



CRF DIGITAL COMMUNITY EVENT

ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT, CULTURE AND CHANGE

On 7th October, members of CRF's Organisation Development, Culture and Change Community gathered for a Peer Exchange Forum. At the session, members discussed how adults learn, positive and negative formative experiences as an OD practitioner, and what's required to be an effective practitioner. This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.



HOW ADULTS LEARN

CRF's Grace Whelan began the session by sharing insights from her research into how adults learn.

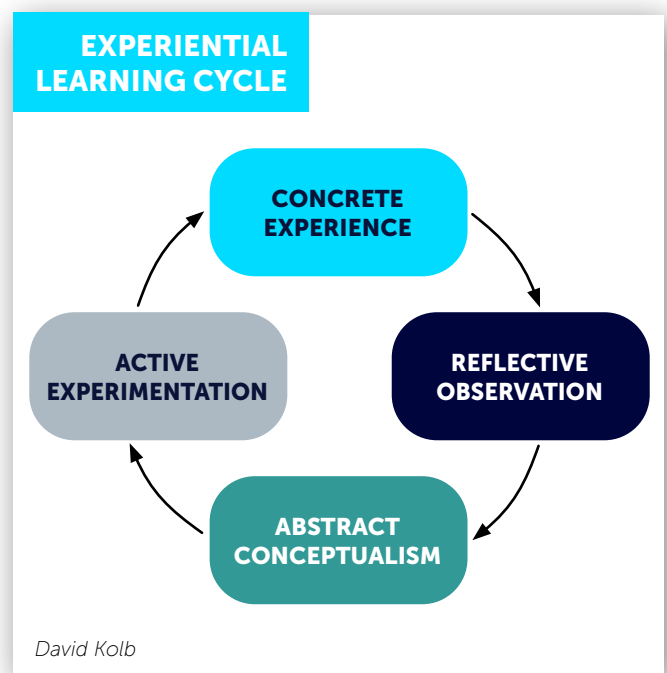
She cited Malcolm Knowles' assumptions about adult learning:

- **Self-concept** refers to the shift from being dependent on others for learning (as a child) to more self-directed learning as an adult.
- **The adult learner experience** involves looking back and reflecting on prior experiences. It includes the opportunity to learn from one's mistakes.
- **Readiness to learn** refers to the immediate relevance of learning – this type of learning holds the most appeal for adults.
- **Orientation to learning** reflects the shift from content-centred to problem-centred learning as we become adults. Adults often learn things for specific, practical reasons and for immediate application.
- **Motivation to learn** shifts over time. Children have external motivations for learning (they are told to learn in formal settings), while adults are more internally motivated – for example, being motivated to learn in order to better one's self or career prospects.

These assumptions generate four principles for adult learning:

- Adults should be involved in the design of learning.
- Experiences should serve as the foundation for learning.
- Content should focus on relevance and quick implementation.
- Learning should be problem-centred rather than content-oriented. (Think of senior leaders developing people by giving them genuine enterprise problems to solve).

Grace closed by sharing David Kolb's experiential learning cycle. In this cycle, learning moves around a loop, from concrete experience, to reflective observation, to abstract conceptualisation, and finally to abstract experimentation, which is the stage at which learners apply principles and patterns.



Grace Whelan's session slides are available upon request.



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COMMUNITY MEMBERS REFLECTION AND EXPERIENCES

What positive formative experiences have helped you to become an effective OD practitioner?

- **Being involved in big organisational change programmes.** This requires practitioners to consider a systemic approach in terms of what they are trying to achieve; you have to balance the needs of the organisation and the needs of individuals – systems thinking overlaid with human dynamic models.
- **Learning by doing.** Often, the practitioner can be too busy with other stuff to learn in an abstract way. Learning by doing is therefore crucial. It is also important to know where to look for stuff – networks are a great tool for gaining access to knowledge and to other practitioners and their insights.
- **Involving large numbers of people.** The more people you can involve the better, in terms of organisation design. This can make the difference between compliance and commitment.

What negative formative experiences have helped you to become an effective OD practitioner?

- **Being pushed to do more than just ask questions.** Chief executives want solutions, not to be told what won't work. OD practitioners have to learn how to get things done pragmatically – asking questions has to be balanced with provision of solutions.
- **Navigating the gap between what senior leaders say they want and what they actually want.** This is a very challenging situation. It requires that OD practitioners be in a position to hold the mirror up effectively. However, it can be difficult to have the courage and credibility to do this.

Have you had formal development in OD?

- Few of the community members at the session have had formal development in OD. Taking courses or attending summits is the exception, though they can provide value. The Ashridge Executive Team Coaching course was cited for its value in networking, sharing models, and helping attendees learn how to break down silos. Generally, there is a tendency to hold models lightly, ensuring they are applicable to the team and organisation one is working with. For many, frameworks are most useful in the early days, providing a mental checklist or guardrails. With experience and growth, they become less useful to the practitioner, because so much of the work is context-driven.
- The Center for Effective Organisations at the University of Southern California is a useful source of research and thinking, though some academics are more helpful than others.
- McKinsey and BCG are consistently helpful with respect to organisational effectiveness practice. Rich in data and evidence, they blend systemic and behavioural approaches.
- Formal and informal peer networks are an excellent resource for finding knowledge and experience.
- Informal learning is the main way that OD practitioners learn. Learning from failure, and learning through the experience of doing different roles at different times are rich veins for learning. Learning from different roles allows the practitioner to collect those experiences and bring them together into rounded solutions – you can then solve organisational problems from a number of different angles.



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What learning do you want to pass on to other OD practitioners?

- OD practitioners need to ensure they are looking at more abstract things because few other people in the organisation are likely to be doing so.
- It is useful for practitioners to keep abreast of developments in neuroscience and social science.
- Networks are very important. They spread ideas and offer space to sense-check ideas, gain ideas and learn about the experiences of other people. This is critical in today's complex world. Networks also provide the opportunity to look across industries. This exposure to different contexts can make for great learning.
- It's good to 'know enough about the business context to be dangerous'. In this way, practitioners can help leaders frame the conversation and ask the right questions. This is where practitioners really provide their value.
- Theoretical underpinnings are essential to operating effectively, but equally individual skill is important – your ability to listen effectively and step back. The OD practitioner is the biggest change agent. As such, he or she needs to be effective as an individual in challenging, questioning, and supporting others.
- Some people struggle with the purely conceptual; it's always important to balance observations and theory against practice.
- OD thinking is never simplistic but it has to be deployed in a simple manner. Perhaps we can learn from digital and mobile deployment.
- OD practitioners operate in a context of complexity, often at a high speed of change. They need to challenge, and to apply concepts in order to simplify organisations. Data can help bring consistency to the analysis, design, planning, and management of complex organisational problems. With data and transparency, you risk being driven by politics and personality.
- Sometimes OD practitioners are better at reflecting than drawing conclusions. There needs to be regular 'post-match analysis', not just of failures but of successes too.

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2019. **A Primer on Adult Learning.** <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/primer-adult-learning>

CRF. 2019. **Organisation Development Manifesto.** <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/organisation-development-manifesto>

CRF. 2015. **Leadership Development – Is It Fit For Purpose?** pp24 31. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/leadership-development-is-it-for-for-purpose>

crflearning



ON DEMAND:

[Building a High-Performance Culture](#)

Performance is the most fundamental requirement for any business, and yet when topic is raised, we spend most of our energy in redesigning performance appraisal systems – with little evidence that changes here truly affect performance. Our On Demand programme [Building a High-Performance Culture](#) encourages learners to consider performance at the organisational level, then performance culture and how to develop it, before finally considering the performance appraisal process.

In this interactive learning programme, we look at the pitfalls of performance management and the emerging trends and the role of HR in driving and enabling performance.