



## Harnessing the Power of Experiential Learning

A simple straw poll of any group of senior executives shows us that our companies and corporations are being led by very well educated groups of people. A significant proportion of the people in the room will have a degree and a large number will have obtained a post graduate qualification of some kind. When asked about more recent training, many will be able to recall the company run management training programmes that they attended in the earlier days of their careers, and some will talk about classes they have attended to learn about developments in their areas of professional expertise.

However, when asked what their current personal development plans are most will shrug their shoulders and admit that, despite requiring it of the people who work for them, they don't have any current plans because they are too busy dealing with the ever increasing and complex problems they face leading their parts of the organisation. The unfortunate reality is that most senior executives are relying heavily on old, and sometimes outdated, learning, and don't have either the time or the motivation to attend classroom-based development programmes that take them away from business critical issues.

### Experiential learning cycle

Of course, this does not mean that senior executives are not continuing to learn. David Kolb's seminal work on experiential learning in the 1980s (*Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*) taught us that we continuously learn through a four-stage cycle of; Concrete Observation > Reflective Observation > Abstract Conceptualisation > Active Experimentation. In other words, we see something, we think about it, we consider how we might apply it to our situation and we try it – we learn through experience.

This process works well for managers in their early careers as a lot of what they are observing is new and presents them with a multitude of opportunities to further their learning and development. However, as time progresses less and less of what managers observe can appear to be new, no new insights are regularly introduced, and they begin to do things the way they always have because it has worked in the

## An Argument for Moving Back to Experiential On-The-Job Learning

In a recent EFDM [article](#) Charles Jennings argues that we need to move away from the 'confinement' model of learning that was developed in Prussia during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and has become the dominant corporate training model since the second world war, to one that is less confining and re-establishes the link between learning and its application.

Furthermore, he believes that the profusion of new communication technologies and applications built upon them has opened up opportunities for workplace learning that simply have not existed previously.

To read Charles' article, click [here](#).

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## Demystifying Mentoring

When people think of mentoring, they often think of an older executive counselling a junior colleague. Whilst this may have been a correct perception in the past, Amy Gallo argues in a recent HBR [article](#) that mentoring has changed a lot in the last few decades, as has the 50-year linear career with a single company.

In her article she discusses the four most popular myths about mentoring and argues that knowing the truth about them can help you figure out who best to turn to and how.

To read Amy's article, click [here](#).

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## Sustained Change Requires Mindset Change

In a recent Formicio article Peter Turgoose argues that sustained change is unlikely to happen if sufficient attention is not given to changing peoples' mindsets; the assumptions, methods or systems held by one or more people or groups of people. In many cases they are so established that they create a powerful incentive to continue to adopt or accept prior behaviours, choices or tools.

It could also be argued that true learning only occurs when mindsets change and that we all have a responsibility to seek more powerful

past. In the worst case scenario, when managers face a new situation that all of their past learning and experience has not equipped them with strategies to deal with, they revert to old tried and tested strategies that are inappropriate and lead to ineffective outcomes.

### **Powerful learning experiences**

When a group of senior executives are asked to describe their most powerful learning experiences, ones where they feel they have really grown as a result, it is very rare for them to cite their time in further education, their attendance at a conference or even a training course. In most cases senior executives refer to a time when they successfully faced a challenging situation that took them out of their comfort zone and stretched them both intellectually and emotionally. They will often refer back to the fact that they were learning with others whilst delivering something important, and that there was someone who was guiding them along the way.

To read my full article in which I discuss the categories and conditions for successful experiential learning, click [here](#).

I welcome your thoughts.

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and effective ways of knowing when and how to change mindsets, including our own.

To read Peter's article, click [here](#).

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### **About Formicio**

[Formicio](#) is an independent consultancy bringing impartial advice and fresh insights to business and technology leaders around the world.

We develop critical organisational capabilities through our experiential learning programmes, and through our consulting we help clients become more innovative, succeed with the most complex transformation programmes and equip their IT organisations to meet the challenges ahead.

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### **Parting Thought**

“A desk (and a conference room) are dangerous places to view (manage) the world.”

John Le Carre, 1931-