Role of Human Resource Management in Learning and Development: Exploring Learning Theories and Styles

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Abstract

The need for skills development is important for all employees no matter which stage of career they are at the moment. One of the most popular upcoming human resource (HR) trends is expected to be the drive for constant learning. In order to achieve this, it is crucial for any organization that wants to grow to provide learning opportunities to all employees. Through learning, employees can improve their skills and give their best while working simultaneously. According to the task at hand, an employee can take up any desired skill to learn to aid his understanding as well as to prepare him for upcoming challenges. An in-depth comprehensive view of how people learn is necessary if learning is to take place effectively. The different ways in which people in general learn – learning theory, describes how individuals learn – their learning styles, and also how the people are 'learning to learn'. The practical implications of these theories, concepts and approaches need to be understood in order to design learning systems. Human resource management plays a significant role in designing learning systems according to the current need of the employees.

Keywords: affective learning, discretionary learning, experiential learning, cognitive learning, human resource

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Most employees at HR services may have generalist jobs where the focus is on many areas, or specialist jobs which focus on specific elements of HR. An HR manager's job is much beyond only recruiting suitable candidates for the posts in a company; solving any grievances that the employees may have or making sure that the candidates are properly settled into their new jobs is also something that an HR manager should show concern towards. Education and training functions also should be prioritized in any organization. A modern organization won't get far without consistently training and developing its employees. Also, from the employees' perspective, learning should be a continuous process in order to upgrade and be at par with the latest technologies and developments.

Learning has been defined as the process of increasing one's capacity to take action (Kim, 1993). It can be described as the modification of behaviour through experience (Armstrong, 2009). Learning is an increase in knowledge or a higher degree of an existing skill, whereas development is more towards a different state of functioning or being (Pedler et al., 1989).

Learning is not simply having a new insight or a new idea. Learning occurs when we take effective action, when we detect and correct error. How do you know when you know something? When you can produce what it is you claim to know. (Argyris, 1993, p.3)

Learning can be categorized into various types; *instrumental learning* is learning how to do the job better once the basic standard of performance has been attained. It is helped by learning on-the-job. While the outcomes of *cognitive learning* are based on the enhancement of knowledge and understanding, the outcomes of *affective learning* are based on the development of attitudes or feelings rather than knowledge. *Self-reflective learning* is the development of new patterns of understanding, thinking and behaving and therefore creating new knowledge.

Learning is complex and varied encompassing everything from knowledge, skills and insights to beliefs, attitudes and habits (Honey, 1998). Individuals learn by themselves as well as

from others, by doing, by instruction and by their interaction with their managers, co-workers and people outside the organization. The ways in which individuals learn will differ and the extent to which they learn will depend largely on how well they are both, intrinsically and extrinsically, motivated.

Discretionary learning can take place when individuals are determined to actively seek to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to carry out their work effectively. It should be encouraged and espoused. The values and principles of the organization also play a critical role as the effectiveness of learning are strongly influenced by the context in which it takes place.

For effective learning to take place at the individual level, it is essential to foster an environment where individuals are encouraged to take risks and experiment, where mistakes are tolerated, but where means exist for those involved to learn from their experiences. (Birchall & Lyons, 1995).

Learning Theories

In general, every learning theory focuses on varying aspects of the learning process of an individual, the main areas of importance being reinforcement, cognitive learning; experiential learning and social learning.

Reinforcement Theory

Reinforcement theory is based on the work of Skinner (1974) which expresses the belief that changes in behaviour take place as a result of an individual's response to events or stimuli and the ensuing consequences (rewards or punishments). Individuals can be 'conditioned' to repeat the behaviour by positive reinforcement in the form of feedback and knowledge of results. This process is known as 'operant conditioning'. (Armstrong, 2009).

Later, Gagne's stimulus-response theory associated the process of learning to factors like: *drive* (a basic need or determination to learn), *stimulus* (incitement by the learning process), *response* (development of appropriate responses that will lead to an effectual operation) and

reinforcement (fortification of responses through feedback and experience until they are learnt) (Gagne, 1977).

Cognitive Learning Theory

This has to do with the attainment of knowledge and its comprehension by the assimilation and incorporation of principles, notions and information. Learners can be regarded as powerful information processing machines (Armstrong, 2009).

Experiential Learning Theory

According to Reynolds et al. (2002), people are active instruments of self-learning. As the name suggests, individuals learn through the reflection of their experiences by personal incorporation of meaning. Supporters of the constructivist theory are of the opinion that experiential learning is augmented through facilitation that stimulates learners to make optimal use of their experience (Rogers, 1983).

Social Learning Theory

It is essential that learners participate collaboratively with others of shared expertise as socialization or social interaction is integral to effective learning (Wenger, 1998; Bandura, 1977)

Learning Styles

A learning style is a learner's individualistic approach to learning. The two most popular classifications of learning styles are:

Kolb's Learning Style Inventory

Kolb et al. (1974) identified a learning cycle comprises of four stages namely *concrete experience* (that is either planned or accidental), *reflective observation* (active deliberation about the experience and its implication), *abstract conceptualization* (development of perceptions that arise from generalizing experiences, to be applied when similar situations are encountered) and

active experimentation (testing one's newly formed perceptions in fresh circumstances). This process gives birth to a new concrete experience and the cycle continues (Armstrong, 2009).

This is an austere description of how experience is transformed into perceptions that are then used to channel the choice of new experiences. In order to learn effectively, individuals must become active participants from passive spectators, from direct involvement to a more objective analytical detachment (Armstrong, 2009). From this, it is clear that learning takes place effectively when the learning environment leans toward being more learner-centered than instructor-centered and instructors accommodate their approaches to the learning styles of trainees.

Kolb also defined learning styles of learners as: a*ccommodators (*who learn by trial and error, combining the concrete experience and experimentation), d*ivergers (*who prefer concrete to abstract learning and reflection to active involvement; as a result they have a high imaginative power and are able to perceive the same situation from different standpoints), c*onvergers (*who choose to experiment to gauge the practicality of their ideas, hence combining the abstract and experimental aspects) and a*ssimilators (*who prefer designing their own theoretical models to integrate a number of distinct observations into an overall amalgamated explanation, hence steering towards the reflective and abstract components) (Armstrong, 2009).

Honey and Mumford Learning Style

Honey and Mumford (1996) identified four styles of learning, namely: *activists (*who indulge fully, unbiased, in new experiences and experiments), *reflectors* (who examine new experiences from different points of view and accordingly, analyze and draw conclusions), *theorists* (who display the characteristics of perfectionists when they apply their logical theories) and *pragmatists* (who are open to the idea of experimentation of new ideas, approaches and concepts to see if they work) (Armstrong, 2009).

Learning to Learn

It is crucial to understand, as a trainer, that these learning patterns of trainees aren't unique or constant and may change from time to time. Learning styles also aren't independent of each other which may result in learners displaying a combination of two or more learning styles. Trainers can use the information on learning theories as a yardstick to design learning and development programmes, to accordingly adapt to the learning style of the trainees. Effective and good quality learning will take place when individuals 'learn how to learn'. As defined by Honey (1998), the process of learning to learn is the achievement of knowledge, skills and views about the learning process itself (Armstrong, 2009).

Motivation to Learn

The factor that drives one to learn and attain new knowledge is the underlying motivation, which may be intrinsic or extrinsic. A person's self-motivation is very important to steer him towards the attainment of his goal, in this case, the attainment of the expected learning objectives. Surprisingly, people of all ages vastly depend on motivation in order to achieve their ambitions. Even as teachers at educational institutions are instructed to use positive reinforcement and encouraging speech to motivate their students, human resource managers are expected to do the same and much more, as corporate environment settings mostly have non-obvious prejudices and may result in some persons or groups of persons to feel discouraged and lesser favoured in comparison with other employees. Learning and development opportunities to be provided to all, in accordance with their post and designation in the company and HR managers should act as the facilitators in a corporate setting. So if employees are expected to ace their skills and upgrade their knowledge continually, extrinsic motivation is much needed.

Constructive feedback is expected from HR managers from time to time that will help the employee analyze his strengths and weaknesses and work on his shortcomings. As Reynolds et al. (2002) observe, 'The disposition and commitment of the learner – their motivation to learn – is one of the most critical factors affecting training effectiveness. Under the right conditions, a strong disposition to learn, enhanced by solid experience and a positive attitude, can lead to exceptional performance.'

Goal-directed behaviour is driven by the expectation of achieving something the individual regards as favourable and beneficial which inclines him to pursue it. An individual will understand the worth of the learning process when his expectations are fulfilled. Their intrinsic motivation is higher when individuals aim to achieve specific, acceptable, and although difficult, achievable goals and when there is feedback on performance. Expected learning outcomes should either be set or individuals may set on their own.

Conclusion

Employee training and development is the subsystem of an organization and core function of human resource management. It ensures continuous skill development of employees working in organization and familiarizes the process of learning for developing knowledge to work. Imparting training and development to employees through various methods is the foundation for obtaining quality output from employees. If employees struggle to perform well in certain areas, learning and development can help to improve their performance and further help advancing the organization towards its long-term goals.

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