

Lifestyle Learning: Improve the Bottom Line With Behavioral Education

BY AGATHA GILMORE

Academic education and professional degrees can impart the technical expertise necessary for on-the-job success, but ultimately, work styles and techniques are what drive productivity.



In today's knowledge economy, with lightning-fast Internet connections and an increasingly globalized marketplace, information reigns supreme. Modern, user-generated tools such as Wikipedia.com and blogs have not only made communication easier and faster, they have emphasized the importance we place on sharing knowledge.

For this reason and more, education is a hot commodity. Bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees help those in the workforce acquire the theoretical knowledge and technical expertise required to get a leg up on the competition. But even in today's world, a degree can only take you so far.

"The notion of a degree or a certification or a certain educational level really is [just] the price of admission into a job or job function," said David Collins, vice president and general manager of the training products division at Tracom Group, a provider of workforce performance solutions.

Once an individual has the knowledge, it's the way he goes about doing his work — his organizational, time-management and behavioral skills — that ultimately drives results.

"Proven knowledge and skills are often necessary conditions for people to be high performers and to be successful. But the will-do, the motivation, the engagement facets really play a role in whether or not you will deploy what you're capable of doing," said Dr. Kenneth Nowack, a licensed psychologist and president and chief research officer of Envisia Learning.

Keeping this in mind, learning organizations can leverage the work styles, choices and techniques of successful employees to elevate curriculum and improve the overall productivity of the workforce.

Successful Social Styles

Nowack said success can be conceptualized as a scorecard that involves four independent elements: happiness, values, achievement and relationships. A successful person is fruitful in all four. But how does he or she do it?

"The most successful individuals possess a set of personality qualities and practice lifestyle behaviors that facilitate continuous growth and learning," Nowack said. "Some of these include being conscientious and achievement-oriented; identifying and deploying signature strengths; practicing forgiveness and expending less energy [on] remaining angry; actively acknowledging stress and practicing stress-reduction techniques when experiencing work and life triggers to reverse the fight-or-flight response; utilizing support of others, as well as expressive writing to let feelings out; maintaining a regular sleep cycle; [and] taking time to become physically active."

Nowack added that a recent *Harvard Business*

Review article, titled "How the Best of the Best Get Better and Better," also offered insight into this topic.

"Some of the things [writer Graham Jones] mentions is having a long-term perspective, blocking out distractions, seeking candid feedback, stretching development, reflecting on ways to improve and celebrating success," Nowack said.

Many of these behaviors are innate character traits that people exhibit as early as childhood, Collins said.

"That preferred pattern of behavior sticks with people their whole lives," he said. "Those behaviors impact how people think and use time, how they make decisions [and] their outward actions with others."

According to Tracom research, these behaviors also have an affect on personality traits, including pace of speech, volume of speech, quantity of speech, assertiveness and responsiveness.

While many of these characteristics are innate, there are several main themes that emerge from them, on which organizations can train employees.

Self-Awareness

"When people understand themselves and what their preferences are and how they do things, they can organize their work more effectively," Collins said.

Indeed, one of the first things required to become a successful worker is self-awareness.

Kathy Wojcik, manager of leadership development and learning at Gates Corp., an automotive and industrial equipment manufacturer, recalled an incident that highlights the importance of self-awareness.

"I clearly remember these three guys who worked together in a machine shop, and all three were of strong mind and opinion," she said. "That created a significant amount of clashing — not necessarily destructive, but a barrier to moving forward."

After enrolling in personality training, the three employees became aware of their behaviors and began to understand why they were having difficulties coming to an agreement, Wojcik said.

"Then [they could] take a look at what behaviors would make them more effective," she said.

Versatility

The key to making self-awareness work, however, is versatility. After all, even if you can identify your own behavior properly, you won't change unless you're willing.

"One of the best habits in working with other people is figuring out how to best work with them," Collins said. "It's adjusting or adapting your behaviors to meet their needs as opposed to your own. What you really want to be able to do is work with people

DATA POINT

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in the way that they most want to be worked with.

“For example, if I’m going to coach one of my employees, and I understand what their behavioral preferences are, I can think about those in advance of the coaching session. And if it’s a session where I have to give them some difficult news on some performance enhancements or some changes that they need to make, I can tee that message up in a way that’s most likely to be accepted by that person — that they’re most likely to understand it and I’m most likely to get the outcome that we’re looking [for]. So it’s not only understanding it but applying it in everyday work situations.”

In fact, research by Tracom found that managers who exhibited higher versatility were 27 percent better at leading teams and 25 percent better at coaching others.

However, versatility only goes so far. According to Nowack, people have the ability to be flexible up to a certain extent, but beyond that, they tend to gravitate back toward their natural states.

“The visual I like to use is a set of springs hanging on a hat rack,” Nowack said. “If we can learn the different ways that we can pull on those springs — and that might be nurturing, coaching, leadership experiences and development activities — we will find we stretch people farther than they ever imagined. But there’s a natural tendency in that spring to go back to its natural set point, where it started.”

That’s not to say that life-altering situations, traumatic events, great coaches and great developmental experiences can’t alter the setting of that natural set point, Nowack added. But it highlights the difficulty every employee — from the frontline worker to the senior-level executive — has in trying to maintain behavior change.

“Zebras don’t change their stripes very much, so it’s a question again of, how much energy do you put in? What do you need to see from an organizational perspective?” Nowack said. “If you’re looking for a dramatic shift from

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a competent jerk to a loveable star, it won't happen.”

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills always are important, but now there's a new imperative.

“We're really dealing in a global environment, and you have to be able to deal with people who haven't grown up in or experienced or been immersed in a culture like yours,” Wojcik said.

Also, with the growing emphasis on social networking and the younger generations' penchant for collaboration, more and more companies are seeing the team become the preferred work unit. Understandably, working well with others is that much more important in this collaborative environment, Collins said.

“I honestly think that a person's success is based almost solely on their ability — especially at a leadership level — to get things done through others, which involves so many of the interpersonal skills that we all use every day, whether they're tremendously honed and highly flexible or whether they're kind of more hardwired,” Wojcik said.

Yet, interpersonal skills impact more than just individual productivity. Collins pointed to Tracom studies that tied interpersonal skills to bottom-line successes.

“They're finding that [hospital employees] who do a better job relating to their patients can run more profitable practices, have better patient retention rates,” he said. “Even in a profession that's as highly specialized as the medical profession, they're finding that this notion of interpersonal skills, or understanding people's behaviors and working more effectively with them, is becoming more and more important.”

According to a survey on the effectiveness of interpersonal skills training conducted by Tracom, nearly 60 percent of respondents said performance had been affected negatively by personal style differences. Sixty-two percent of

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respondents cited low morale as another result of these differences.

"There's a really strong connection between those interpersonal skills and the business-practice skills that organizations expect from frontline people, managers and even their executives," said Sean Essex, director of marketing for Tracom.

Training Tips

There are several techniques learning organizations can use to help train employees on the three broad skills necessary for workplace success. First, some initial preparation can put the employee in the right mindset for achieving self-awareness. Additionally, when training employees on work styles and personality traits, it's important to give them real-life examples and explain how the material relates to their everyday routines.

"Where so many programs fall short is they don't tie it back to the daily workflow that people exhibit," Collins said. "So when you're able to take the knowledge from the classroom and actually give them a tool that makes it very job-specific to what they do, the likelihood of them applying it and using it go up much more. And the likelihood of them getting the desired impact that they want goes up equally as much."

Wojcik highlighted the universal application of social-style training, which she said Gates Corp. typically offers between six and eight times a year.

"It not only touches your work life, it touches your whole life," she said. "I've had people call me back six months after this program and tell me how it has changed their relationship with their kids or parents, especially an aging parent, or spouse. [They're] truly life skills."

Nowack said learning executives can help employees overcome the hurdle of maintaining behavior change in several ways.

"The use of 'professional nagging' or reminders seem to help all of us keep going with new change efforts, even when we want to quit," he said. "Building in metrics to monitor our change journey is another way of reinforcing our efforts."

"Celebrating success at specific achievement points that are predetermined helps us to recognize where we have come from and recommit us to continue," Nowack continued. "Finally, recognizing that relapse-prevention strategies are critical [will help] avoid the inevitable. Build in some social support to help [workers] get through times when [they] actually could lapse, [and] develop a plan of getting right back on track."

Finally, it's important to remember that lifestyle learning doesn't happen overnight.

"You need to give that time," Wojcik said. "It's like farming: You need to wait through the seasons." **CLO**

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