Turning Learning Into Action

How to get more out of every training dollar

Reflection and Feedback

Essential training tools for individuals

Most people involved in learning and development are aware that reflection and feedback are essential components of adult learning.

Adult learning principles have been increasingly used by companies over the last two decades to improve the effectiveness of training. Their impact on the skills and knowledge component of training has been significant and led to the rise of accelerated learning principles, with different teaching styles being used depending on participants' learning preferences. However, an important component of implementing new skills is changing behaviour patterns. Participants are rarely assisted to make those changes after training, and are often not fully equipped to be aware of the common pitfalls.

Internal Feedback

People who have returned from a training course and are attempting to execute new processes or behaviours, often give themselves feedback in the form of 'internal dialogue.'

Typical internal dialogue responses that come through feedback or reflecting post a training course include:

- "I've not done as much as I should have done."
- "I should have done better than that."
- "I didn't do it as well as I did on the course."
- "I could remember it on the course but back at the desk it all seemed different."
- "I just couldn't get it right back in the work place."
- "What a disaster – I just couldn't remember how I was meant to do it."

- "How could I have been so stupid to get that wrong?"
- "It was easy in the course but now I just can't do it."
- "I'm not sure if I'm doing it right."

With this kind of self-talk the end result is that people frequently give up trying. They perceive that they are failing and are not good at the new process or will never master the new behaviour. They then layer on to this that it doesn't work for them or doesn't work in their particular work situation. In short, they give up practising or implementing what they have learnt, and go back to their old behaviour or way of doing things.

Failure - the Success Formula

One of the reasons I believe this happens is that most people have forgotten that **learning is often about making mistakes.**

When people say they love to learn it's often because they are driven by the desire for constant improvement and to do things better. To substitute this way of thinking with the phrase 'I love to fail' for most people would be difficult. However, in essence, learning is about failing along the way - it is part of the process.

I, alongside others, would be happy to refrain from using the word 'fail' here. There's no such thing as a failure, only a learning opportunity. However, what I am talking about here is the internal dialogue that we use unprompted in many learning situations.

Remember when you were a trainee or an apprentice. No one expected you to get everything right all the time, your main objective was to learn. As a successful

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employee, leader or manager, you are used to getting things right and don't enjoy performing below 100%.

When we are implementing a new skill we rarely get it right the first time that we try to use it back in the work place. This is the root of the problem. We rarely get something 100% right the first time we do it, yet our mindset is not adjusted to deal with this. Our mindset is that if we do not perform the task 100% correctly we have failed.

Learning from Children

The time in a person's life when he or she learns the most is in the developing years. Considering why it is easy to learn at this stage of life can give us some pointers as to what we need to address as adult learners.

Think of the attitude of a child as he or she learns to walk. It is one of curiosity, wonder, awe, excitement, and absolutely no fear. Think also of the role of the parents, which is to support and encourage. When the child falls after the first few steps the parents clap, cheer and celebrate, they never point out that the child fell (or failed). The feedback a child receives is totally supportive, and encourages him or her to keep trying.

So, when did we ever learn that failing is a bad thing? Certainly not at that wonderful stage of life.

Focusing on the Negative

Also, often when we seek feedback it stems from wanting to know what we did wrong. By asking "Can you give me some feedback on my presentation?" generally we are looking for advice on ways to improve, rather than to be told how great it was. We concentrate on the negative.

Habitual language is often the biggest barrier to overcome when changing the way we reflect and feedback to ourselves, consciously or unconsciously.
Words are very powerful and just a slight change of wording can make a dramatic change in the result or the quality of your thinking. For example using the review question "What did I do wrong today?" produces a very different response in the brain to one that asks "What could I have done differently today?"

I often hear clients saying "Oh, my god, it was a disaster, I did everything wrong." I challenge them to think this through from a distance. What does a true disaster look like? How many lives were lost? What was one small thing that did go right in the process?

Doing it Differently

So what can we do differently? Well, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

- Discuss with people while they are still training the challenges they may have back in the work place, in terms of feedback and reflection. It's an obvious problem, but if it's not discussed, it often goes unnoticed.

- Suggest the participants review their own performances as they would a trainee's, or someone new to a department. Most would never dream of speaking to others the way they speak to themselves.

- Remind the participants about a time when they were really into learning, perhaps as children. What was their attitude? Generally it is one of curiosity with no fear. If we had the same fears as a child that we have now, our learning progress would have been very slow. There was no fear of getting it wrong then because there were no dire consequences.

- Make sure that the participants receive positive feedback, and also pat themselves on the back. Imagine, for example, you are wearing a new shirt for the first time, and someone says "That's a great shirt, I really like it on you". This simple instance of positive feedback will probably mean you'll be sure to wear it again and no doubt soon. Feedback in this example is external but you can make a decision to make it internal.

Staying the Same

It's also important to raise awareness of the consequences of not changing the way the participants

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reflect and give feedback to themselves. If there is no behavioural change the participants will get little benefit from the training, which means wasted resources of time, money and skills. The results they get back in the work place will be the same as they were before they went on the training. If they do what they have always done, they'll get what they've always got.

The important outcome is to break the cycle by trying and failing. The participants need to learn to reflect how they are doing with implementing what they have learnt, to give themselves some positive and constructive feedback and then plan how to move forward.

Tools for Change

Six strategies you can encourage people to try are to:

- Keep a learning journal or a specific learning space in their diary, and asking themselves two specific questions every day: What worked really well today? What could I have done differently? Aim to have the 'what worked really well' comments double the 'what could I have done differently'.

- Make a specific time to review each day. If they really don't want to write notes choose the same time each day to at least mentally review. Many of my clients use the journey home from the office. Again ask the two key questions. What did I do really well today? What could I have done differently?

- Buddy up with a colleague they trust and respect to have a five minute self-review each day. Suggest they talk about their own progress while the other person just listens. It's important that the partner doesn't start offering judgment. They can use this as an exercise in learning to listen without offering their own opinion.

- Ask their colleagues to gently remind them when they are beating themselves up. Clients often ask their partners or friends to say something like "Um, sounds as if you're just being human to me" to gently remind them when they're stressing over not having got something right.

- Combat negative language. Catch themselves and become familiar with their personal habitual negative response. 'What a disaster! I did it all wrong' can be reframed as 'That was interesting! It didn't quite go as I intended'.

- Offer the feedback to themselves in the same manner that they would offer it to a person they were mentoring. What would you say? How would you say it? – bearing in mind that you are mentoring and want to motivate, encourage and get the best from the individual. The best way to experiment with this is by moving away from the desk and to a quiet area and reflect, as a mentor, just for five to ten minutes.

Through implementing some of the above strategies I believe people can raise the quality of the feedback and reflection they give themselves post a training course. I believe that you can reverse the trend of wasted training dollars and begin to maximise your investment. I wish you well as you take steps to turn learning within your organisation into action.

Emma Weber
Lever Learning Founder and Director

Lever Learning *is leading the field of learning transfer specialists who are supporting companies to meet their needs and* **turn learning into action**. *Lever Learning offers both advisory or implementation consultations, not offering training itself, but working alongside current training programs. Services include face to face briefings, telephone action sessions. Each service is tailored for the individual client. To talk to a* **Learning Transfer** *specialist to discuss your current training programs please call our office on 02 8221 8833 and ask to speak to Emma Weber.*

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