

ENTELECHY

Entelechy n, [LL, entelechia, from Greek]1. the vital force or principle directing life and growth. 2. a realisation or actuality as opposed to a potentiality.

On learning and development

By Guy C. Gattegno

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 2

Learning at the individual level

An earlier newsletter (Vol. 1 No. 7) introduced the hierarchy of learning from individual to organisational, and made the point that each level in the hierarchy is a pre-requisite for the next.

Development of individual learning must precede any attempts to promote one-on-one learning. In turn, initiatives aimed at one-on-one coaching, mentoring or other similar efforts, must be well-established in an organisation before team learning can succeed. Finally, many successful learning teams must be fully functional within an enterprise, before the development of a learning organization can even be considered.

From the outset, it must be made clear that the learning being focused on here is learning that takes place at, through and from the work that people do, as opposed to learning designed to be undertaken off-the-job (training courses, pursuit of academic qualifications and the like).

This newsletter looks closely at the first rung of the hierarchy --- learning at the individual level. Subsequent editions will focus on each of the other three levels.

The individual as learner

Among leading researchers in the field of learning and development, perhaps the ideas of UK-based Alan Mumford come closest to the concepts being discussed here. In his 1993 book, ***Management Development: Strategies for Action***, Mumford identifies four ways in which managers can learn on the job. These are:

- Intuitive learning
- Incidental learning
- Retrospective learning
- Prospective learning

Mumford's classification forms the basis of what is detailed below.

Intuitive learning

This is the way in which individuals learn unconsciously from experience. There is little deliberate effort to learn. Any learning that results from on-the-job occurrences appears to be taking place through some little-understood process of osmosis. The intuitive learner who is asked questions about his/her learning ("What have you learnt from this?" "When did you learn it?" "How did you learn it?") may have little of value to offer ("I don't know." "I didn't even know I knew this until you asked me about it.")

Incidental learning

This is where learning occurs by chance, frequently from activities that jolt managers into conducting analyses or post-mortems. Difficulties, mishaps and frustrations often provide the spur for the incidental learner. Most individuals tend to dwell less on successes ("That went rather well!") than on failures ("How could this happen?") Learning is conscious but it happens in a random and unstructured way, since it depends on a chance event before the opportunity to learn arises.

Many individuals prize incidental learning as their preferred mode. They see it as directly related to their work, and it is therefore perceived as immediately relevant, “real-life”. Its drawbacks, however, are that it is episodic, haphazard and discontinuous, since it is always triggered by the occurrence of chance events.

Retrospective learning

This type of learning occurs much more deliberately. It requires the individual to take the time to think about something that has happened in order to reach conclusions about the meaning of the experience and the lessons that can be drawn from it.

The conscious process of collecting with hindsight useful information about the past requires an explicit attempt at thinking things through --- whether in one's head, in conversation with another, or on paper. In addition to the random events from which the incidental learner learns, retrospective learners are more likely to draw lessons from routine events at work, successes as well as failures.

This mode of learning is relatively easy to bring about, especially if it is initially triggered in an individual by another person (manager, coach, learning facilitator, etc.). An individual can be asked questions to encourage his/her development as a retrospective learner (“Now that this has happened, what can you learn from it?” “Why do you think it happened?” “How might you approach this situation differently next time?” “How might you try to bring about this positive outcome as often as possible?”)

Prospective learning

This learning mode is characterised by the intention to learn from an experience that has yet to take place. Thus, the prospective learner sees future occurrences not merely as work to be performed (and hence got

out of the way), but as events from which he/ she stands to learn something of value.

This mode of learning requires the individual to possess a highly developed "learning-to-learn" orientation, not only in foreseeing that an upcoming event may provide significant opportunities for learning, but also in making him/herself receptive to what the experience may yield.

Here is an example. You are a senior manager in a mid-sized corporation and, in a few days, you are scheduled to make a 20-minute presentation to the Board. You are looking to secure formal approval for a new project of significant importance to both your department and your career.

Normally, you would focus on the task (structuring your presentation, producing slides and handouts, rehearsing your address to the Board, attempting to "cover all the bases", etc.). This would keep you under maximum pressure until after your appearance before the Board!

But, because you have developed your ability as a prospective learner, you are also able to reflect on what you might be able to learn by observing yourself before, during and after the presentation. You can ask yourself a series of questions, and devise ways of answering them to your satisfaction. These questions may include, "How do I prepare myself for such an important event?" "What do I find easiest to prepare for? Most difficult? Do I know why that is? How do I take myself through what is hardest for me? What does this make me more capable of?" "How do I approach my presentation?" "During the presentation, how do I respond when things are going well? How do I respond when the unexpected happens? What do I handle well? What do I handle in a less-than-satisfactory way? Why is that?" "Reflecting on the experience, what would I do more of next time? What would I do differently? Why? How?" And so on.

By considering these and similar questions, you give yourself the best possible chance to learn from the experience. Being a prospective learner

enables you to go beyond the task aspects of the situation (preparing and delivering the presentation), and to maximise your opportunities to learn from the event.

Prospective learning is the most difficult mode to develop, but there are ways to maximise opportunities for individuals to become aware of it, practise it, enhance it, and ultimately become thoroughly conversant with it.

Combining learning modes

One way is to explicitly combine the "anticipatory" processes that distinguish the prospective mode of learning with retrospective learning.

On their own, competent prospective learners are likely to review what they have actually learned from experiences they have identified as worthwhile, while learners who are able to identify useful retrospective experiences can be extended by asking them whether they can see similar --- or indeed different --- learning opportunities in the future. This requires encouraging or enhancing in learners what is already taking place "naturally".

The ultimate aim of an effective on-the-job developmental initiative is to enable individuals to grow into fully-fledged prospective/retrospective **learners**. Over the course of a suitable transition period, people can be assisted to move through the following progression:

From	Intuitive or incidental learning
Through	Retrospective learning
To	Prospective/Retrospective learning

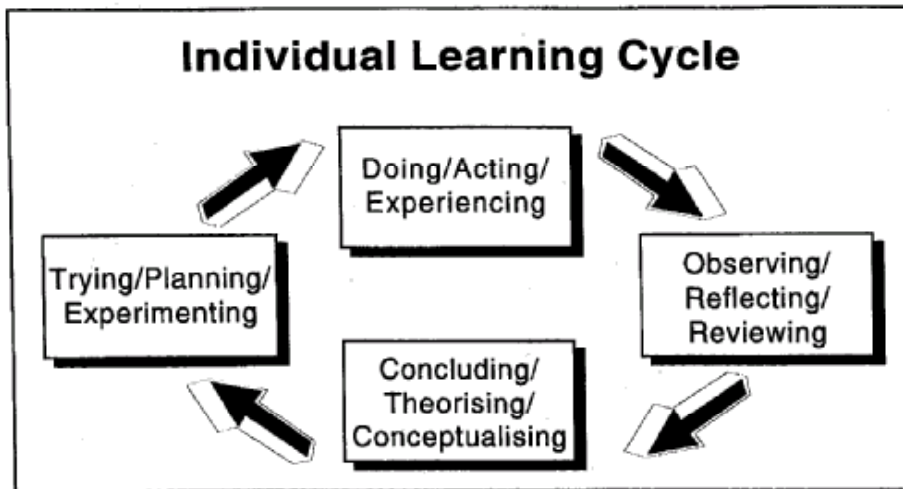
The learning cycle

To ensure that people are given the best chance to develop on the job as learners, they should be provided with recurring opportunities to go through a combined prospective/retrospective learning cycle.

The major task is to transform people's "innate" preference for casual and unplanned learning experiences into the capacity to make the most of conscious learning efforts designed to develop them into self-directed prospective/ retrospective learners.

Among other leading researchers, Peter Honey & Alan Mumford have produced a widely used variant on the basic adult wheel of learning, consisting of:

- ***Having an experience***: the learner involves himself/herself in new experiences.
- ***Reviewing the experience***: the learner observes and reflects on the new experiences from different perspectives.
- ***Concluding from the experience***: the learner adapts and integrates his/her observations and experiences into logically defensible conclusions, theories, models, conceptual frameworks.
- ***Planning the next step***: the learner tries out the new ideas and theories to see if they work in practice.



Repeated "trips" around the cycle can enable most individuals to become proficient prospective/retrospective learners.