

# DIY

## ... for lifelong learning and development

Constant learning and development is the key to staying effective in today's dynamic and complex business environment, but what can we do to address the challenges? Carl Sanders-Edwards outlines a D-I-Y approach that focuses on supporting people to become self-sufficient learners.

**A**round 200,000 years ago, three early humans stood on a large rock and surveyed the Serengeti savannah. They were hungry and wanted food for their families. A small animal appeared 60 metres away. The largest human proposed running directly for it. Another pointed to a line of trees that could conceal their approach, promoting nods of agreement. The third paused then pointed to a small gully they could use as a trap. A plan was now fully formed. That evening a fire crackled as the people and their families ate heartily. The story of the hunt and lessons for the future were shared into the night.

This was the environment we humans evolved from. As neuro-scientists such as John Medina (*Brain Rules*, 2008) point

out, it is an environment that could benefit our learning and development (L&D) initiatives: "If we were to design a learning environment that is directly opposed to the fundamental wiring of our brains, we would design a classroom and then design a cubicle!"

There were no courses or classrooms in the Serengeti. Lifelong L&D was essential for survival. Each of us directed our own learning—it was D-I-Y L&D.

### **L&D more essential than ever**

Fast forward to today. L&D is more essential than ever. As HR professionals fight to attract and retain the best talent, we read about research from people like Beth N Carver, who after 12

years studying exit interviews found that opportunities to learn and develop count more in the war for talent than money.

Our leaders and managers are also operating in an increasingly dynamic and complex environment. Population growth, emerging countries and technology advances are driving change at a dizzying rate. An IBM study of over 1500 CEOs identified their number one concern as the growing complexity of their environments. Constant learning and development is required to stay effective in this environment. Yet as learning and development professionals, we face a number of challenges:

- *Less time.* Managers and leaders have less time than ever thanks to flatter management structures and competitive environments;
- *Less money.* Since the global financial crisis, budgets have been slashed. Research from the likes of Gallup proves a strong link between better developed leaders and managers and organisational performance. However, most L&D initiatives have hard-to-prove short-term benefits, making it difficult to excite sponsors;
- *Low learning transfer.* Many L&D initiatives don't create the level of behaviour change we would like. This has been called the 'knowing-doing gap'. We need to improve what people *do* rather than what they *know*.

What can we do? Our research has uncovered three core megatrends that have an impact on L&D. Understanding these led us to developing the **Diagnose-Inspire-Your action** (or D-I-Y) framework that can be used to help better develop more effective leaders and managers.

### The mega trends affecting L&D

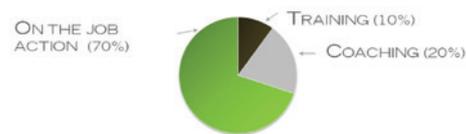
**Content more available.** Twenty to thirty years ago, good content on leadership development and practices was rare and hard to access—you needed to go and hear 'experts' tell you what they had found/learned for themselves. Today this just isn't the case. Thanks to the internet and the explosion of business and personal improvement books and other resources, the world is full of great information about how to improve the way you work and lead. The challenge for our leaders and managers isn't getting the information, it's finding the right information for their situation and applying it.

**Adaptive leadership.** As mentioned, the world is becoming more complex and less predictable. Our leaders and managers can't solve tomorrow's problems using yesterday's tools. Master executive coach Marshall Goldsmith's book title says it all—*What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. Instead, we need to learn how to continuously learn and adapt, develop new styles and apply and create new models.

**Action learning.** The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has worked with tens of thousands of leaders to develop the 70:20:10 model for how leaders learn:

## The world has changed... Learning and development also needs to!

1. **Content availability** → Today leaders already know or can easily find content – application of content is the challenge.
2. **Adaptive leadership** → Yesterday's tools won't solve tomorrow's problems. We need to learn more problem solving skills in the face of uncertainty.
3. **Action learning** → Learn by taking actions relevant to the job required - not by pushing predetermined content.



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- 70 percent through on-the-job experiences;
- 20 percent through the people they work with—coaching;
- 10 percent through courses they attend.

Thankfully, many L&D initiatives embrace this approach. However, all too many ignore the first mega trend and focus the on-the-job actions on activities that reinforce and deliver predetermined 'content'. This content, determined by someone not in-the-job, is often not relevant to the learner. Take our Serengeti ancestors for example. While hungry and confronted with an animal, they would not have benefited from an activity to improve seaside foraging!

### The Diagnose-Inspire-Your action (D-I-Y) framework

The D-I-Y framework supports making learning and development an ongoing process and not an event or outcome of a course. You do it for life. It focuses on supporting people to build a habit of taking meaningful action that they then learn from. Let's take a look at each of the phases.

**Diagnose.** Start by finding a relevant opportunity or challenge for each person and group. This way, learners focus on things meaningful to them that have high intrinsic motivational value.

Simple questions help drive this process:

- What are you trying to achieve?
- What do you already know but don't do?
- What is blocking you from achieving your goals?

This phase can also be supported by assessment (personal style and/or 360° evaluations) and self-reflection to help each learner identify their own development focus areas.

The learners then begin problem solving and action planning around these focus areas. In the process they create long-term



Kanban allows production staff to pull inventory when they require it rather than when production planners decide they need it. We think that L&D programmes can learn from this.

sustainable improvements in their own capability, but also in their organisation's performance. Tangible business improvements (short and long term) become a visible part of the L&D process instead of a hoped-for outcome.

**Inspire.** The Inspire phase is where facilitators and/or content come into play. However, as it follows the Diagnose phase, only the most relevant information that might help the current reality of the learners is shared.

We also recommend that learners are encouraged to 'pull' content to help with their job/challenge. This is in contrast to many traditional approaches where content is 'pushed' to learners regardless of relevance to them.

This isn't the first time we have seen the pull versus push approach. Toyota's Taiichi Ohno invented the Kanban system that helped revolutionise manufacturing with a similar insight. Kanban

allows production staff to pull inventory when they require it rather than when production planners decide they need it. We think that L&D programmes can learn from this. The 'pull' approach brings many advantages:

- *Increased self-reliance*—When learners are supported to find their own relevant content, it further decreases reliance on specific 'development' events;
- *More relevant*—Pulled content is, by design, more relevant to a learner's unique situation and more likely to be useful in application;
- *Repeatable*—Content is de-coupled from the programme design so it is easier to design a repeatable programme. Repetition helps build beneficial habits as Charles Duhigg points out in his book *The Power of Habit* (2012).

The aim of the Inspire phase should not be to teach but to make

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learners aware of what could help them. The aim is to build confidence and provide what is known as 'scaffolding'. Scaffolding provides learners with relevant tools and frameworks customised to the barriers they face. This ensures that as learners construct their own models, they do so from a foundation of best practice.

**Your action.** A participant in one of our recent programmes said, "I never learned anything from something I didn't do." This summarises 'Your action' to a tee.

Psychologists have shown that people have a bias for preserving the status quo (or against taking action). Therefore L&D programmes should focus on inspiring and helping learners to take action in the workplace—hence a dedicated 'Your action' phase.

When action planning is preceded by diagnosis and inspiration, we can be sure that the on-the-job actions learners take are important and relevant to them, providing real learning and payoff.

The risk involved in taking novel actions by the inexperienced is managed by making each action small and discrete. Support from experienced facilitators and coaching from peers and managers further reduce risk. Successes add up over time, while failures are captured and adjustments made to avoid repeats. Taking action provides the opportunity for powerful learning processes of reflection as outlined in many places, including *The Art of Changing the Brain* (James E Zull, 2002). After actions, debrief sessions ask learners to share:

- What happened?
- What can I learn from what happened?
- What will I do next as a result?

By repeating this D-I-Y process a number of times, learners become self-sufficient and can drive their own learning and development. This self-sufficiency supports them to become more adaptable leaders and managers who change as their organisation and world changes around them.

This ability to change is a form of what Professor Robert Kegan of Harvard University calls 'vertical development', that is, the development of a mind that can see connections, consider multiple perspectives and learn more effectively—a mind better-suited, to lead in today's complex world. Vertical development is in contrast to

the more common 'horizontal' development where learners simply focus on development of new competencies.

### Making D-I-Y work

The following three tips will help guide your D-I-Y for lifelong L&D initiatives:

1. *General themes rather than specifics*—There is no need to get overly specific with 'learning outcomes'. Learners will identify and focus on areas most relevant to them.
2. *Promote peer and manager coaching*—Design to promote strong peer coaching relationships and don't forget the managers of the learners. Google's Oxygen study found 'coaching others' the most distinguishing competency of its best leaders.
3. *Capture insights*—Capture and theme the trends that emerge to help improve your organisation's performance and influence strategy. What are the common issues learners face, what do they already know, what actions get the most results?

A final word of caution. To most L&D professionals, D-I-Y makes sense and articulates today's best practice. We agree. However, experience has shown us it is hard to implement. It is hard to resist the temptation to just 'give the answer' when you see a group grappling with a situation you have seen other groups encounter. But, in doing so, we rob learners of the chance to make their own insights and act because 'they saw the connection'.

To conclude, we have seen many impressive results from the D-I-Y framework for lifelong learning. We also believe you can use it to get great results in your organisation—tomorrow.

Lastly, we think it is somewhat ironic that today's technology-fuelled world lends itself well to a learning process that our Serengeti ancestors used hundreds of thousands of years ago!



Carl Sanders-Edwards is founder and managing director of JumpShift Development Ltd (experts in D-I-Y learning and development). Visit [www.jumpshift.co.nz](http://www.jumpshift.co.nz).

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