



Applied Getting Maximum

By Laurie Hillis

If you've ever come away from a learning event full of good intentions, but.....

If you've looked back 6 months after attending a learning program and realized you've missed some good opportunities to action your learning....

If your latest binder from a learning program is providing your bookshelf with more value than it does to you...

If you want to retain key employees by creating a motivating learning environment...

... then this article on how to maximize the value of your learning investments is for you.

The field of adult education and learning is as old as time itself, dating back to Plato and Socrates. Whether we build learning organizations, develop leaders, advocate learner self-direction, or encourage competency improvement, learning is an essential foundation.

What is learning? David Kolb (1984), a well respected author, writes that experience is the source of our learning and development. He characterizes learning as the following:

Learning

Value for Your Investment

Learning:

- is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes
- is a continuous process grounded in experience
- is a holistic process of adaptation to the world involves transactions between the person and the environment
- is the process of creating knowledge

If we agree that adults learn best from their experience and from applying experience, it would seem to make sense that every new learning opportunity needs to result in action of some type. Read on for tips to maximize your learning through action.

Being Intentional About Learning

Before attending a significant learning event, reflect on what is most important for you to learn. Some suggestions on how best to be intentional about your learning follow:

Pre-Program:

- Review the program content and be proactive in setting specific learning goals and outcomes for yourself (for example, to tap untapped creative potential, to understand systems thinking, to learn how to lead change).
- Write down your learning goals so you can review them during the program and post-program.

- Seek feedback from others – your leader, your team members, and those you lead.
- Connect your learning to core competencies that are part of your personal development plan.
- Review your performance plan to see how the learning will support your overall career development plans.

During the Program

Jay Conger, a well recognized writer in the field of leadership development writes that effective leadership programs need to provide learners with the following four key approaches to learning (Conger 1992):

- a conceptual overview
- feedback on requisite skill levels
- skill building opportunities
- personal growth experiences

What does Conger mean by this?

He means as learners we need to understand the big picture concepts, we need to have feedback on our existing skills and abilities, we need to have practice time to try new behaviors, and we need to take risks and try experiences that incorporate our new learning. Conger, like Kolb, recognizes that learning is not a passive event.

Many organizations today are using an approach called action research to achieve these diverse learning goals. Customized, practical case studies are developed collaboratively within key business units of an organization. Early in the program the case studies are presented to the

teams? Here are a few examples: how to expand customer bases, how to enhance customer service, how to develop knowledge management strategies, how to hire and retain employee talent, how to encourage work and life balance, etc.

Learners demonstrate their applied learning in a variety of ways. Teams may develop presentations that occur at the end of the learning program. In other cases, teams develop a project plan for a true action learning approach upon return to their sponsoring organization. When this option is selected, action teams collaborate virtually back in their workplaces for a given period of time. Presentations are made to the business unit and organizational leaders two to three months post program. Organizational action may result from these recommendations.

What is action research?

Action research is a process which engages people to explore “ideas-in-action.” It provides the important pragmatic link between theory and practice. As a learner, it allows me to be able to put my new learnings to work in a practical manner on issues around which I have a passion.

“A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seem likely to

“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

David Kolb, 1984

- Take advantage of a learning coach if your organization provides this option. Coaches can help you focus your learning outcomes in a safe manner.

learning community and teams are formed. New learning is applied directly to the organization’s most pressing business challenges.

What types of issues are tackled by learning

lead to improvement, and for evaluation the results of strategies tried out in practice. Action research is a group activity.” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988)



“... it can open participants’ eyes – about themselves and their company. It is a process of self-discovery ... Self-awareness breeds confidence... participants can become more confident in their abilities because they have gained insights about their strengths and weaknesses. ...Action Learning lets twenty-first century leaders identify themselves.” (Dotlich and Noel, 1998)

One approach to action learning is based on Kolb’s experiential learning cycle – a cycle of what he calls “concrete experience” (engage in a learning experience) – “reflective observation” (reflect on that experience) – “abstract conceptualization” (draw conclusions from the experience and reflection) – “active experimentation” (do something with those conclusions). Used in a learning team, the action research model would work something like this:

Act:

- to gather ideas during program, brainstorm, and dialogue about the systems challenge in action learning team
- to develop a tentative project plan and present it to peers for feedback
- to return to the department or business unit and solicit feedback from others

Observe:

- whether prior assumptions were correct, based on the feedback gathered
- what impact an inquiry approach has on others
- how the team is working together

Reflect:

- on the organizational or team implications as information is gathered

- on the implementation changes and buy-in that are necessary

Plan:

- to sketch out initial action plans
- to brainstorm with team members what is believed to be the best action
- to take new ideas to others in the organization
- seek input on recommendations
- to celebrate successes

Continuous cycles of Act, Observe, Reflect, Plan are used to develop the strategies.

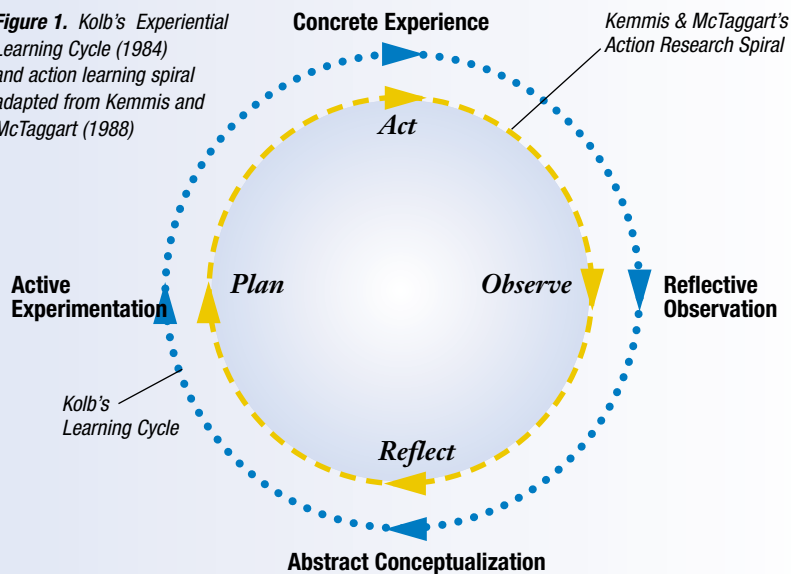
Post Program

Recognizing the importance of program follow-up, it is important as learners to use a variety of methods to ensure new learning leaves the program with us. Here are some practical examples:

- Review your learning goals and outcomes to develop specific, measurable and timely action plans.
- Engage in conversation with your learning coach and synthesize key ideas.
- Share new learning with your leader, your team and those you lead – ask for on-going feedback.
- Track your progress to your competency development.
- Update your performance plan.
- Celebrate your success in applying your learning!

Learning is a lifelong process that continues to build on our applied experiences... be intentional about getting the maximum from your learning.

Figure 1. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) and action learning spiral adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)



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