

Experiential learning:

Why learning by doing builds agile, supportive organisations

It's usual for busy managers and their teams to master challenges through a collective learning curve, making and moving on from mistakes as they do. But the real problems occur when a manager with new responsibilities must make fast, accurate decisions in a wider role, without the right business and management skill-set to underpin those decisions. With potentially damaging, irreversible consequences.

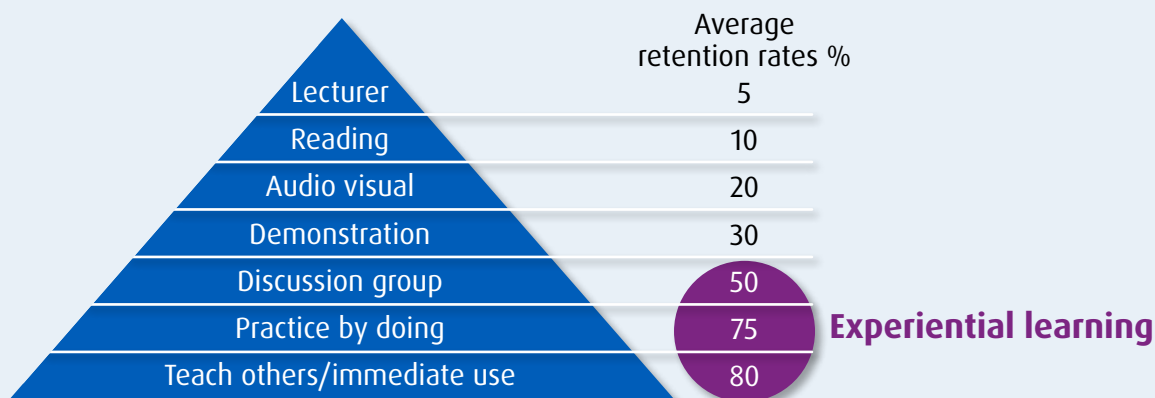
This whitepaper explores three universal challenges every business faces. It shows how progressive, intuitive teams can be nurtured through the use of effective experiential learning; learning by doing. There is another way.

"Learning is experience. Everything else is just information." Albert Einstein

It is a fact that successful agile companies must address skills gaps quickly to support continuing change. But traditional learning approaches are passive and don't always allow participants to try out the new behaviours needed to support that change. Back in 450 B.C. Confucius recognised this. "Tell me, and I will forget – show me, and I may remember – involve me, and I will understand." Research by the National Training Laboratories suggests passive learning models like lectures drive only 5% retention.

Briefings, 'all hands meetings', webinars, computer-based learning and e-mail communications are all forms of passive learning. They don't encourage teams to interact, perform, make mistakes, reflect and learn new competences and behaviours together.

Retention rates of various learning methods



Source: National Training Laboratories

Conversely, experiential learning more effectively engages participants in 'learning by doing', driving at least 75% retention. Experiential learning includes business simulation games. A business game is a device through which individuals learn about how businesses and organisations work, and which enables them to improve their performance within their organisation through the development of business and/or inter-personal skills.

Experiential learning fast-tracks the development of new behaviours driving agile, decisive businesses, helping managers develop the skills they need to lead effectively. It enables teams to meet, get to know each other and work out a common purpose, together.

Three common challenges in 21st century businesses; silo mentality, compliance and sales performance.

1 Breaking down silos

Silo mentality is a mindset relating to safe, hierarchical ways of working in organisations. Information is not shared and people work separately not together, unable to see the impact of what they do on the work of others. Often resulting from a conflicted leadership team, statistics show that 33% of management behaviour does not support change and 39% of employees resist change.¹

Add into the mix a new business unit, merger, acquisition or reorganisation, then people become unsure of their place in the grand scheme of things. 'Chinese walls', turf wars and resentment build as dispersed teams and remote workers interact less. Mismatches occur as production schedules based on a past experience approach don't align with profitable sales. Disconnected decision-making means that Murphy's Law becomes a real inevitability. "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong at the worst possible moment, over and over again."

The good news is that a well thought-out business game or simulation can help avoid the damaging effects of silo mentality. In the case of two companies merging, a game can be designed to mirror both sides of the organisation and show how they can work together. A different game can help teams who don't know each other to share knowledge and build connections. This is a 'safe' way to get teams bonding, collaborating and 'persuading themselves' to adopt new behaviours towards a defined objective, with rapid results.

2 Compliance an enabler not a hurdle

If you are not directly working in a part of the business tasked with ensuring compliance with rules and procedures, then anything associated with this can be seen as pretty dry and boring. Think of any training associated with legal regulation, anti-bribery, insider trading, safety, regulation and you can hear the yawns.

Organisations tend to approach compliance as a box-ticking exercise to prove compliance training has been attended or a briefing has been delivered. The advantage is that there is a clear audit trail to show that compliance managers have briefed employees, which also indemnifies the company. However, it places responsibility on employees to implement the changes without any real context. It fails to address any confusion and fear they have done so incorrectly and may be held accountable.

If you work in these areas and are struggling to get engagement it doesn't have to be like this. People learn best through stories and interactivity. You can make a participative game for your training, approached as an opportunity to inform rather than impose a list of punitive policies. Forward-thinking companies use the opportunity to demonstrate that compliance training is beyond a box-ticking exercise. They advise "it's good for everyone's long-term future – regulators, employees and customers. We are all in this together."

A well-crafted business game will help individuals grasp the consequences of their actions, reducing the risk of poor choices being repeated. Identifying the part they play in implementing the change, they're far less likely to feel intimidated and overwhelmed and much more likely to embrace the rules – resulting in less policing and better performance.

3 Improving sales performance through shared learning experiences

A sales person without managerial responsibilities can get by with sales acumen; prospecting, presenting, negotiating and closing deals.

But when promoted to sales manager, the skill-set needed is business acumen, rarely taught and trained. A sales manager has to balance company profit against customer value. Sales management is less about micro-managing individual deals and more about holistic plans for overseeing an entire business strategy, the sales manager's role is to guide and motivate others to make those plans succeed.

In cases where companies have restructured to serve a wider market or changed their sales model to sell into that market, a business simulation exercise provides an ideal vehicle of discovery for new skills the sales managers require. The exercise will have real, lasting effects, and offers a valuable framework for discussion, feedback and routes to future implementation.

Why Elgood? Helping clients back to front

Market leaders, Elgood have a 50-year track record of designing and facilitating bespoke experiential training solutions. They design unique learning solutions which work backwards from the client's predicament. From the initial meeting (free of charge), to the scoping meeting, prototyping, trial and test and final delivery, clients are free to continue, postpone or redefine the project to the budget and pace they prefer.

Experienced practitioners, Elgood are skilled in drawing out key learning priorities relevant to the important end result; engaged individuals and teams with time to reflect on what they have learned in all kinds of workplace settings, from sales conferences to recruitment events, training programmes to team meetings. Resulting in motivated people returning to their roles to start implementing the learning immediately.

Conclusion

This whitepaper shows that, in dealing with universal day-to-day or major transformational challenges, people learn most effectively by doing. It's proven that experiential learning bridges the gap between learning and practice in a safe, risk-free environment.

Elgood's approach is to develop tangible learning programmes uniquely tailored to the specific outcome the client requires. To find out how they have helped clients give their teams a truly interactive learning experience read our [case studies](#).

References

1. Slatter S, Lovett D, Barlow L (1996) Leading Corporate Turnaround : How Leaders Fix Troubled Companies

