Innovation in Leadership
The training delusion: the man who thought Play-Doh was for cleaning walls

By
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Here's a funny story: Several years ago I worked on a "Change Leadership" programme aimed at improving the ability of leaders in a big organisation to lead change.

We designed a programme with a number of digital and project-based learning elements. A change model was introduced that delegates would have to then apply in practice through a simulated challenge, receiving feedback from peers and culminating in a judging panel. There were digital elements and performance support and a community of change leaders to further the sharing of expertise. Overall, the programme was carefully engineered to shift capability and ensure that behavioural change was embedded.

Proudly, we presented our design to the "Head of Change". He listened politely then said: "Yeah… I think people really just want a couple of days off the job".

I often find that people in education (whether corporate or public) are living out some kind of delusion. What I mean is that there is a huge gap between what they *think* they are doing and what the consumers of their service believe they are providing.

For example, in public education people often talk about "building skills" and "delivering learning" when in reality most students are just there to get a certificate and have as good a time as possible while doing so. If nothing else, the astonishing numbers of university students who do not bother turning up to lectures suggests as much (together with the vanishingly small amount of information they retain).

In corporate learning and development we like to imagine that we are "building capability" and "improving performance" – even "delivering the business strategy". But when we listen closely to our customers it seems they see our role as managing risk through regulatory training and providing the occasional break from work.

In case this sounds a bit cynical, I do believe that it is possible for L&D to do something useful – but not if we carry on as we are. I would suggest that there are two big challenges that stand in our way:

First, if we were *really* interested in shifting capability and performance, we would be operating very differently than we do today. Instead of designing courses we would be building resources and designing experiences.

Second (and less obviously), we would have to dramatically shift our clients' perceptions of what we are able to do. Today we seem to be trapped in a bit of a bubble, where the only people who genuinely believe that we can make a difference to performance are ourselves. I would like that to change.

You might wonder how it is possible for training to have persisted in this delusional state for so long. Consider this:

Play-Doh was originally created (in 1933) as a wallpaper cleaner. It was only sold as modelling clay for children in 1956 when the company realised that its product was being purchased for this purpose.

Imagine being the company who makes it, seeing sales climbing and thinking "wow – people

Doh!

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are really crazy about cleaning their walls", never realising that it was being purchased as a toy. It is possible for something like this to happen. Obviously, you have to be almost completely insulated from the lives of your customers – and the missed opportunities are enormous. But it can happen.

So, what should we be doing?

Over a decade ago, I set out an explanatory framework within which we can make sense of what is going on when people (and other creatures) learn. According to the Affective Context Model, we store our *reactions* to our experiences (rather than the experiences themselves) and use these reactions to re-create the experience in a process we call "remembering".

But what do we react to? Answer: the things we care about. A person who does not care much about bathroom tiling, for example, may fail to appreciate the outstanding beauty of your recent DIY efforts and – heaven forfend – find them boring or forgettable.

This basic mistake – chucking information at people that they don't much care about characterises almost all education and training. The good news is that solving it is really quite simple: we talk to people. By talking to people

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— for example, talking to new leaders — we can discover what they care about and what they don't and this then forms the basis of the decision whether to develop resources or experiences.

Resources are typically the sort of things we use when we *do* care about something — for example when we use Google to solve a problem. They don't have to be fancy or expensive. They can make a huge impact on engagement and employee experience — just compare the impact that having Google to hand has made on your life.

Oftentimes the things people care about are quite unrelated to standardised curricula — new starters, for example, really care about "fitting in" and "not looking stupid". New leaders are concerned about impressing their peers, keeping their boss happy and being seen as a good leader by their team (among other things).

We use the term "challenges" to describe the things people are concerned with doing — for example, creating the perfect Baked Alaska is a challenge for someone I'm sure but not for me. Consequently, I will not be Googling it tonight.

A simple way to think about our role as learning professionals is as follows: people learn through challenges; there are two classes of challenge -- challenges people already have and challenges we can give them.

When we discover that someone already has a challenge it is usually the case that resources are the best solution since they will use these to address the challenge. But there are cases where people are not yet sufficiently concerned about something — for example safety or effective feedback or inclusivity. They may also need the opportunity to practise a skill and develop capability in an environment where it is "safe to fail" (rather than, say, in a live environment).

In these latter cases, we need to design experiences that will change how people feel about something as well as give them a chance to practise their response. For example, people may be quite unconcerned about fire safety — but by creating a VR experience in which they have to escape a burning building, we can impress on them the importance of learning proper procedure.

So experiences — often challenges or simulations — play a critical role in building capability where none already exists. Whether or not a resource or an experience is the most effective intervention can only be established through engagement with your target audience — specifically mapping their concerns (the things they care about and the things they don't) and everyday tasks at sufficient level of detail.

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About the Author
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