



EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE UNDERPIN ALL PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

The importance of experiential learning for children is evident to us all. We would never have learned to ride bicycles or hit balls without taking tumbles, swinging and missing, and trying again until we had developed some mastery. When it comes to adult learning, we often ignore the simple fact that experience and practice underpin all performance improvement, whether simple psychomotor activities or complex decision-making processes.

In fact, all workforce development can be distilled down to four basic elements: experience, practice, conversations and reflection.

Neither Albert Einstein nor Tiger Woods rose to the top of their fields by studying theory in a classroom and then going out and simply applying it. They needed to be exposed to a multitude of experiences and undertake lots of practice to become competent, and to draw on their exceptional talent (and their mentors and colleagues), and then undertake even more practice and experience to become leaders.

As trainers, this is what we aspire to for our entire workforces.

The great U.S. educational psychologist Jerome Bruner once asked, “What is the difference between learning physics and being a physicist?” He went on to say that in order to be a physicist, we need to absorb the practices of the profession. As training professionals we need to focus on ensuring employees have the opportunity to absorb the practices of their particular profession and learn through experience and practice. Teaching is not, in Bruner’s words, “to pro-

duce little living libraries on a subject” but rather to help employees at all levels, from senior leaders to new recruits, to think and act as experts.

An excellent model that a number of organizations have adopted to support learning through experience and practice is the 70:20:10 approach, based on a body of research that highlights the fact that some 70 percent to 90 percent of learning occurs as part of normal work rather than through off-job training events.

The 70:20:10 Model

- **70% of workplace learning** is through on-job experiences and practice
- **20% of workplace learning** is through others (coaching, feedback and personal networks)
- **10% of workplace learning** is through formal off-job training

Training managers should check whether their own approach and resources allocation are in line with 70:20:10, and if not they should think about how they can place greater focus on supporting learning through experiences and practice, where most learning takes place.

Charles Jennings is the director of Duntroon Associates, a training & development and human capital consultancy company. Charles is the former chief learning officer for Reuters, where he was responsible for developing 55,000 professionals. E-mail Charles at charles@duntroon.com.