

Jørgen Thorsell and Justin Bridge explore new perspectives on achieving immediate impact from executive development

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT: A CRY FOR IMMEDIATE IMPACT



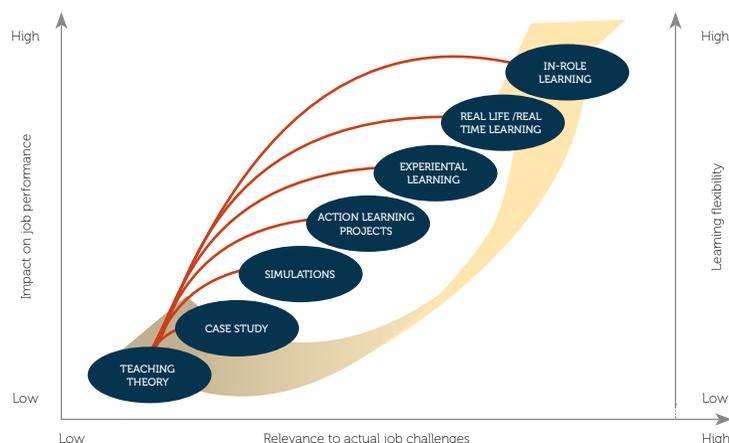
Executive development is no longer simply about offering learning that leads to new insights and changed behaviour. Today it is about creating immediate impact in support of change. The challenge is how executive development can keep up with the demands for successful leadership in times of rapid change.

Executive development has come a long way over the past few decades. The toolbox has grown to include a rich assortment of different approaches. But how effective are those tools when it comes to preparing executives to meet the demands for radical changes? Are these tools right for what we need today? And how well are they meeting the needs for achieving immediate impact on job performance?

This article argues that tools are a hierarchy of effectiveness in terms of their potential for delivering immediate impact. This hierarchy is determined by how effective a tool or method is in offering learning that is truly relevant to the actual challenges an executive is facing at that moment. The higher the relevance, the more likely the method is to deliver immediate and sustained impact on job performance.

Figure 1 shows such a hierarchy, which is discussed in detail in the rest of the article.

FIGURE 1:
THE IMPACT MATRIX



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The challenges of teaching business theory

Well-documented theory should be the basis of effective executive learning whatever the choice of method. When best practices are studied carefully and academically “processed”, theory is what all business development should be solidly grounded in.

The challenge is how to make theory useful precisely when it is needed in real life. Business schools have long taught theory in MBA classrooms and, generally speaking, “teaching theory” has been the preferred methodology for preparing students for a successful executive career. Even so, following graduation most students have felt a big gap between theoretical knowledge and becoming a successful executive.

Simply teaching theory as a one-way approach has been viewed by learning and development practitioners as the least effective way of preparing executives for success. That way of learning has consistently been rated lowest in attractiveness when we have studied successful executive development in recent years (Mannaz: *Innovation in leadership development 2007*, Mannaz: *Global leadership development 2011*, Mannaz: *Preparing Chinese leaders for the global business world 2013*).

Of all face-to-face learning methods, teaching theory has the lowest relevance to the reality of an executive’s life and thus the lowest impact on job performance. Today there are learning methods that are much more effective at securing the transfer of theory into new effective practice than raw lecturing.

The case method

Harvard Business School pioneered the case method in the 1920s to address the deficits of theory-centred teaching. The case method involves debating interesting successful, or even less successful, business cases to extract learning in a challenging dialogue between the professor and the student.

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The method was well received due to its much higher appeal than one-way lecturing and its emphasis on diagnosing for decision making. Thanks to the higher degree of relevance to the real business world and its engaging interactivity the case method has enjoyed long-lived success.

Although the case method was and still is more appealing to students than raw “teaching of theory”, it is challenged by the fact that in real life no single case will repeat itself. It hones analytical skills and may well influence shifts in executives’ business mindsets but it lacks immediate applicability.

Advanced corporate universities have made up for that deficit by using tailored cases that address relevant real-life business situations in order to achieve a higher level of relevance and applicability.

In other words, in most instances the relevance of case studies is still too distant from students’ own situations and thus does not really cater for most of the real-life situations executives will be experiencing in their own jobs. Thus the case method has relatively low immediate impact on everyday executive performance.

Business simulations

“Learning by doing” is the foundation of business simulations, which became popular quite early in executive learning. Now computer-based simulations in particular offer a dynamic and intense learning experience. Simulations tend to excel in areas where facts and numbers play a significant role such as manufacturing and finance. Many students have learned much from the competitive landscape of simulations ranging from the basics of accounting to the more complex worlds of business development and change.

Simulations tend to favour “doers” in a competitive environment. They typically offer less space for reflection and theory sharing. As such, simulations are ideal for acquiring skills rather than being truly effective at creating learning that is relevant to an individual executive’s actual challenges.

As a simulation usually has little relevance to executives’ on-the-job challenges, the likelihood of immediate application and thus immediate impact is small.



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"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

CONFUCIUS
CHINESE PHILOSOPHER



Action learning

The Chinese philosopher Confucius says: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand".

In corporate life the inefficiency of "teaching theory" left room for new and more "doing" – orientated learning methods. Action learning is a significant example. Actual corporate projects are most often used for action learning and thus create a high degree of meaning for those involved.

However, action learning is often difficult to separate from everyday business projects. Thus, the "learning" in action learning frequently does not receive proper attention and the method becomes quite inefficient from a learning perspective despite all the "action".

Lack of room for reflections and theory is still the Achilles heel of this approach to executive learning. In addition, chosen projects tend not to be of real relevance to the learner and lack true wholehearted sponsorship. That has fostered frustrations in using action learning.

Action learning can only be highly effective as an executive learning approach when it is truly relevant to the learner's situation and when it is fully backed by a committed sponsor. It is important for the effectiveness of action learning that highly qualified facilitators who can master sharing relevant theory and extracting meaningful learning supervise the actions. Only then does action learning get close to delivering immediate impact.

Experiential learning

While action learning places its focus on action, with only limited room for reflection, experiential learning is grounded in learning through reflection upon doing. Where action learning favours skills training, experiential learning is best when emotions and feelings are most important for the learning.

In executive development, experiential learning is often based on experiments, for example role playing and group exercises where learners interact with the deliberate intention of living through a near real-life situation. Reflections and feedback from fellow peers and facilitators anchor the learning.

Experiential learning may still be at arm's length to the executive's own real world, however. Thus it is seen to lack full relevance for the learner's everyday job challenges. From our studies of best practices in executive development, it appears that experiential learning has gained increased popularity over recent years.

This is likely to be caused by its particular emphasis on developing leadership skills, which become important in times of change. That calls for methods that are particularly strong in fostering behavioural change.

Although being at arm's length from the learner's own job situation, experiential learning demonstrates greater relevance for the learner than other methods described so far.

Facilitators using this method often hear how a session has been considered life changing. Experiential learning is quite powerful when it comes to affecting one's insight into oneself and impacting others' behaviour. That makes it among the potentially stronger methods for achieving immediate impact.

Real-life real-time learning

Where experiential learning does not necessarily address the actual job challenges that keep the learner awake at night, real-life real-time learning offers learning centred around exactly the issues most pertinent to the learner here and now.

Rather than offering "role plays" this method applies what might be called "real plays". That means it is the learner's own real-time job situation that is central to the learning process.

It is a method that requires good control of the facilitation process and places significant demands on the facilitator. The processes are typically systemic in nature, which means that the total ecosystem of the executive is the actual base for the learning. In other words, the process takes all aspects, personal as well as professional, into the process.

The challenge of real-life real-time learning is its reliance on highly skilled facilitators who must master the unforeseeable context and be able to share appropriate theory when needed. In contrast to standardised skills training, where programmes are carefully detailed to guide the trainer minute by minute, facilitators in real-life real-time learning processes have little guidance except for the overall development process since content relies on the specific situations.

According to our studies of best leadership development practices, the real-life real-time learning method has become extremely popular lately due to its strength of being highly relevant for each individual learner. The method has proved to be powerful in creating immediate impact when both the executive and the executive's team engage in the development processes.

In-role learning

From our practice of leadership development and studies of best practices, we have noticed a significant new trend towards in-role learning, which brings learning into the workplace.

We see, for example, executive coaching getting much attention globally. Like real-time learning, executive coaching excels by being learner centric, real-life real-time based and thus focused strictly on relevant current issues. However, coaching is mostly focused on the individual executive and does not bring direct reports or the boss effectively into the learning process. This makes coaching something of a black-box learning experience, at least for the stakeholders around the coachee.

What we also see more of is a willingness to trigger deliberate learning on the job, which often involves key people around the executive. Intact team learning is an effective way of including various stakeholders in the on-the-job learning, which is often practised as various sorts of facilitated group coaching.

If the in-role learning is not facilitated, we have



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experienced difficulty in motivating the executives and creating space for learning in a hectic job situation. Executives can feel great frustration at not having been able to meet on-the-job learning assignments and in these cases in-role learning loses its effectiveness.

In short, in-role learning is still in the early stages of development but it leaves us with hopes for an effective approach that is relevant to all stakeholders and is powerful in bringing immediate results.

A cry for immediate impact

Fast change requires fast learning and executives nowadays operate in a hectic environment with an overload of new challenges. This demanding and complex reality calls for learning at a different pace and with much higher and immediate relevance to each executive. That has placed executive development in a situation that is more challenging than ever. Most of the classic tools, as we have seen above, do not meet those needs and new ways such as real-time learning and in-role learning are still in their infancy.

Our conclusion is that this cry for immediate impact and instant relevance seems to turn executive learning upside down.

In the past executive education was professor centred; today it is executive centred. In the past it was theory focused; today it is job-challenge orientated. In the past it was classroom teaching; today it is much more about facilitated, workplace-based learning. In the past learning was about theory learned by heart; today, executive learning is about instant relevance to the executive's own current challenges.

In the past executives were developed in isolation away from their team; today, the entire ecosystem of the executives is involved and has become an important part of a shared approach to leadership development. In the past the mindset was long-term career orientated; today, executive development is an important search for how to satisfy the need for immediate impact with instant relevance to increasing performance.

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