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Hive Learning

Mini eBook:

Beyond Books: How Behavioral Learning Shapes L&D

Beyond Training: How Systems and Behavior Shape L&D

Part 2

July 2024

Introduction

In Part 1 of this eBook, we explored behavioral learning theory and its application to L&D. But the real work often begins before we even sit down to create these learning interventions. This second part looks at the importance of understanding systems and behavior, especially during the discovery and Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) phase, to ensure that our L&D efforts are genuinely effective. And what's more exciting, it's all from our special guest contributor: Chris Hall, Digital Manager - Professional Development and Knowledge at Macmillan.

The Importance of Understanding Systems and Behavior

Part 1 of the eBook discusses how L&D can use behavioral learning theory when creating learning, but there are so many implications this has before sitting down and creating learning interventions.

All too often, L&D teams rush into solutions mode and have things up their sleeves or in their back pockets that are their go-to's, or that have "worked" somewhere before. But every environment and its challenges, quirks and nuances are different. What works in one context, won't work in another. Lifting and shifting doesn't work, no matter how many times you try it.

The one vital step many L&D teams miss in their haste to please is the crucial step they need to undertake to truly change behaviors and make a real impact – discovery. In Natal Dank's work on Agile in L&D, she explains the importance of taking time at the start of any project to understand the environment and what you need to focus on to make the biggest impact.

Understanding all the incentives at play

Training requests or performance issues that come to L&D usually happen because someone, or a team, isn't meeting the expected standards. Therefore, the first step in the design and creation of any learning initiative is to understand why. Why aren't they doing what they're supposed to be doing? What's the route cause the problem?

Very rarely is the cause of performance problems solely down to a lack of knowledge or understanding. Instead, it's likely to be a combination of poorly designed and implemented systems, ways of working and incentives. To understand why people are performing a certain way, it's important to look at all the incentives in their system. Then, see if these incentives are helping the desired behaviors or encouraging different ones.

Example – NHS waiting time targets

My wife works for the NHS as a Senior Physiotherapist, and her team have a long wait time for follow-up appointments. It's not because they don't know that follow-up appointments are important, instead, it's because they've been set clear targets on first visits and initial appointments. So, to meet these targets, the initial appointments are prioritized. It's not a learning issue, but an issue with the targets and incentives.

So, training her team on the importance of follow-up visits, but then returning them to an environment where first visits are prioritized and incentivized, won't fix the problem. If anything, it will only lead to greater frustration and low morale among the staff who have been trained. They will become more aware of how important follow-ups are, but the organization will still be telling them that first visits are more important!

James Clear's Perspective on Systems

A learning intervention won't change behaviors on its own unless the systems in which the learners operate are also changed to encourage and reward the new desired behaviors. James Clear, in his work around habit forming in Atomic Habits, emphasizes that effective change relies heavily on the environment and systems in place. He pointed out that "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

This means that no matter how strong the learning is or how clear the goals are, if the systems and incentives don't support the desired behaviors, meaningful change is unlikely to happen.
Only when you understand the system you're operating in and why these behaviors are manifesting themselves, can you hope to make any meaningful change.

Example – Sales Team's Bonus Structures lead to a lack of sharing opportunities

A sales team was struggling with behaviors that affected their ability to win certain contracts. Their team had specialists who were experts and selling to certain sectors such as the Healthcare and Education sectors, but these experts weren't being used to help win work with prospective customers in these sectors. Instead, members of the sales team weren't sharing their leads and were keeping them to themselves.

A closer look at the problem revealed that the behavior was directly caused by the incentives and bonuses given to the sales team. If salespeople shared their leads with an expert who then secured the sale, the initiator didn't receive any commission. This meant there was no individual incentive to share opportunities, as it could result in missing out on commission. In this case, changing the incentives to share commission when opportunities were shared across the team would be more effective in changing behaviors than training alone.

Once you've completed a detailed discovery stage, you should know the areas you need to focus on to have the greatest impact, and in turn, you should have a series of objectives for your work before you start designing your solutions.

When crafting your objectives, consider what you want people to: do differently, know differently, or behave differently as a result of your learning intervention.

Having clear goals for your intervention will help determine the best solutions to use. Different goals (knowledge, skills, behaviors) need different approaches. This is why it's important to have a variety of tools. What works for teaching knowledge might not work for developing skills or changing behaviors.

Skill Building and Memory Systems

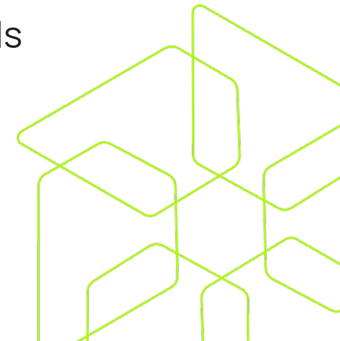
It's important at this stage that we understand the difference between knowledge acquisition, skill building and behavior change. These are all common features of learning outcomes and often the same solution is attempted to solve two, or even all three of these types of learning.

The challenge here though is that we're dealing with different memory systems which require different approaches to encode and store, and then retrieve and use at the point of need. There's a reason Malcolm Gladwell discusses his 10,000 hours of practice rule in his book Outliers – it's not 10,000 hours of reading or watching, but 10,000 hours of meaningful practice required to become an expert.

Knowledge transfer can be done by a range of resources, whether it's delivered in a lecture, watched in a video format, read as text or a briefing, or listened to as a podcast or broadcast. But facts and figures (knowledge) sit in a different memory system than skills and task execution. It's declarative vs. non-declarative memory.

Whereas to build skills, as Malcolm Gladwell hinted at earlier, you need to include meaningful practice – and I don't just mean poorly written multiple choice questions. But actual practice scenarios that mirror their real-life experiences either in a classroom, virtual classroom or digital learning scenario.

You could delve deeply into this topic on its own, but the key point is that different memory systems require different tools to help us encode and retrieve these memories successfully.



Affective Context Model and Emotional Engagement

Nick Shackleton-Jones' is a strong advocate of the Affective Context Model. This model suggests that we remember events and information based on our emotional reactions to them. That's why we often recall moments that caused strong emotions.

What does this mean for our learning initiatives? If we want people to learn about something that doesn't interest them, we need to add an emotional context to it. We need to make them care about what they're learning. If they're already passionate about the topic, our job is easier. But if it's something less engaging, like data protection, we need to find creative ways to make it interesting and relevant to them.

There are two ways we can increase the affectiveness of something, firstly we can create an emotionally affective experience, something which brings emotion into play rather than just focusing simply on knowledge and knowing things. Do you know the scene in Good Will Hunting where Robin Williams and Matt Damon are sitting on a park bench? Robin Williams tells him that he feels sorry for him because he's never left Boston and all he's ever learned has been from books. And he says:

"So if I asked you about art you'd probably give me the skinny on every art book ever written. Michelangelo? You know a lot about him. Life's work, political aspirations, him and the pope, the whole works, right? But I bet you can't tell me what it smells like in the Sistine Chapel. You've never actually stood there and looked up at that beautiful ceiling."

For me, this scene perfectly explains the difference between knowledge and experience, the difference between a superficial understanding of something and a true depth of experience.

The Power of Storytelling

The second way we can make something more affective is through telling compelling and engaging stories. Interestingly, going back to the memory aspect, there's a reason the specific memory of that scene from Good Will Hunting bubbles up in my mind more than others.

I can remember it so much more vividly than something I watched just two days ago because it affected me emotionally. Our brains deal with so much information every minute of every day that it's often hard to determine what is important and worth remembering versus what is trivial and can be forgotten without harm.

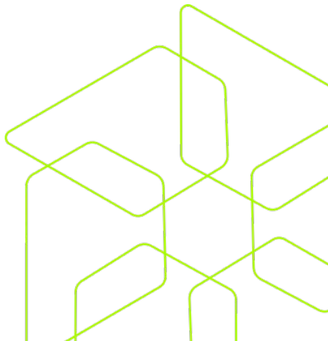
One of the best indicators to our brains that something is important is our emotional response. If something affects us emotionally, our brain assumes it must be important and is more likely to remember it. For example, you only need to burn your finger on an oven door once to know not to touch it again. But you could be like me and reach the age of 43 without being certain how to spell "necessary" without a spell checker. The burn really hurt, so my brain made sure to remember it, while the spelling error is relatively harmless, so a close guess is good enough.

This is why getting good at storytelling is so important for people who create learning content. Stories have a special effect on us and our brains; we light up when we're told stories and tend to learn a lot more from them.

One of the mantras I try to instil in my teams of instructional designers is:

"Make it personal. Personal is powerful".

So if you want to get people to learn, make sure it's emotionally engaging and try to use storytelling too.



Conclusion

Effective Learning and Development goes beyond designing good learning programs. It begins with a deep understanding of the systems and behaviors within the organization.

By thoroughly analyzing the needs, redesigning systems to align with desired behaviors, and employing emotionally engaging methods like storytelling, we can create L&D initiatives that lead to meaningful and lasting change.

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Curious to see how these principles can be put into practice?

Speak to someone at Hive Learning for more insights to help you shape effective L&D strategies that truly make a difference.