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Introduction

I took a great deal o' pains with his education sir;
I let him run the streets when he was very young,
shift for his-self. It's the only way to make a boy
sharp, sir.

—Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*

What Is Work-Based Learning?

The sina qua non of organizational learning has become the need for learning to be ongoing. Only learning can keep up with change; in fact, recalling a familiar maxim of organization learning that has been attributed to both Reg Revans and Gregory Bateson, "The rate of learning must equal or exceed the rate of change."[1] Learning is what creates but also adapts, enlarges, and deepens knowledge. Without new or adapted knowledge, it is not possible to change either the meanings we attach to our actions or the actions themselves.

So, learning has to become a way of life in our organizational enterprises. As such, it has to be more than the sum of everyone's individual learning; it needs to become shared as part of an organizational ethic. That ethic requires the organization to deliberately unseat itself in order to cope with change, in order to "get smarter faster."

How can we introduce learning as an organizational property that extends to all managers? The answer lies in making learning arise from the work itself. Learning has to become natural, even fun. Unfortunately, we have become conditioned to a classroom model

that separates theory from practice, making learning seem impractical, irrelevant, and boring. But what if we make our work site a perfectly acceptable location for learning?

This is where work-based learning comes in. Work-based learning expressly merges theory with practice, knowledge with experience. It recognizes that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom. Such learning, however, needs to be centered around reflection on work practices. Hence, it offers managers faced with the relentless pace of pervasive change an opportunity to overcome time pressures by reflecting upon and learning from the artistry of their action. It is no longer acceptable to offer the rationale, "We don't have a minute to think." Managers can no longer react to change; they must anticipate and work with it. Reflection with others offers the key to competing successfully in the twenty-first-century marketplace.

Work-based learning uses many diverse technologies, but prominent among them is the deployment of action projects, learning teams, and other interpersonal experiences, such as mentorships, that permit and encourage learning dialogues. Learning dialogues are concerned with the surfacing, in the safe presence of trusting peers, those social, political, and even emotional reactions that might be blocking operating effectiveness.

There are three critical elements in the work-based learning process:

1. It views learning as acquired in the midst of action and dedicated to the task at hand.
2. It sees knowledge creation and utilization as collective activities, wherein learning becomes everyone's job.
3. Its users demonstrate a learning-to-learn aptitude, which frees them to question underlying assumptions of practice.
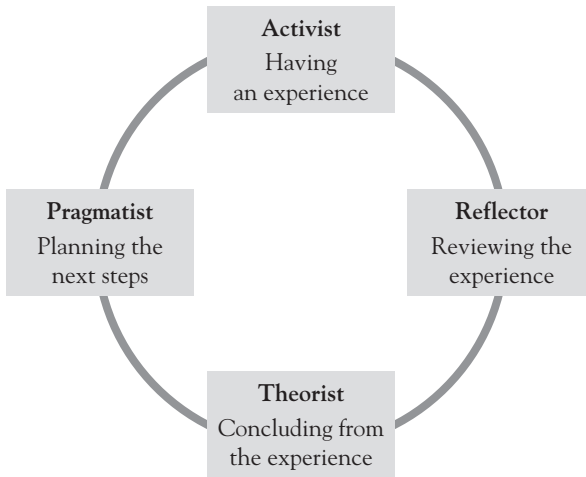
Work-based learning, then, differs from conventional education in that it involves conscious reflection on actual experience. Fun-

damental to the process is the concept of *metacognition*, which means that one constantly thinks about one's problem-solving processes.[2] It is not enough just to ask, "What did we learn?" but also to ask, "What does it mean or how does it square with what we already know?" Hence, learning can be more than just the acquisition of technical skills. It also constitutes the reframing necessary to create new knowledge. Smith refers to programs of work-based learning as "throwing a net around slippery experience and capturing it as learning."[3] Ohmae adds that learning of this type requires a combination of rational analysis and imagination and intuition.[4] Using both hemispheres of the brain, one reintegrates information into new patterns.

Although I shall detail many examples of work-based learning experience in the chapters to follow, finishing with a prototype model in Chapter Eleven, it might be useful to get an early glimpse of what elements are normally incorporated into work-based learning programs. Adapting the prior work of Kolb on learning styles,[5] Honey and Mumford provide a glimpse of what a work-based learning experience might look like (see Figure 1.1).[6] Within a work setting, the process might start by having a manager undertake an experience that is new or unique and attempt to learn what that experience meant and what it achieved for the organization. For example, a human resource (HR) manager might benchmark her hiring practices against a number of companies participating in a regional trade association. This is acting in what Honey and Mumford refer to as an *activist* role. However, they also recommend that the manager become a *reflector*, which entails some deep reflection about the unique experience, brought about normally through public dialogue with some like-minded colleagues. For example, the HR manager might assemble a small group of colleagues from the association to meet both in-person and online to react to each other's practices, including their recruitment and selection procedures.

In the next role, the *theorist* role, the manager, continuing the public dialogue, interprets what the experience meant in context,

Figure 1.1. Honey and Mumford's Learning Cycle and Learning Styles

Activist
Having
an experience

Pragmatist
Planning the
next steps

Reflector
Reviewing the
experience

Theorist
Concluding from
the experience

Source: Adapted with permission from *Capitalizing on Your Learning Style* ©1983, 1985, 1986, 1989 Peter Honey and Alan Mumford. Published by Organization Design and Development, 610-279-2002, www.hrdq.com.

perhaps by comparing it with other actions, checking it against other theories, and so forth. Finally, in the last stage of the learning process, the manager in a *pragmatic* role plans what steps might be taken next to extend the experience, keeping in mind how the learning that has already been acquired might be applied. Completing our example, the HR manager would use the ongoing dialogue with her colleagues, in addition to other written sources, as a means of adding to her knowledge base. She would attempt to implement some of these new ideas into her work setting while continuing to reflect on these initiatives on her own as well as with her learning team and her work site colleagues.

Work-based learning, then, is mindful and situated learning in the sense that it does not view preexisting knowledge as fixed but rather as provisional until tried out in a given context or in practice.[7] Further, it recognizes that learning can occur spontaneously in a given situation. It is not akin to learning a set of facts to be

stored and used later but rather to bringing new tools to bear in order to figure out how to cope with instant challenges arising from the practice field. Learning is thus tied to practice, arising as people attempt to solve new and interesting problems, often improvising as they go.[8] Lévi-Strauss referred to this spontaneous improvisation as "bricolage," or the practice of using the materials of the situation in creative and resourceful ways.[9]

Note that the role of language changes under work-based learning conditions. It is not just a means to transmit information from one mind to another, from those who know to those who do not. It can become the means for creating and expressing new knowledge in the making.

Derived from action itself, work-based learning may be thought of as a natural process tied to the human instinct to grow. In this sense, it is very much a part of our being. Accordingly, we might match it against seven unique criteria proposed by Peter Vaill for making learning a *way of being*.[10]

- *It is self-directed*. The learner has substantial control over the purpose, content, form, pace, and evaluation of the learning.
- *It is creative*. There is no pre-set goal, nor are there pre-set methods in work-based learning. The learner is asked to create on the spot to find and solve problems.
- *It is expressive*. Learning occurs in the process of doing it and expressing it. All nuances of the experience, especially one's tacit performance, are engaged. Unlike in the instance of classroom learning and even in some experiential learning, we do not know what will happen at the conclusion of our practice. Learning occurs in conjunction with experience, potentially beforehand, as long as we theorize about what we are about to do and compare our experience with it. Learning also occurs during and after the experience as we attempt to improve our often tacit behavior by reflecting on what we did, through peer advisement, or from instruction.

- *It involves feeling.* Work-based learning entails emotional involvement in the context itself. We care about what we do and what we have accomplished. We feel the learning as well as possess it intellectually.

- *It is real-time.* We do not learn in an artificial, sheltered environment; we learn within the fray of practice itself, within genuine operating environments. Our learning is purposeful, dedicated to helping us solve the challenges that confront us in the moment.

- *It is continual.* Once work-based learning becomes natural to the learner, it becomes a never-ending process. We are always open to surprises, to new ways of doing things. Change is accepted as a given in life; hence, learning becomes part of our very being.

- *It is reflective.* We become not just more aware of our own learning processes but also more aware of (and more interested in publicly commenting on) the processes of others.

Uniqueness of This Book

Having read this far, you may begin to wonder what is unique about this book. How does it differ from the myriad of works out there on organizational learning? First, the field of work-based learning is still new, although it has been recognized in the past through other labels, such as adult learning, vocational education, cooperative education, school-to-work, and so forth. Books in these fields typically come from the generic fields of education and higher education and thus do not focus on the action dimension in management and organizations. Further, although this book is about learning in organizations and how that learning is managed, it adopts a unique approach. Most methods designed to help people develop their organization to be more effective and more humane or to help them develop themselves come in the form of a recipe. The recipe is like a tool that has been devised by someone else but that can be suc-

cessfully applied within the user's organizational or team culture. For example, we have reengineering and quality tools, we have access to talent management platforms, and the like. This book presents very few such tools. Why? It is because the philosophy of work-based learning does not specify the methods of practice *in advance*. Rather, the methods of work-based learning are developed concurrently with work practices themselves. If there is a recipe to be afforded here, it is one that merely prescribes how to set up various experiences that make use of the organic and reflective processes embedded in work-based learning.

In this way, this book parallels some of the recent work in organizational learning and the learning organization; yet, here too there is an important difference. Organizational learning characterizes a set of activities that allow organizations to grow and learn in order to sustain themselves and improve. The learning organization characterizes the type of organization whose internal structure and process allow organizational learning—in other words, that allow it to grow and learn. Work-based learning characterizes those developmental activities and educational efforts within the organization to help it establish a culture of organizational learning.

The closest parallel to work-based learning is of course *action learning* and a close second would be *action science*. However, these "action strategies" have developed along distinct epistemological traditions, as have such interrelated methods as mentorship, journaling, or developmental experiences. As yet, there has not been any attempt to distinguish the commonalities across these approaches and to bring them together as part of a new, yet comprehensive, tradition, which we can now refer to as *work-based learning*.

The Plan for the Book

Before we plunge immediately into the applied world, it is important that we first consider the theoretical and practical context of work-based learning in order to understand its rationale. We shall start, then, in Chapter Two by considering what I am calling the

new learning, a work-based process that is based on reflective principles and that may be the one way to successfully overcome the frenetic pace of our corporate world. In Chapter Three, the emerging tradition of work-based learning will be compared with other familiar and closely allied management and organizational learning approaches. Chapter Four is my theory chapter and hence may be one that some of my less-sympathetic readers may choose to skip. It develops a comprehensive conceptual model that integrates the learning styles embedded in work-based learning.

Three of the most popular learning styles or strategies of work-based learning, which evolve out of my conceptual model, will be detailed in Chapter Five; namely, *action learning, community of practice*, and *action science*. In Chapter Six, I pay special attention to the fundamental basis for work-based learning—*public reflection*. It is only through public reflection that we can create a collective identity as a community of inquiry. From there, we embark in Chapter Seven on a discovery of four specific reflective practices known to be quite representative of work-based learning experience: *learning teams*, *journals and portfolios*, *developmental planning*, and *developmental relationships*. Chapter Eight is devoted to the art of facilitation in work-based learning, especially as applied to learning teams. In Chapter Nine, the most popular of all work-based learning techniques, the *action project*, is discussed at length. Chapter Ten is devoted to those organizational officials who—having sold the concept of work-based learning in their organization—now have to prove it by sound management practices and reliable measurement techniques. Finally, the last chapter, Chapter Eleven, displays a prototype work-based learning program and incorporates some thorough examples of such programs in use today, locally and globally.