

# The A&DC Thought Leadership Series

## Behavioural Change

Making Your Training Deliver Lasting Positive Change



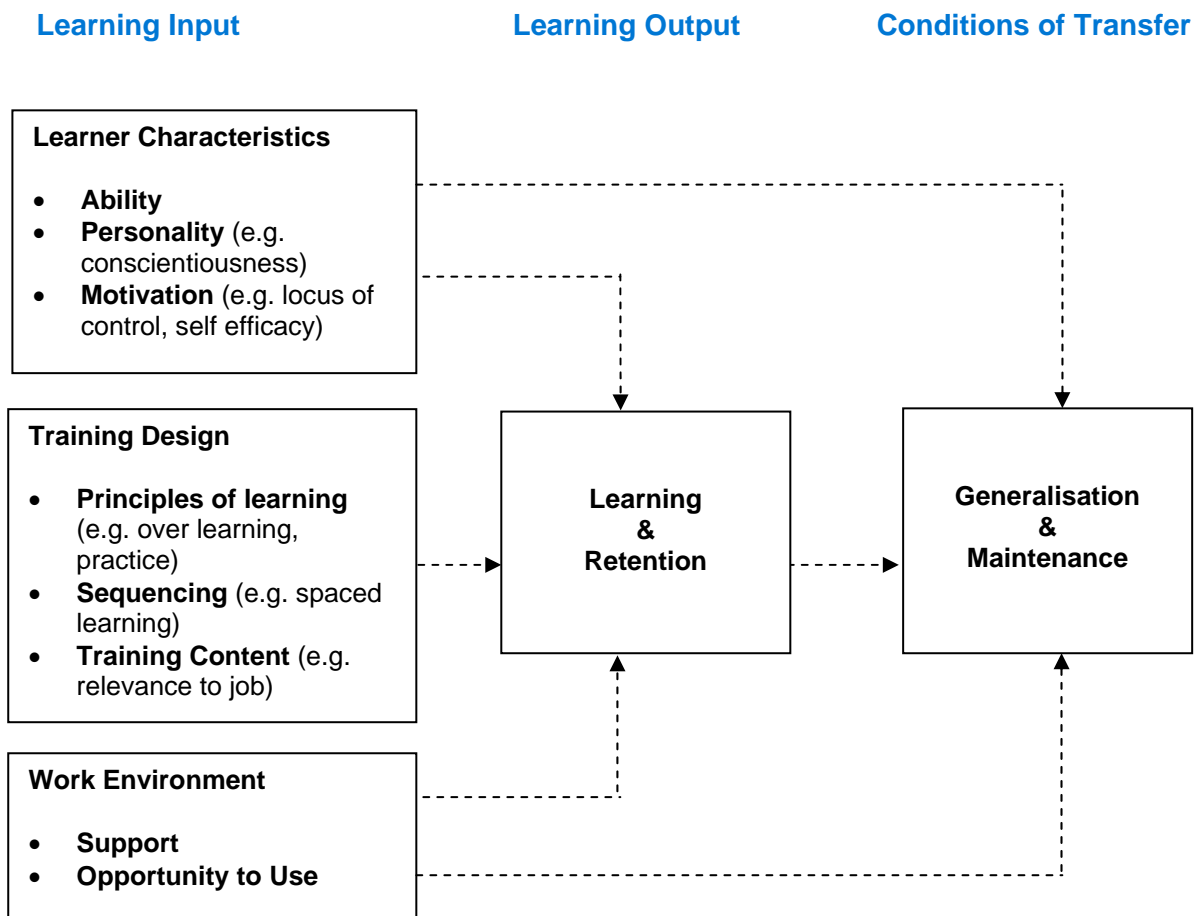
## Behavioural Change Development Interventions that deliver lasting change

How many training courses have you attended thinking “Wonderful, a nice day out” or perhaps even “What a pain, don’t they know how much work I have sitting on my desk?” The problem is always that whilst you may have an interesting day and you might even learn something new that could be useful back in the office, once you get back to your desk, it all gets forgotten.

Millions of pounds are spent each year on formal training but it’s the successful transfer of learning into job performance that is critical in ensuring a positive return on investment (ROI). Yet, it has been estimated that only 10% of learning ever gets transferred. (Holton & Baldwin, 2000).

So, at a time of increasing budget constraints, where all spending needs ROI justification, what’s the answer? What can we do to ensure that development has a real impact for the individual and the organisation? How can we demonstrate that learning interventions really do add value and deliver a real and permanent change for the better in workplace behaviours?

To maximise learning transfer, when selecting development options or designing development programmes, three critical factors should be considered; learner characteristics, intervention design and work environment.



## 1. Learner Characteristics:

Begin with the individual learner. A number of personal characteristics influence how people learn, and effective learning is essential for workplace transfer to occur. Development interventions therefore need to be designed with the following characteristics in mind to ensure adequate retention and subsequent learning transfer:

### *Ability*

Learners must have the basic ability to absorb the material they are given to learn. They also need to feel that the investment they are making in the learning itself, as well as its application, will bear fruit in terms of enhancing their own job performance. Thus, learning interventions must be pitched at the right level for the individual learner and be seen by them to be relevant to their role.

### *Self-efficacy*

This relates to a person's perception of their ability to achieve a goal. Higher self-efficacy before a learning intervention is directly related to an increase in learner commitment towards goal setting and achievement. Anxiety can paralyse the learning process. Thus, steps should be taken to minimise this wherever possible (Colquitt, LePine & Noe, 2000). Focussing on the positive rather than the negative aspects of personal development could help alleviate learning related anxieties.

### *Motivation to learn*

The ability to learn in itself is not enough to ensure that benefits will arise from a learning intervention, motivation of the learner to learn is also a necessary prerequisite (Tsai & Tai, 2003). Motivation to learn and learning itself have consistently been shown to be positively associated. Learners need to be encouraged to embrace fully the responsibility for their own development. For example, asking learners to agree and sign a learning contract with their manager or coach at the start of a development programme encourages them to take personal ownership of their learning.

### *Reactions*

The degree of positive reaction from a learner to a learning intervention is proportional to the level of personal achievement they can attribute to it. Thus, learners should be encouraged to reflect and report upon their learning from an intervention and helped to understand the benefits they could gain from applying it to their workplace. It follows that the more they understand their learning achievement and its benefits, the more they are likely to transfer it to the workplace.

### *Learning Styles*

It is well known that individual differences in learning style are key considerations when designing learning interventions (Honey & Mumford 1992). Thus, to maximise its effect, all learning interventions should be designed with built-in flexibility so that they can be adapted to suit the specific styles of individual learners:

- **Activists** - who are 'hands-on' learners and prefer to have a go and learn through trial and error. They tend to act first and think later.
- **Reflectors** - who are 'tell me' learners and prefer to be thoroughly briefed before proceeding. They tend to collect, analyse and review data.
- **Theorists** - who are 'convince me' learners and want reassurance that a project makes sense. They tend to value theories, models and rationality.
- **Pragmatists** - who are 'show me' learners and want a demonstration from an acknowledged expert. They tend to act quickly, wanting to put ideas into practice

## 2. Intervention Design

The key question that must shape the design of any development programme is; 'What is the desired effect of the learning upon the actual performance on-the-job?' (Millward, 2005). For example, will the intervention be directly or indirectly applied to job performance? How frequently are any newly learned behaviours required to be put into practice in the workplace?

### *Direct application of learning to job performance*

If the learning is intended to be directly applicable in the workplace, then the 'conditioning approach' to learning would be most effective. This is where each stimulus is paired to a response through reinforcement. Positive feedback and rewards should be used to reinforce new behaviours.

To ensure effective learning transfer, the learning environment needs to be similar to the job environment. If they are dissimilar, zero transfer occurs. If the stimulus is the same, but the response required is different then negative transfer will occur (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Negative transfer is defined as interference of previous learning in the process of learning something new, such as changing from a manual typewriter to a computer keyboard. To overcome this, real workplace examples, that will have direct relevance to the learners, should always be provided.

To maintain direct learning, learners must have the opportunity to repeatedly and extensively practice the same responses to the same stimuli when in the workplace, so the responses eventually become automatic. Thus, when developing their judgement, it may be better to give learners experience of a variety of different stimuli, so that they can develop a 'tool kit' of responses that can be used interchangeably where necessary, rather than one 'standard' stimulus.

This practice of 'over-training' is particularly essential if the learned responses are required infrequently on the job. 'Over-trained' approaches dissipate more slowly than those that are 'under-trained'. Learners also gain most benefit from practising new skills in a safe environment and receiving one-to-one feedback from experienced coaches. Thus, the coach to delegate ratio is a critical factor to be considered in designing any intervention.

### *Indirect application of learning to job performance*

This is where the learning focuses upon general principles that can then be applied to novel situations and it is becoming increasingly more popular. It has come to most prevalence with the shift from manufacturing to service-orientated jobs.

To enhance the transfer of indirectly applied learning, opportunities for self-reflection should be incorporated into the development programme. During these periods, learners should be asked to elaborate upon their learning by identifying how it might be applied to their specific jobs. This serves two purposes, firstly it helps learner to retain the material they have learned, through deeper processing. Secondly, it functions as the first step towards goal setting. Self-established-goals have been shown to increase the application of learning to personal job performance. Goal setting theory prescribes setting specific, challenging, achievable goals to achieve the best performance.

In order for elaboration and goal-setting activities to be effective, learners should also be encouraged to identify any obstacles which may prevent learning transfer and then seek to create ways to overcome these to prevent a relapse into old behaviours. Feedback from coach to learner should also be tapered off with time, allowing learners progressively to reinforce their own behaviour, thereby encouraging continued application beyond the original learning intervention.

Learning transfer can also be increased by providing visual performance aids, for example, by locating the learning in the work environment itself, and providing support material that summarises the key learning points. These will act as retrieval cues that trigger memories of the original learning intervention.

### *Blended Learning*

Blended learning is a popular term, which describes an approach to learning that integrates a range of methods to create a rich, varied set of learning approaches and materials. It isn't just about combining e-learning with conventional face-to-face learning, as is so often the case. It's about using a range of methods such as coaching, online learning tools and surveys, workbooks, face to face workshops, assessments, collaborative and experiential learning in a blend, that has previously been determined to be the most effective for learning transfer with a given group of learners, in a given environment. The benefit of blended learning is that this gives a real choice for learners, who can take greater control over their learning journeys, making learning more effective.

With this approach, the combination of pre work, coaching, online resources, learning logs, practical activities, as well as individual and teamwork can be very powerful, since delegates are then far more likely to retain the skills they have learned. Role-plays are also a useful tool as they allow learners to practice behaviours in a safe environment and receive feedback from each other.

### **3. Work Environment**

Organisational culture can present a significant blocks to learning transfer. Often learners will gain benefit and enjoyment from the intervention, but when they return to the workplace they either do not have the time and/or do not receive the support necessary to enable learning transfer to take place. Therefore, it is important to establish the level of support the organisation is able and likely to provide before designing the intervention. Stakeholder buy in is also crucial!

Organisations must to create continuous learning environments if they are to maximise learning transfer. It is particularly important to have supportive managers and peers who positively reinforce the transfer of learning to the workplace and actively demonstrate the learned behaviours themselves. Learners can also benefit from having personal mentors to help them continue their self-reflection and goal-setting well beyond the original intervention itself.

Learners also need the opportunity to practice their learned behaviours on the job if they are to increase their retention and further development. The more learners can pick up during a learning intervention, the more opportunities can be provided by their managers to apply the learning at the workplace, doubling the benefits of the original intervention.

By encouraging their manager's input before and after the learning intervention, the learner is more likely to engage in it from the outset and will be encouraged to think through its application to the workplace throughout the intervention and beyond. This in turn builds the confidence of the learner, which is also critical in determining how well they will retain and apply the learning.

Learners need to understand the benefits that will accrue to them from their learning. Thus, involving the manager at an early stage encourages recognition for the efforts of the learners, demonstrates organisational support and builds career potential. Managers and colleagues are also a key source of feedback to learners as they attempt to apply their learning to their workplace, and a crucial step in the process of motivating them to continue the process.

#### 4. Summary

In summary, designing and delivering a one-day course where a trainer lectures to a room of delegates won't change anything!

To bring about real behavioural change enlightened organisations need to start thinking about the individual differences amongst their learners, the variety of learning interventions that are available to suit the different needs of learners, and the environment in which the learners are expected to apply their learning.

In this way they can ensure that their development interventions really do result in a transfer of learning to the workplace and thereby deliver lasting behavioural change and in so doing a return on investment for the organisation.

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## About A&DC

Founded in 1988 by Nigel Povah, author of 'Assessment and Development Centres', A&DC is one of the leading experts in the Assessment and Development field. We combine our expertise in business psychology and behavioural change to create and deliver end-to-end solutions to HR issues across the talent management spectrum.

We work in partnership with our clients to unlock human potential, using best of breed processes to enable them to select, promote and develop talented people who can contribute effectively to business growth and cultural enhancement. Always, we apply recognised best practice, putting our clients in a position where they can minimise risk and optimise return on investment in these critical areas of people strategy.

Based in Surrey, our Consultants operate across the UK. Through our international partners, we ensure that our comprehensive portfolio of products and services is delivered through specialists with a high degree of local cultural and business insight.

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