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An On-line
OD Network Magazine

Experiential Learning in the 21st Century

by Jim Morris

This article reminds us of the significance of experiential learning in our work. Morris offers an inventory of OD processes and interventions to demonstrate the broad range of experiential learning methodologies in our field.

A client of mine, an executive vice president of learning for a leading manufacturing and sales organization, said it best: "I simply cannot imagine getting as much accomplished without a blend of your approach (experiential training and development) and traditional learning methods. Time is our most precious commodity and the cost of our people's time for learning is a huge investment. Using experience as a teacher makes the investment worth it."

Although its novelty in corporate learning has worn off, experiential learning as a learning modality is as vital as ever. In the past decade, most of the largest organizational learning and change efforts undertaken by both government and business have relied heavily on experiential designs to help participants learn and embody desired outcomes. Experiential training and development does not replace traditional classroom learning, but it does bring adult, corporate learning to life, usually in concert with other learning modes like e-learning, case studies and group action learning.

Research conducted jointly by Harvard and ASTD shows that blended learning, or learning using a combination of traditional and experiential methods, increases the volume and retention of material by as much as a factor of five at one-third of the cost of traditional, classroom-only training.

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experiential learning. From the “good old days” of simple activities or simulations, the range, diversity, complexity and suitability of experiential designs and delivery now includes

- Programs and consulting engagements that
- complement business initiatives such as lean manufacturing, Balanced Scorecard, enterprise resource planning, and value stream engineering
- Whole-system change management initiatives for as few as ten and as many as 40,000 participants
- Work partnership models that are vibrant and effective and that span race, gender and sexual orientation
- Organizational re-design, strategic planning and organizational initiatives that are accelerated while improving the execution
- Interventions and learnings specific to issues of diversity
- Applications and practice in a variety of instruments such as the DiSC, MBTI, the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, Creatrix, and Belbin team roles
- Experiential methods that are new and innovative and that connect participants to a variety of current management writings including, *Good to Great*, *Primal Leadership*, *Execution*, and *The Human Capital Edge*;
- Leadership methods like emotional intelligence and self-awareness
- Team performance enhancement engagements tailored to address key strategies

Experiential learning generally includes the following phases:

1. *Action and Experience* – After setting the context for the learning, individuals, groups, teams or organizations are engaged in an active experience that helps to recall past behaviors and thinking relevant to the current outcome.
2. *Observation and Reflection* – period of evaluation, sometimes called “outframing,” or observation of the group’s actions and performance during the Action and Experience phase.
3. *Application of Learning to Work Contexts* – Once evaluated and reflected upon, what was learned that has meaningful application to daily or key work contexts.
4. *Implementation* - Testing the new application in real-life, evaluating results and re-engaging in learning through action

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and experience

In the past, experiential learning has been inaccurately pigeon-holed as outdoor adventure or involving the use of challenge courses, outdoor activities and simulation games. In reality, outdoor learning is but one subset of a variety of methods to help people synthesize learning into action at work and home. While many Experiential Training and Development professionals begin their careers in outdoor learning, an equal number hone their skills through more traditional careers in education, business, marketing and executive leadership.

We are only beginning to scratch the surface of the possible application of experiential training and development in corporate learning for adults. Through participation in annual Summits featuring best practices and thought leaders in specific disciplines and quarterly phone clinics we collaborate to discover, learn and deliver cutting edge experiential learning projects that help clients change the world.

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