

Employees – Why can't they be more like me?

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■ Introduction

How do you approach the task of learning something new? Do you jump right in? Need time to think? Look for multiple possibilities or one right answer? Approaches to learning are as varied as people are, and such differences provide challenges in workplace training situations both for the trainer and trainee.

Learning is a highly complex process. Discussing preferred approaches to learning or preferred “learning style” provides some insight into and strategies for dealing with different employees or “learners”. Learning style is only one factor to be considered in training situations, and learning style descriptions are not intended to be labels for individuals. However, an employer, manager or trainer (for purposes of this paper all are referred to as the “trainer”) who has an understanding of and appreciation for diverse approaches to learning, is better prepared to cross learning gaps and provide more complete training experiences.

Participants in this session will complete David Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to assess their individual approaches to learning. Strategies to bridge learning differences will then be discussed. Kolb's framework for providing complete learning experiences, the “experiential learning cycle” will be applied to training situations. This paper provides a brief description of the concepts that provide the foundation for the LSI.

■ Learning Styles

There are many ways to look at learning style. David A. Kolb has written extensively on learning style and provides one model that has been used by educators throughout the adult education field. The model involves two key

learning processes - perceiving and processing information. Each of these processes involves a continuum of opposites.

When individuals perceive or take in information, they may prefer to take it in concretely or through real life experiences. Others may take an abstract approach; that is through using mental models or ideas. Once information is perceived some process information actively by doing something with it. Others may prefer to process by thinking about or reflecting on new learning.

Kolb's four dimensions or ways of learning are further described below:

Concrete experience:

A experienced-based, involved approach to learning. An individual needs to feel and experience the new information in a real way.

Abstract conceptualization:

A conceptually-based, analytic approach to learning. An individual needs to understand or have the new information explained logically.

Active experimentation:

An action-based, active approach to learning. An individual needs to try out or apply new learning

Reflective observation:

An observation-based approach to learning. An individual needs to reflect on and examine new learning.

When approaches to perceiving and processing learning are combined a preferred learning style emerges. Individuals who perceive concretely and process actively are hands-on learners who learn best through others in a trial and error approach. Those who perceive concretely and process reflectively would rather watch than act and like to consider all possibilities before taking action. People who perceive abstractly and process reflectively are analytical and logical learners. Sound Ideas are more important than people. Finally, those who perceive abstractly and process actively are practical, problem solving learners. Theory must be useful to be of any value.

As can be seen from the above, different learning styles can provide challenges in training situations. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle provides a framework for identifying different types of training activities that will bridge learning gaps.

Kolb argues that complete learning involves ALL four processes (regardless of preference) and that different activities support different phases of the cycle.

(Complete learning refers to learning that is retained for future use and development.) A brief listing of training activities for each process is below:

Concrete experience (feeling)

Examples, demonstrations, simulations (employer-led) case situations

Reflective observation (watching)

Discussion, rhetorical questions, brainstorming, logs

Abstract Conceptualization (thinking)

Lecture, manuals, reference material

Active experimentation (doing)

Simulations (employee-led), case studies, workplace application with feedback.

■ **Conclusion**

In workplace training situations heavy emphasis is placed on the active experimentation process. Using a variety of training activities and Kolb's experiential learning cycle provides for more complete training experiences that will bridge the learning gaps with different employees throughout the process.

■ **Resources**

Algonquin College of Applied Arts (1996) Learning Styles.
www.algonquinc.on.ca/edtech/gened/styles.html.

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (1999) Understanding Learning Styles – Instructor Learning Module.