the larger group too saw the problems and where knowledge or experience existed, they were able to contribute and help to resolve the problems. There volunteer group of employees also sought pride to be associated with a like-minded tribe in the company and they also tended to fiercely protect each other by continuously coaching and mentoring each other.

5. **Problem work out solutions**- It is believed that learning happens best when there is a problem to be solved or a challenge to be combated. Ever wondered how the army groups come together in the

battle ground to evolve new techniques and strategies to combat the enemy groups? The same can be also practiced at work. Pose a problem or an issue to a group of employees and witness how their mind opens out to newer vistas and encourages them to look around for solutions. I have personally been with product development organizations for the last 13 years and have seen that when groups come together for an innovation work-out session, their mind opens out to accept new learning's and they try to apply those learning's to their problem to come out with a solution to their problem. It is seen that the group that goes through such problem work=out sessions, emerge out stronger and their spiral learning curves are more extended.

CONCLUSION

In essence while companies should continue to engage employees in the traditional modes of learning such as class room learning, mentoring, coaching, e-learning, brunch n learn sessions, book reviews, and higher education, it is important to understand the learning patterns and evolve these learning styles to suit the needs of the organization and the group.