

## Introducing the learning log

As you journey with us, you will encounter a number of different learning situations in your work or community role. At the end point, most action learners will think that it has been an enjoyable and useful experience, a few might have different views. Why might this happen? In part at least, it is because different people have different ways of learning. If the action learning journey offers them plenty of their preferred type of experience, they are likely to enjoy it and to learn from it.

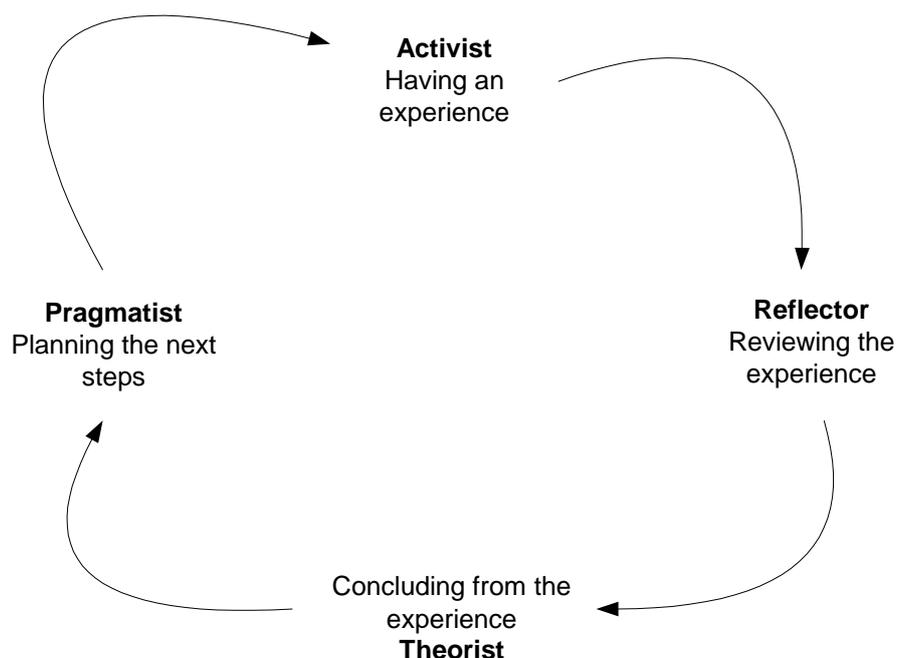
As the individual learning preferences of different members of the group will affect how they respond to different experiences and opportunities, it prompts some questions: How ready they are to learn from them? How difficult (or easy) it is for them to learn from them? and How well they learn from them? Although it will be impossible to please all of the group all of the time, if you understand that there are different types of learner, you will be better able to help your colleagues to derive the maximum benefit from the pathway. By understanding that you too have a preferred learning style, and finding out what it is, you will be in a better position to understand the strengths and weaknesses of group members with different styles from your own. You will also understand why they respond to you as they do. The person who never looks enthusiastic and never seems to want to speak may be learning just as much as his or her neighbour, but may simply be a 'reflector' who does not wish to commit him or herself too hurriedly.

### What do we mean by learning?

You know that learning has taken place, when you know something which you did not know before and can show it and/or you are able to do something which you were not able to do before.

### The learning cycle

There are many ideas about how people learn. One interesting view was developed by David Kolb, who depicted learning in the form of a cycle.



Although a learner might move through these stages, the reality is that we not equally at home at all stages of the cycle. Most of us show marked preferences for one or more of the stages and sometimes positive dislike of one of the others. Honey and Mumford identified four different preferences, or ways in which people prefer to learn, each related to a different stage of the learning cycle. These preferred learning styles they called activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist. Some people are happiest operating in just one mode, others in two or even three. For managers, the preferred learning style tends to reflect their own managerial style.

## Preferred styles of learning

### Activists

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to focus on immediate experiences. They are open-ended rather than sceptical and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new. Their philosophy is 'I will try anything once'. Their days are filled with activity. They tackle problems by brainstorming. As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down, they are busy looking for the next. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer-term consolidation. They are gregarious people, constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they seek to make themselves the centre of all activities. Activists learn best from novel experiences, from being encouraged to 'have a go' and from being thrown into things. They enjoy relatively short 'here and now' learning activities like business games and competitive team exercises. Activists learn least well from passive situations like reading, watching or listening to lectures, particularly those on concept or theory. They do not enjoy solitary work, repetitive tasks, situations which require detailed preparation, or being asked to review their learning opportunities and achievements.

### Reflectors

Reflectors like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first-hand and from others, and prefer to analyze them thoroughly and think about them from every possible angle before coming to any definite conclusions. These they postpone as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious. They enjoy watching other people in action and prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They think before they speak. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant, unruffled air about them. When they act, it is part of a wider picture, which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own. Reflectors learn best from activities where they are able to stand back, listen and observe. They like to have a chance to collect information and be given time to think about it before commenting or acting. They like to review what has happened. Reflectors learn least well when they are rushed into things with insufficient data or without time to plan, when they are forced into the limelight by being required to role-play or chair a meeting, or when asked to take short cuts or do a superficial job.

### Theorists

Theorists like to analyze and synthesize. They assimilate and convert disparate facts and observations into coherent, logical theories. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic above all. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step, logical way. They tend to be perfectionists who will not rest easy until things are tidy and fit into a rational scheme. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking. They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity. They feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, ambiguity, lateral thinking and anything flippant. Theorists learn best when they are offered a system, model, concept or theory, even when the application is not clear and the ideas may be distant from current reality. They like to work in structured situations with a clear purpose, and are allowed to explore associations and interrelationships, to question assumptions and logic and to analyze reasons and generalize. They like to be intellectually stretched. Theorists learn least well when asked to do something without apparent purpose, when activities are unstructured and ambiguous and when emotion is emphasized. They do not learn well when faced with activities lacking depth, when data to support the subject are unavailable, and when they feel 'out of tune' with the rest of the group.

### Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from management courses bursting with new ideas which they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with things, and act quickly and confidently on ideas which attract them. They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions. They are essentially practical, down-to-earth people, who like making practical decisions and solving problems. They respond to problems and opportunities 'as a challenge' Their philosophy is 'There is always a better way' and 'If it works, it is good.'

Pragmatists learn best when there is an obvious link between the subject matter and their current job. They like being exposed to techniques or processes which are clearly practical, have immediate relevance and which they are likely to have the opportunity to implement. Pragmatists learn least well where there are no immediate benefits or rewards from the activity and the learning events or their organisers seem distant from reality.

Most practitioners claim to learn from experience but not all practitioners have the same motivation to learn. They may not have a working environment which encourages learning and their own preferred styles of learning might not fit the kind of work experience in which they are engaged.

## The learning log

Keeping a learning log book can help you to identify useful learning experiences and develop your own learning so that you can see ways of taking appropriate, personal action. At work, it will also help you to be more effective. Many factors influence our ability to learn. Here for example, is a list of some of the skills we need to develop to become an effective action learner:

The ability to: Identify your own learning needs; Plan personal learning; Establish effectiveness criteria for yourself; Measure your effectiveness; Listen to others; Take advantage of learning opportunities; Manage your own learning processes; Take risks and tolerate anxiety; Deal with unwelcome information; Know yourself; Share information with others; Review what has been learnt; Analyze what other successful practitioners do and the capacity to accept help from others.

Question: *Which of these skills do you need to work on at the moment?*

## Getting starting with your own learning log

1. Start by thinking about a significant event or experience and select a part of it (a 15 minute period or so) that was important for you.
2. Write an account of what happened during that period of the activity. Don't at this stage put any effort into deciding what you learned just concentrate on describing what actually happened.
3. List the conclusions you have reached as a result of the experience. These are, in effect, your learning points. Don't limit the number and don't worry about the practicality or quality of the points.
4. Decide which learning points you want to implement in the future and work out an action plan which covers: What you are going to do? When you are going to do it?

There are many different kinds of events that you could write about in your learning log such as your initial thoughts on a new task or project or the outcomes of a meeting at work.

### Identifying significant events

It is neither practicable, nor useful to record every event. You may be able to identify an important experience in advance, or you may recognize after the event that something significant (to you) has occurred. The most useful logs include specific statements rather than general statements, both about things experienced and about action plans arising from them.

An example might be: *"I tried to persuade the group that we should set measurable objectives before we started. I was only partially successful in this because I hadn't thought of possible examples in advance and couldn't think of any fast enough when asked, at the meeting, what I had in mind."*

An action plan would similarly have something like, *"I learned that I should have some specific examples to offer rather than expecting to convince people of the general desirability of whatever I have in mind. I will do this for the meeting on Monday."*

### A weekly review

The purpose of a weekly log book review is to draw threads together by considering previously unconnected experiences recorded earlier. It will probably be a summary of main points, or conclusions from a number of events. You may wish to try to draw these things together.

Try to make your review specific to your own action plan(s), rather than general. For example, instead of simply noting that you did not learn from a particular experience, try and analyze why (perhaps by looking at your own behaviour, not that of others).

The approach suggested here, links to the learning cycle as follows:

- Step 1: Having an experience: A preference for an activist learning style equips you for stage 1.
- Step 2: Reviewing the experience: A preference for a reflector learning style equips you for stage 2.
- Step 3: Concluding from the experience: A preference for a theorist learning style equips you for stage 3.
- Step 4: Planning the next steps: A preference for a pragmatist learning style equips you for stage 4.

If you are by nature a high activist and low reflector, you will probably find keeping a learning log rather difficult and perhaps initially unrewarding. Have patience and persevere - a number of high activists have said that the process was in the end very important for them. All-round learners are clearly best equipped to manage all four stages. However, most people develop learning style preferences that assist with some of these stages and hinder others. (for example: have learning style strengths that help with stages 1 and 4 and weaknesses that hinder stages 2 and 3.) Either you can accept this situation or do something to nurture the undeveloped aspects of your learning style. The advantages of having a broader range of learning skills are that you become a more effective learner from life's events and, if you are a trainer, you are more likely to be able to help a greater range of people with learning style profiles that are very different from your own.

A challenge with most kinds of activity is that 'action' doesn't necessarily prompt reflection. Practitioners will quite often say they are too busy and do not have enough time for 'this sort of thing in real life'. They might be prepared to undertake it on a course, but they might be reluctant and genuinely less able to do so in their real work context. This is a further reason for saying that the process should be kept simple, so as to concentrate on a few activities rather than attempt a total review of everything. It is better to keep a learning log for one activity over a period of time (e.g. a particular meeting that you regularly attend, or in relation to one identified learning skill you want to improve) than attempt too much and give up because it seems too daunting.

### Learning log exercise:

1. Look back at an experience you have had recently in your work and answer the following questions about it:

What was the activity/experience?  
 What did you learn from it?  
 What plan do you need to carry your learning forward?

2. Now select an activity in which you will be involved in the near future, which provides you with an opportunity to learn.

What is the activity/experience you have earmarked, in advance, as an opportunity to learn?  
 What, precisely, do you hope to learn from it? What do you need to do to ensure your learning?

3. *After* the activity/experience, answer the following questions about it:

In the event, did the activity/experience differ significantly from what you expected? If so, describe the main differences. What did you learn from the activity/experience?  
 What plan do you need to carry your learning forward?

4. Now that you have written two learning logs, one retrospectively and the other prospectively, identify the benefits you have gained from keeping a written log.