Learning and Development

The first two columns that I wrote “set up” the science–practitioner issues, and the next three addressed three of the five significant ways in which I-O contributes to the employee lifecycle:

- June 2015: Performance Management
- September 2015: Staffing
- January 2016: Strategy and Measurement

This column will tackle the issues related to learning and development and the July TIP will address talent management. To find how I-O contributes to all five employee lifecycle areas, from the SIOP website, click on “Professionals” and you will see “I-O and the Employee Lifecycle.”

Many great contributions of psychology to learning and development are well chronicled by David Kolb in Experiential Learning (2015), which is the 2nd edition of a book originally published 30+ years ago—reflecting some of the early contributions of experiential learning experts such as William James, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Abe Maslow, Eric Erikson and Mary Parker Follett. In the foreward, Warren Bennis writes (in one of his last writings prior to his passing):

Kolb’s achievement is in providing the missing link between theory and practice, between the abstract generalization and the concrete instance, between the affective and cognitive domains. By this BIG achievement he demonstrates conclusively—and is the first to do so, that learning is a social process based on carefully cultivated experience which challenges every precept and concept of what nowadays passes for “teaching”. And with this major achievement he knowingly shifts the ecology of learning away from the exclusivity of the classroom (and its companion, the Lecture) to the workplace, the family, the carpool, the community, or wherever we gather to work or play or love. [Foreward, page X]
Now I have to confide that I thought everyone already knew about this “learning through experience” thing a long time ago because between 1971–1975, I attended and graduated from New College in Sarasota, Florida (the last year it was still a private school). In those 4 years I never took a multiple choice test (I had to move on to graduate school to have that experience again). The professors (who mostly lived on campus) would not have survived if they just stood up and lectured. Almost every on-campus “house” had a “living-learning community,” and every student every quarter would get faculty approval for the learning contract that documented the student’s commitment for the quarter. It would usually involve some mixture of class, tutorial, special project, internship, or “experience.” No grades; you simply passed or failed your contract.

One such “learning from experience” quarter for me in 1972 was hitchhiking around the country and keeping a journal of my experiences and what I was learning from it; and oh, yes, reading all four volumes of Joseph Campbell’s *The Masks of God* —a deeper dive on the meaning of life cannot be had. Then in 1973 I did a 6 month “off campus study project” when a fellow student’s dad funded our development of a one acre, 10,000 plant commercial hydroponics farm in Perrine, south of Miami. Picture a swimming pool with nutrient solution that pumps through PVC pipes and tubing into 10,000 plastic bags filled with vermiculite, peat moss and sand; and picture all 10,000 plants performing strongly because if one is not, you rip it out and replace it with one that is performing. We had to learn everything from agricultural science to construction to sales and marketing because we sold the produce to local grocery stores. Yes, I kept a journal on what I was learning, which was a lot—including why farming is so difficult. It was frustrating after such great success, 8 months into the project a freak hailstorm destroyed everything. More learning.

During my graduate school years at the University of South Florida, our I-O psychology program (under my major professor Dr. Herbert H. Meyer) had a partnership with a new organization in North Carolina—The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). I visited there in the late 1970s and then got very involved with them during my Pepsico years (1981–1990) because the leader of Management Development in Pepsico was Dr. Bob Eichinger, and he had a developing relationship with Dr. Mike Lombardo at CCL (which culminated many years later in their firm Lominger which they later sold to Korn Ferry). CCL was instrumental in focusing on the critical importance of learning from experience, and their contribution to the literature on this issue is nothing short of huge. CCL has published many books providing guides on how to learn on the job and from experiences (e.g. *FYI for Your Improvement* [2006] and *Eighty-Eight Assignments for Development in Place* [1989] by Lombardo and Eichinger; *Developmental Assignments: Creating Learning Experiences Without Changing Jobs* [2006] by Cindy McCauley).

As the current chairman of the board at HRPS (www.hrps.org), I have had the
chance to work with some great people over the last 20+ years, one being Dr. David Miller who served on the HRPS board from 2009–2013. In 2000 at Duke University he was a founding member of Duke Corporate Education. For over 13 years David helped provide companies with a customized learning and development resource that combines highly accomplished business practitioners, academics, and alternative learning methods. They must have been doing something right because they were ranked #1 worldwide in custom executive education for the last 10 rankings, according to Financial Times and BusinessWeek. David helped grow the company from an $8M base in 2000 to a $70M corporation in 2008. He would collaborate with key corporate executives to help design solutions that address their company’s most pressing human capital development challenges. Presently, he is principal of Ashby Street Advisory. I reached out to David and asked for his perspective on learning and development within organizations, and he graciously offered the following.

In thinking about the evolution of learning and development over the past decade and a half it is easy to see lots of changes, as there have been in every other field. To think about learning and development we have to first understand what it is we want people to learn, and what abilities we want them to develop. It could be argued that “leadership development” is a subcategory of learning and development, and as such it has offered some clarity around the changing nature of learning and development. Duke Corporate Education’s 2013 CEO Study, entitled “Leading in Context,” gives a really good discussion of some of these changes. For this discussion let’s call them mega changes, of which there are at least three.

The first of these mega changes is the sheer complexity of being an employee in a large global (or even a small regional) organization. Needed knowledge is increasingly multidimensional. Much learning of course is technical and determined by the business needs of the organization; but a growing amount of important knowledge is tacit, things learned outside the normal channels of business activity. This is precisely in the realm of experiential learning. Think of the many times where a business strategy and tactics needed to be changed as a consequence of developments in a completely different field. The impact of cell phones on credit cards and banking comes to mind. Or the influence of wireless communication on automobile interiors.

A second significant sea change has been in the way we conceptualize the resolution of problems. A fabulous treatment of this issue is provided in David Dotlich’s The Unfinished Leader (2014). Much of what we are asking employees to learn and develop does not have an acknowledged end point. Imagine the difference between solving a problem, which ostensibly has a solution, and wrestling with a paradox, which does not. Accepting that learning and development is never complete leads one immediately into the realm of judgment and intuition; again the space of experiential learning. A great example is the topic being discussed here; the organization that arrives at the point of believing that learn-
ing and development are “done” will be sorely disappointed.

A third and final mega change has to do with the nature of the learners themselves. An excellent starting point to examine this notion is Daniel Pink’s 2011 book Drive. Long gone is the passivity of learners showing up for whatever course HR has created. Employees, especially young ones, have strong opinions about their own development, and about meaning and purpose in their lives. This has been driven by very bad corporate behavior of the past several decades, the corporate social responsibility movement, the multicultural nature of societies, and growing global inequality.

So what does this mean for organizations and the role of I-O psychology within them? Richard’s 2015 articles in TIP outline the long involvement of I-O psychologists in some organizations, though sadly this has been far from universal. Many organizations still do not see human capital development as a top priority. In my experience learning and development is a corporate responsibility that simply cannot be outsourced; it is too intertwined with the organization’s culture, its ultimate purpose, and its level of employee engagement. The most effective and most cost effective model is to have an appropriately sized cadre of internal I-O psychologists who are capable and excited about engaging in the trenches but who also have a solid connection back to academia.

Toward the end of this column, Richard offers seven ways in which I-O psychologists can benefit organizations in the employee lifecycle. Of particular importance, from my perspective, are program (or project) design, leadership development, and executive coaching. Design is critical because it invariably presages project success. Leadership development is essential, and today most organizations admit they do not have in place the leadership talent to execute their current business strategies (to say nothing of future strategies). Good executive coaching often makes the difference in leadership performance. Just as clinical psychologists often choose a colleague to be a “supervisor,” someone to serve as a mirror and to discuss tactics, performance, and difficult circumstances, so should senior organizational executives.

Another perspective comes from David Wentworth and Mollie Lombardi of the Brandon Hall Group in a 2014 article in Training Magazine entitled “5 Trends for the Future of Learning and Development.” They conducted a study with 569 organizations and identified the following trends and ongoing issues:

- **Going mobile.** Mobile has transformed the way companies work, interact, and collaborate. Despite this, companies are still slow to embrace mobile learning solutions, with only 10% using mobile Web-based learning solutions.
- **Understanding social.** Companies are embracing social media and social collaboration tools to engage employees and build a culture of learning. However, of the 59% of companies using social for their learning strategies, relatively few (24%) say they are effective.
• Considering adaptive learning. Adaptive learning lets employees learn at their own pace. They can be monitored individually, in real time, to determine the learning approach that best suits their needs. This takes considerable skill and time to accomplish.

• Aligning with business objectives. “Training” has operated in silos with little input from other areas of the business. Training in the future must be closely aligned with corporate strategies to help companies achieve results. Of companies aligning learning and business priorities (48%), more than 70% improved company revenue.

• Measuring effectiveness. To determine if a learning strategy is driving business outcomes, companies must consistently measure its effectiveness. Many companies tend to consider employee satisfaction over more concrete business metrics such as turnover, retention, or financial measures.

Organizational outcomes that can be influenced by high quality learning and development programs include:

• Improving the bottom-line performance of the organization by giving employees the skills needed to excel;

• Reducing external recruiting costs by developing internal employees and preparing them to take on greater leadership roles;

• Increasing employee retention by visibly demonstrating to employees an investment in their career development and growth.

The information in the next few paragraphs is presented on the SIOP website to help us better understand how I-O psychology can benefit organizations in each phase of the employment lifecycle. The SIOP website points out that learning and development in organizations can be greatly improved based on what we have learned through the science of psychology. Learning and development helps organizations build and maintain internal capabilities so they can successfully execute their strategies and often includes:

• Identifying key employee skills and abilities

1. Facilitation. I-O psychologists can help senior leaders articulate business objectives and identify the key employee skills and abilities required to execute the organization’s business strategies.

2. Defining the need. I-O psychologists can conduct analyses to determine the most prevalent employee skill gaps in an organization in order to prioritize the content and focus of training programs.

3. Building the learning strategy and frameworks. I-O psychologists can help organizations create systems and approaches that align training and
4. **Program design/delivery.** I-O psychologists can design and deliver training content to meet the particular needs of an organization, identifying and focusing on areas where skill gaps exist and adapting messaging and content to the organization’s culture and goals.

5. **Leadership development.** I-O psychologists are uniquely qualified to develop programs and processes that enable participants to build and improve leadership skills. This includes but is not limited to the use and interpretation of personality and skill-based assessments, assessment centers, instruction, role plays, and action learning assignments.

6. **Executive coaching.** I-O psychologists serve as seasoned and credentialed professionals who work with individuals and teams to help them learn, grow, and change. Coaching engagements may focus on imparting specific skills, addressing performance issues on the job, preparing for and facilitating transitions to higher levels of leadership, or supporting broader changes in individual and group behavior.

7. **Performance and program metrics.** Using a results-oriented approach, I-O psychologists can assess the effectiveness of learning and development programs and track individual learners’ achievements as a result of program participation.

Unquestionably, I-O psychologists working with human resources and leadership teams can make a big difference in providing organizationally relevant learning and development programs and experiences that contribute to the goals of the organization and help deliver expected results for the stakeholders.

I invite feedback at rmvsolutionsllc@gmail.com.

**References**


