

National Implications: Effective Approaches to Learning for Organization Members

David E. Bartz, EdD

Professor Emeritus

Department of Educational Leadership
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, IL

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD

Distinguished Alumnus

College of Education and Professional Studies
Central Washington University
Ellensburg, Washington

Abstract

High-achieving organization members are always in pursuit of learning new knowledge and skills that will increase effectiveness in their present jobs and provide growth for career development. Ten learning approaches to enhancing organization members' knowledge and skills are: (1) desire to learn, (2) learnability, (3) learning agility, (4) transfer of learning, (5) action learning (incorporates "thought leader" and elastic thinking), (6) learning loops, (7) system 2 learning, (8) micro-learning, (9) micro-credentialing learning, and (10) gamification and simulations. An organization's need to effectively change—and react to change—dictates that its organization members continually acquire new knowledge and skill sets for the organization's sustainability and growth. Organization members who continue to learn, grow, and develop professionally will have a competitive edge within their organization, professional career area, and career advancement in realizing their full potential.

Keywords: approaches to learning, change, organization members

Context

Organization members do not get better by chance. For organization members to realize their full potential and "be their best," they must systematically seek new learning opportunities and work hard at mastering new knowledge that they convert to skills and competencies. Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel (2014) offer a practical definition of learning for organization members used in this article when they state that learning "means acquiring knowledge and skills and having them readily available from memory so you can make sense of future problems and opportunities" (p. 2).

It is essential that organization members not merely dwell on getting better at what they are already doing, but also anticipate change and the necessary future attributes needed to be effective in their organization and professions. Henriksen (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018) notes the need for “development of agile leaders [organization members] who can navigate change” so an organization can consistently reinvent itself to remain viable and effective (p. 139). Dalziel (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018) also observes the need for organization members to be able to adapt to future work by learning new skills and competencies when noting that: “the nature of work is changing . . . there is no doubt that work at all levels will require much more adaptation and cognitive skills than in previous generations” (p. 130). Dalziel (as cited in L.A. Berger & Berger, 2018) continues by stating “The key issue for evaluating potential is whether the person [organization member] sees himself or herself as a change agent” (p. 131).

Organization members must also address “the rapid and disruptive technology change” that “is a big mega-trend pervading the whole [USA] economy *for their own professional survival*” (Krisher & Boak, 2018, p. B3). Of the 14,000 jobs recently eliminated by General Motors Corporation, 8,000 were white collar positions. Technology advancements, in part, have prompted General Motors to eliminate some positions and create new positions that require organization members to have—or learn—new skills to remain employed. Karaevli & Hall as cited in Spielberger (2004) advocate that organization members must be masters at *adaptability* which is “the capacity and motivation to adapt or change in response to changing tasks or work environmental circumstances” (p. 773).

Learning

Acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competencies—as well as supplementing current ones—is achieved through ongoing learning. Organization members must aggressively seek new learning experiences to enhance their career destiny to realize their full potential and must view themselves as *life-long learners*. This new learning should include on-the-job experiences that stretch the organization members’ capabilities and challenge their acumen (Bartz, 2018b). With all learning, the organization members must ultimately internalize the new knowledge so that it “can later be taken over by intrinsic cues” and become standard operating procedure for their brain (Holding, 1965, p. 23).

Ten approaches to learning for successful career development of new skill sets and competencies by organization members are: (1) desire to learn, (2) learnability, (3) learning agility, (4) transfer of learning, (5) action learning (incorporates “thought leader” and elastic thinking), (6) learning loops, (7) system 2 learning, (8) micro-learning, (9) micro-credentialing learning, and (10) gamification and simulations.

Desired to Learn

Desire to learn is representative of organization members who have “innate curiosity about the world around them” (Henriksen as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018, p. 132). Desire to learn means having an open mind that is inquisitive to finding cause-effect connections to solve problems. Interestingly, organization members indicative of desire to learn also understand the importance of the *ability to unlearn* (Caplan, 2013). This means *letting go* of what traditionally has been done, and how to do it, in favor of identifying new job targets that

improve the work process and implementing unique ways to solve problems.

Learnability

The effective application of *learnability* is a key to organization members' acquisition of new skills and competencies over time for career development (Bartz, 2018a). Henriksen (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018) describes *learnability* as "the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt skill sets to remain relevant for the long term" (p. 139). Henriksen continues explaining learnability by referencing the Learnability Quotient™ that can assess the following about each organization member:

Intellectual: How motivated or willing is the individual to learn or understand things better?

Adventurous: Does an individual have an intrinsic desire to explore and try new ways of doing things?

Unconventional: Is the individual willing to question the status quo? (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018, pp. 144-145)

Learning Agility

Learning agility is defined by Gay and Sims (2006) as:

Encompassing the ability to learn very quickly and think creatively. Individuals with high learning agility also seek out the ideas and feedback of others, and work towards continuous improvement both for personal effectiveness and team effectiveness. Demonstrating high learning agility includes the ability to be flexible, handle stress well, and adapt to change. Individuals with high agility perform effectively in ambiguous situations. (pp. xvi-xvii)

Dalziel (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018) adds innovation and self-reflection to the learning agility concept.

Dalziel (as cited in L. A. Berger & Berger, 2018) also notes that the inability for organization members to effectively apply learning agility can result in *derailment*. Derailment is indicative of the "know-it-all" organization member who is extremely inflexible and ineffective in reacting to change. The self-managed organization member in pursuit of career development must embrace learning agility and counteract derailment.

Transfer of Learning

Transfer of learning refers to an organization member's ability to take knowledge and skills acquired in one context (e.g., off-site seminars or previous on-the-job tasks) and effectively transfer and apply the learning to new tasks or unfamiliar situations. New learning for organization members is of minimal utility for career development if it cannot be put to the correct use in performing new and difficult tasks. Both organizations and their members benefit most from new learning when the transfer of learning is successfully applied to problems in their actual work settings.

Action Learning

Action learning is a unique process for an organization member to acquire and apply knowledge and skills through interacting with others to solve challenging *real world, organizational-specific problems*. Action learning is defined as “a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subjects, through responsible involvement in some real, complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change” (Revans as cited in Tichy & DeRose, 2016, pp. 275-290). Tichy and DeRose (as cited in Bickham, 2016) embellish this definition of action learning by stating that “it places people in uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations, forcing them to work with others to resolve a *live challenge* rather than a hypothetical circumstance” (p. 276). Carson (2017) advises that it is beneficial to add someone outside the action learning group to facilitate questioning and discussions to maximize members’ inputs and maximize perspectives and solutions for problems.

Organization members can benefit immensely from the challenges encountered via action learning because it moves them *outside their comfort zones* and challenges them to stretch and expand their expertise in the context of working collaboratively with others. According to Tichy and DeRose (as cited in Bickham, 2016, p. 289), action learning prompts organization members “to learn, change, and *convert insight into action.*” Organization members need to search out opportunities to participate in action learning to expand their competencies, connect and network with others, and showcase their knowledge and skills.

The action learning process affords organization members excellent opportunities to demonstrate themselves as *thought leaders*. Bortz (2018) describes a thought leader as “a person whose thinking shapes that of others and spurs conversations within his or her field of expertise” (p. 24). An organization member viewed as a thought leader by colleagues and leaders in the organization earns recognition and *career currency* which is an asset for professional advancement.

Vaughan and Janov (as cited in Bickham, 2016, pp. 231-242) observe that: “In the increasingly complex world of business, leaders [organization members] are challenged to think differently” (p. 231). The thought leadership process provides an opportunity for an organization member to utilize *elastic thinking*, which emulates thinking differently. Attributes of elastic thinking are:

1. *Letting go of comfortable ideas* and becoming accustomed to ambiguity and contradictions.
2. Rising above conventional mindsets and reframing questions.
3. Abandoning ingrained assumptions and opening up to new paradigms.
4. Utilizing imagination to generate and integrate a wide variety of ideas.
5. Being willing to experiment. (Mlodinow, 2018, p. 6)

Thinking the same way with the same assumptions and reference points does not provide the innovative thinking needed to address the fast pace of the changing environments experienced by organizations. Organization members who are well versed in elastic thinking will stand out and acquire recognition needed for career advancement. They will also identify creative and innovative ways to gain unique developmental experiences to enhance their knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Learning Loops

Hansen (2018) advocates the use of the *learning loop* approach by organization members to acquire new knowledge and skills, especially in the context of learning as they work. Six tactics necessary for the effective application of the learning loop are: (1) identify changes (new approaches) needed for improvement, (2) try out new approaches, (3) learn from failures, (4) be curious, (5) do not believe that “you always knows best,” and (6) experiment a lot (Hansen). He emphasizes that the quality of time spent to learn new knowledge and skills takes precedence for effective learning over the quantity of repetitions or reviews of information. Hansen labels this approach as *deliberate practice*. This means that organization members must be extremely focused and organized regarding what needs to be learned and minimize distractions.

According to Hansen (2018), the basic steps of a *learning loop* are:

1. **Do** (develop and try a new approach)
2. **Measure** (identify criteria to be used to assess the effectiveness of the new approach)
3. **Feedback** (review the results from step 2—measure—and seek constructive feedback from others involved in implementing the new approach)
4. **Modify** (based on the feedback from step 3, what, if anything, needs to be changed/done differently).

If step 4 indicates needed changes, these changes are integrated into the approach utilized in step 1 and the learning loop cycle is initiated again.

System 2 Learning

System 2 Learning is necessary for organization members to acquire new information and is represented by thoughtful and analytical mental effort that often is indicative of an organization member “working hard and struggling to figure out something” to integrate new information into sustained knowledge (Kahneman as cited in Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 47). This is in comparison to System 1 Learning that “operates automatically and quickly” and requires considerably less effort than System 2 Learning (Kahneman as cited in Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 47). Kahneman (as cited in Stulberg & Magness, 2017) reminds us that learning new knowledge and converting it into skills for organization members is hard work and often not an easy task. This is because one’s brain will take the path of least effort by staying in a System 1 Learning mode unless consciously spurred to accelerate into System 2 Learning.

An axiom of System 2 Learning is that “the best learning occurs when we really have to work for it,” and struggle through the process of getting off the System 1 autopilot (Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 48). As Stulberg and Magness (2017) note, “It’s only when we activate System 2 that we have the best chance of examining new information critically and integrating it into our web of knowledge. True learning requires System 2” (p. 47). The System 2 Learning process can be stressful for organization members, but such stress is often required to master new knowledge and convert it into usable skills. System 2 Learning often is aided by “spacing out learning over an extended period” via several sessions as compared to “massed practice” that concentrates learning in one lengthy session (Haseline, 2018, p. 59).

Micro-Learning

Micro-learning, in increments as minimal as five minutes, meshes well with technology-driven on-the-job skills and competency development of organization members. Micro-learning means “making learning [only] as long as necessary. Cut out extraneous details and only focus on the most relevant and pertinent information” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). The heart of micro-learning is understanding “how long it will take to teach [learn] the most critical parts of the concept” (Cole, 2017, p. 9). Micro-learning is often facilitated through the quick “accessibility across devices, particularly mobile devices. Integrating the use of these instruments [technology] with micro-learning paves the way for a more enjoyable learning environment” (Ozmanboluk, 2017, p. 8).

Micro-Credentialing

Micro-credentialing learning is different than micro-learning because it usually utilizes more extended time periods for learning to occur, is more formalized, and results in certification or *credentialing* of mastery or competency for the content learned. Micro-credentialing is usually digitally-based and affords flexibility concerning when the learning occurs. Much micro-credentialing is commercially-based and thus costs organization members to participate. Professional organizations also offer micro-credentialing which is often less costly than commercially-based sources. A variety of competency content areas are available to allow organization members to tailor micro-credentialing to their individual career development needs.

Gamification and Simulations

Technology-based learning environments in the form of gamification and simulations are often very motivational to an organization member’s desire to commit time to learning, are enjoyable, and excellent at *actively engaging* participants. According to Fishman and Dede, these two technology-based approaches to learning allow for immersion, meaning having the sense of “being there, the subjective sense of having a comprehensive, realistic experience in a place where one is not physically present” (as cited in Gitomer & Bell, 2016, p. 1300). Gamification and simulation-based learning can be done individually or with others—including teams or groups. The more *real-world* gamification and simulation activities are, the more effective the knowledge and skills acquired *transfer* to being “usable” to organization members for their present and future work experiences. *User interaction* is often a key and unique component of gamification and simulations.

Simulations allow the organization member to explore the implications of manipulating factors and parameters to experience the results of making such decisions. Simulations are dynamic and allow for a plethora of experiences for an organization member. Effective simulations mimic the challenges of actual practical experiences needed in the real world and have excellent transfer of learning (Brown et al., 2014).

Gamification is technically incorporating aspects of motivation, enjoyment, and learning into games—usually in a technology-based delivery (Gameeffective, n.d.). As Morschheuser, Werder, Hamari, and Abe (2017) note: “Gamification primarily aims to increase users’ positive motivations towards given activities” (p. 1298). Games have been used for decades for training and development in the learning of new knowledge and skills. Technology-basing games through “gamification designing” have significantly enhanced their use and learning efficiency.

Specifically, gamification design should follow a “user-centered design process with a high degree of user involvement” (Morschheuser et al., 2017, p. 1306). Technology-based gamification learning activities often differs from simulations by: (1) being more informal; (2) offering less instructional guidance; (3) having explicit goals, rules, and well-defined outcomes; (4) being competitive; (5) providing immediate feedback of progress toward outcomes; and (6) players being able to quickly improve their progress by actions and strategy (Fishman & Dede as cited in Gitomer & Bell, 2016).

After engaging in learning through gamification and simulations, it is beneficial for organization members to debrief and reflect—with others—on what was learned and how it can be applied to their actual job settings in meeting the organization’s present and future challenges for sustainability and growth. Brown et al. (2014) advocate that such reflecting is actually a form of practice. Organization members also need to strategize about how the new knowledge and skills can have positive impacts on their present and future careers. It is crucial for organization members to remember that, while it is perfectly acceptable for gamification and simulations to be “entertainment,” such experiences are not the real world, per se, and the desired end results are the knowledge and skills that can be applied to their professional careers.

Concluding Thoughts

The climate within which organizations function today is represented by external stimuli prompting change. Organizations need organization members who can effectively respond to these external change stimuli to be sustainable now and grow for the future. Having organization members learning new knowledge and skills is essential to an organization for it to effectively react to change, cause change, and manage uncertainty.

Organization members who take the initiative to continually learn new knowledge and skills (lifelong learners) will serve the organizational needs to change, while positioning themselves for recognition in their current job, and develop attributes for career advancement. These ten approaches to learning will serve organization members effectively in their quest and mastery of new knowledge and skills: (1) desire to learn, (2) learnability, (3) learning agility, (4) transfer of learning, (5) action learning (incorporates “thought leader” and elastic thinking), (6) learning loop, (7) system 2 learning, (8) micro-learning, (9) micro-credentialing learning, and (10) gamification and simulations.

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