

**This note aims to prompt consideration of your organisation's approach to learning.**

## **Importance of learning**

Learning ability is a vital ingredient in organisational effectiveness – particularly how an organisation improves, innovates and rectifies any shortcomings. An organisation that doesn't learn well will suffer operationally, reputationally and financially, will be unattractive to both customers and employees, and may become subject to regulatory action.

## **How good is your organisation at enabling people to learn effectively?**

Critical issues include:

- the importance given to learning as an organisational priority – how is this reflected in terms of strategy, goals and measures of effectiveness?
- the understanding of learning as a process, and how to orchestrate it well, including how learning is integrated across three dimensions – individual, team and collective
- the accountability for learning results – deploying learning and making a difference
- how learning fosters better performance in the short, medium and long-term
- ensuring that learning is built into how you manage business relationships and processes, improvement and innovation – and not regarding it as an optional add-on.

People learn best when these critical factors are aligned (or are 'in flow') – organisational and personal goals, together with environments and methods that encourage learning.

## **Understanding learning...and turning it into practice**

If you asked your top executive team, and the governing board that supervises them, to articulate the key principles of good learning, how would they do? And how knowledgeable are members of the HR team, who should guide and support your managers and workforce?

And if there *is* good understanding, how well are these principles translated into practice?

## **Revolution or evolution at work?**

The increasing digitisation of work and communication requires people and organisations to learn how to work in different ways – both internally and with customers, suppliers, partners, media, regulators etc. Some are adapting well, but many are struggling.

Thus some employees find it easy to work with emerging technology – they share, collaborate and learn together naturally – and are in advance of their organisational leadership, and also their HR, Communications and IT departments. Others are more inhibited and reluctant to adopt new ways, particularly if their organisation has been slow to address silos and other constraints to innovation.

Yet the trend is clear – children and grandparents alike realise that answers to many questions are available within a few clicks, anywhere anytime. While scientifically, the way people learn is not different from several thousand years ago, the unique brainpower of humans allows them to adapt more quickly.

- Thus the dramatically changing communications environment is leading to a step-change in behaviour. This includes greater ability to learn and interact with other people, even strangers.
- The amount of knowledge now freely accessible has reduced the validity of old-fashioned push/control methods of management and training, forcing both company leaders and learning strategists to move towards ‘pull’ methods and self-help. Knowledge ‘management’ must give way to knowledge ‘enablement’.
- To stay efficient they need people who can be trusted to learn, resolve issues and effect improvements without waiting for bureaucratic wheels to whir.

### Focusing the learning agenda

Here are some of the important issues that should be on the agenda in order to be fit for the future

<b>LEARNING INGREDIENTS</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>QUESTIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS</b>
<b>Experiential learning</b>	Most of what we learn, from birth into adulthood, is acquired by experience.	How well are jobs designed and managed as added value learning opportunities (as well as for outputs)?  Is double-loop learning embedded in the way things are done?
<b>Informal learning</b>	Similarly, much more learning is derived informally rather than through formal ‘training’.	How thoroughly has the 70/20/10 concept been interpreted and enacted?  How well resourced is informal learning?
<b>Responsibility for learning</b>	To maximise learning for the mutual advantage of both individuals and organisations, accountabilities need to be allocated.	How clearly articulated (and enacted) are the respective responsibilities of individuals, teams, managers, top executives, HR and learning specialists?

		How well does the organisation ensure that business goals interconnect with its investment in learning?
<b>Learning context, culture</b>	Physical and cultural environments both help to determine the quality of learning. Leaders are responsible for these factors organisation-wide, and managers for the atmosphere in their teams.	How effective is organisation design in maximising learning performance?  How accountable are leaders/managers for the quality of learning context?  How well is learning built in to operational processes, communications, and meetings?
<b>Feedback</b>	Feedback is recognised as even more important than formal training in developing confident performers. Yet obtaining good feedback is often a struggle.	How well developed are the culture and practices for ensuring good feedback from managers, colleagues, juniors and coaches?  How well supported are feedback systems in terms of management priority and investment?
<b>Learning from mistakes</b>	Recognising shortcomings and errors is key to learning (inc. using feedback). Success comes from identifying and practising what works, and stopping what doesn't. A punitive approach encourages concealment, and discourages accountability, initiative and improvement.	How well do you strike the balance between avoiding and mistakes and encouraging experimentation?  Are mistakes used as positive learning and improvement opportunities?  Do people feel confident in admitting errors?
<b>Focusing on strengths</b>	People perform best when they work on what they are good at. Feedback is most effective when at least as much time is spent on achievement as on any shortcomings.	How good is the organisation at using people for their strengths, and in recognising achievement? How effective are feedback practices in motivating performance, improvement and commitment?
<b>Relevance</b>	Learning processes and content must be relevant to users' needs, but in a context of absolute clarity	Do you co-create learning practices and content with users? Have you developed high quality content

	<p>about organisational priorities.</p> <p>Well-focused users are best placed to determine 'when, where, what'.</p>	<p>curation capability?</p> <p>Are people given good opportunities to practice what they have learnt?</p> <p>Are understanding learners' needs, and facilitating deployment of learning, core requirements for managers?</p>
<b>Latitude of learning</b>	Ensuring a blend of varied development methods is deployed.	Are the varied methods of development deployed and evaluated in an integrated way, and tailored to needs?
<b>Longitude of learning</b>	Learning is continuous from when employees join until they leave.	Are learning relationships managed on an end-to-end basis, from pre-employment to becoming 'alumni'?
<b>Digital capability</b>	Ability to think and work effectively in the digital workplace.	<p>How well are people with varied technological skills and orientation helped to work harmoniously?</p> <p>How well does your technology infrastructure support learning and collaboration, and ensure security does not compromise productivity?</p>
<b>Reflection</b>	Absorption often requires time to consider, particularly in accepting change, generating ideas.	In a speeding-up and task-focused world, how do you ensure time for reflection?
<b>Role modelling</b>	People follow the tone set by leaders/managers.	How good are organisational role models in learning, sharing and inspiring improvement? How well developed are managers' coaching skills?

This list is not exhaustive. Please feel free to share your own insights and experience with other CRF members via the CRF website ([www.crforum.co.uk](http://www.crforum.co.uk)).