

Chapter 4

Self-Directed Learning & Learning Agreements

In the competitive environment of the twenty-first century, organizations can no longer depend solely on "traditional" training and development, which focuses on designing and delivering workshops for groups of people. While workshops will remain as part of an organization's OL strategy, workshops alone will not be sufficient to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

Organizations of all sizes must become "learning organizations."

A learning organization is an organization that promotes, rewards, and captures individual learning for the benefit of the organization.

(Beitler, 2003, Chapter 12)

Becoming a learning organization requires the utilization of both self-directed learning and learning agreements. In the second part of this chapter, we will look at how to use learning agreements to "capture" an individual's self-directed learning for the benefit of the organization.

Let's look first at the use of self-directed learning in a learning organization.

Self-Directed Learning

The literature on self-directed learning (SDL) is now growing at an exponential rate. In addition to countless articles and books, the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* debuted in 2004.

Over the past thirty years, an impressive body of literature has developed concerning the theory, practice, and potential of SDL. Tough (1979) speaks of *independent learning*--learning, for the most part, independent of teachers and institutions. Tough's approach to learning, with little or no institutional support, is also shared by the advocates of *distance learning* (e.g., Garrison, 1987). Knowles (1975) speaks of self-directed learning

in institutional settings.

Malcolm Knowles

For our purposes, I think the best definition of SDL is that of Malcolm Knowles. He defines SDL as a process in which:

individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes.

(Knowles, 1990)

While I found the work of Knowles to be inspiring, I had two reservations concerning the use of self-directed learning. Based on my own teaching, training, and consulting experience, I realized:

- 1) some intelligent adults are not psychologically equipped (or "ready") to succeed at self-directed learning, and
- 2) some subject matters (e.g., accounting) are not appropriate for self-directed learning.

Long & the Guglielminos

My first concern was addressed in the works of Huey B. Long, and in the extensive research of Lucy and Paul Guglielmino with the self-directed learning readiness scale (SDLRS).

Long (1989, 1990, 1991) addresses the psychological aspects of SDL. Long (1989) depicts the successful self-directed learner as having the following characteristics:

1. self-confidence,
2. self-awareness,
3. self-reflectiveness,
4. a strong goal orientation, and
5. an aptitude for systematic procedures.

Obviously, all organizational members do not exhibit these characteristics.

In his 1991 book chapter, entitled Challenges in the Study and Practice of Self-Directed Learning, Long presents his four-quadrant model identifying situations in which SDL is (and is not) appropriate, based on the psychological make-up of the individual (p.22). It is important to note that Long (1991) prefers to speak in terms of degrees of individual self-direction, rather than in terms of "all-or-nothing" (p.15).

Measuring "readiness" for self-directed learning is the focus of the work of Lucy and Paul Guglielmino. As part of her dissertation work in 1977 at the University of Georgia, Lucy Guglielmino developed and field tested the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), a Likert-type questionnaire with five response options per question (Guglielmino, 1978). The SDLRS was later expanded to its current 58 items. The SDLRS has become the most widely used instrument for assessment of self-directed learning readiness (Long & Ageykum, 1988; McCune, 1989; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). The self-scorable form for the SDLRS is called the Learning Preference Assessment (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991a, 1991b).

Based on a compilation of more than 3000 respondents to the instrument, the Pearson split-half reliability of the English version is .94 (McCune, Guglielmino, Garcia, 1990). Further discussion of the validation studies on the SDLRS can be found in Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Delahaye and Smith (1995), and Guglielmino (1997).

Research has suggested that individuals who have developed high self-directed learning skills tend to perform better in jobs requiring high degrees of problem-solving ability, creativity, and change.

The average score for adults who complete the SDLRS is 214 (with a standard deviation of 25.59). The following scoring ranges have been established:

Low	58-176
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Below average	177-201
Average	202-226
Above average	227-251
High	252-290

Individuals with low or below average SDLRS scores usually prefer very structured learning options, such as lectures in traditional classroom settings. Individuals with average SDLRS scores are likely to be successful in more independent situations, but are not fully comfortable with handling the entire process of identifying their learning needs, planning their learning, and then implementing their learning plan. Individuals with above average or high SDLRS scores usually prefer to determine their own learning needs, plan their learning, and then implement their learning plan. (This does not mean people with above average or high SDLRS scores never choose to be in a structured learning situation. They may choose traditional courses or workshops as a part of their learning plan.)

The adult version of the SDLRS has been translated into French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, German, Finnish, Greek, and Italian. The SDLRS has been used in more than 75 doctoral dissertations. For further information about the SDLRS, write to Guglielmino & Associates, 734 Marble Way, Boca Raton, FL 33432.

Tools to Determine Appropriate Use of SDL

My concern about individual readiness for SDL was addressed in the work of Long and the Guglielminos. But I was still concerned about the indiscriminant use of SDL without regard to the subject matter being learned. Certain business subjects (such as accounting), by nature, require the direction of a teacher/trainer. For example, the non-accountant does not know what he/she doesn't know, or how to go about learning it. Self-directed learning could lead to mis-education.

To guide the appropriate use of SDL based on subject matter, I created *The Continuum of Business Education* (Figure 4.1). Greater learner participation (more trainee group discussion or

SDL) is appropriate as one moves to the right on the continuum.

Teacher-Directed (Training)		Learner-Directed (Development)
<u>Technical Skills Courses</u>	<u>People Skills Courses</u>	<u>Conceptual Skills Courses</u>
accounting finance	team building conflict management	leadership strategy

Source: Beitler, M.A. (2000).

FIGURE 4.1: The Continuum of Business Education

The Continuum of Business Education recognizes the need of organizational members to acquire three types of skills: technical, people, and conceptual. These three types of skills are quite different in nature and require different teaching/learning strategies. While lectures may be effective for accounting or finance, acquiring people skills requires the use of group discussion and role playing. Conceptual skills, different from both technical and people skills, require teaching/learning techniques that emphasize critical thinking and integrative thinking (e.g., case studies).

The Continuum of Business Education is helpful once the organizational members have demonstrated that they are ready to succeed at SDL. Lucy Guglielmino's SDLRS instrument is designed to indicate learner readiness to engage in SDL.

While the learner characteristics are addressed in the work of Long and the Guglielminos, the subject matter/environmental characteristics are addressed in depth in my own work (Beitler, 1999, 2000).

It is necessary to analyze three sets of variables to determine if SDL is appropriate. Analyzing the three variables (teacher characteristics, learner characteristics, and subject matter characteristics) is facilitated by using the following checklist:

	Teacher- Directed	Learner- Directed
1. The teacher's characteristics		
knowledge	high	low
experience	high	low
2. The learner's characteristics		
SDLRS score	low	high
knowledge	low	high
experience	low	high
maturity level	low	high
motivation level	low	high
ability to set goals	low	high
3. The subject matter/environmental characteristics		
"block of knowledge" --defined by profession	high	low
time availability	low	high
resource availability	low	high

FIGURE 4.2: The SDL Variables Checklist

Circling items on the left side of the Checklist indicates a need to move to the left (teacher-directed) side of the Continuum of Business Education. Circling items on the right side of the Checklist indicates a need to move to the right (learner-directed) side of the Continuum.

SDL in the Workplace

Several U.S. companies have been implementing SDL as part of their long-term OL strategies. Guglielmino and Murdick (1997) report the following companies using SDL: Motorola, Disney, Aetna, U.S. West, Levi Strauss, Owens-Corning, and American Airlines.

Several studies (Durr, 1992; Merriam, 1993; Piskurich, 1993)

note a number of efficiency and effectiveness reasons for using SDL:

1. SDL has greater relevance to the particular needs of the individual learner.
2. SDL allows greater scheduling flexibility.
3. SDL promotes meta-skills for approaching and solving problems beyond the immediate learning project.
4. SDL allows for frequent and timely updating of skills and knowledge.
5. SDL can provide more focused learning in highly specialized fields.

Also, as individuals "develop their self-directed learning skills, they tend to become more self-confident and more apt to solve problems on their own" (Guglielmino & Murdick, 1997).

Using Both SDL & Teacher-Directed Learning

It is important not to think of self-directed versus teacher-directed education in terms of which one is better. There is not an ideal here; we must think in terms of which one is *appropriate*.

Is it possible for teacher-directed and self-directed learning to occur simultaneously in a single organization? Yes; in fact, both should be occurring simultaneously at all levels of the organization. Managing multiple teaching/learning projects throughout the organization can be facilitated by the use of learning agreements. Let's look now at the benefits individuals and organizations gain from the use of learning agreements.

Learning Agreements

I have been a vocal advocate for the use of learning agreements (also called learning contracts) in organizations for many years (Beitler, 1999, 2000). But I didn't invent the concept.

Contract learning was advocated throughout the 1970s and 1980s by Malcolm Knowles (1975, 1986). Knowles, who taught graduate students at Boston University and North Carolina State University, found lecturing to *older* students ineffective because of their unique backgrounds and needs. Knowles decided to write a learning contract with each of his students. The contract was an agreement between teacher and student; it detailed what would be learned and how it would be learned (Knowles, 1986). Knowles' concept of the learning contract has been implemented in numerous graduate schools, including Norwich University (Montpelier, Vermont) and The Union Institute (Cincinnati, Ohio). Throughout the 1990s, I advocated the use of learning agreements with mid-career professionals and managers in organizational settings (Beitler, 1999, 2000).

While I have been an advocate of self-directed learning in organizations (discussed in the previous section), I have always kept one of Knowles' warnings in mind. Knowles (1986) cautioned, "some people get so enamored of one technique that they use it in every situation, whether it is appropriate or not" (p.3). To heed his admonition, I try to consider every imaginable technique before determining "the best" one for a specific learner to acquire a specific skill (or knowledge).

Capture of Individual Learning

While I can argue for the use of both teacher-directed learning and self-directed learning in the organization (based on the SDL Variables Checklist), it is more important to discuss how to *capture* individual learning for the benefit of the entire organization. That result is one of the major advantages of learning agreements. A learning agreement between the supervisor and his/her subordinate can incorporate both teacher-directed and self-directed learning, as appropriate.

These agreements provide guidance for the supervisor and subordinate; they also provide a way to document, capture, and share knowledge throughout the organization. These agreements can provide the foundation for a learning organization in which individuals engage in self-directed study and then share their new knowledge with other organizational members (e.g.,

participation in group or peer discussions). These group discussions (we will look at these further in the next chapter) enhance the critical-thinking skills of the individual and add to the knowledge base of the organization.

Steps in Writing a Learning Agreement

Learning agreements are actually quite simple to write, if they are incorporated into the employee performance evaluation process. The performance evaluation should include a determination of the employee's learning and development needs.

Once the learning and development needs are agreed upon by employee and supervisor, only four writing steps are necessary (Beitler, 1999):

1. What will be learned?
2. How will it be learned?
3. How will the learning be documented?
4. How will the learning be evaluated?

The first step involves determining the learning objectives for the upcoming year. *What* will be learned must be determined (and agreed upon) before *how* it will be learned is considered.

The second step specifies the resources that will be used (for example, books, journal articles, workshops, mentoring, experiential learning).

The third step defines how the learning will be documented (for example, through thematic papers, reaction papers, annotated bibliographies, videotapes).

The fourth step defines how the learning will be evaluated, who will conduct the evaluation, and what the evaluation criteria will be.

When incorporated into the annual performance appraisal process, learning agreements do not substantially increase the workloads of individual managers and workers. Learning agreements, utilizing both self-directed learning and teacher-

directed learning, can dramatically improve an organization's ability to promote, reward, capture, and benefit from individual learning.

Using SDL & Learning Agreements

With the use of SDL and learning agreements, the organization takes major steps towards becoming a learning organization. Remember the earlier definition?

"A learning organization is an organization that promotes, rewards, and captures individual learning for the benefit of the organization."

Now, with the concepts of self-directed learning and learning agreements in mind, let's look at how to *promote*, *reward*, and *capture* individual learning for the *benefit* of the organization.

Promoting Individual Learning

Nobody denies that self-directed learning takes place in organizations. Long and Morris (1995) found more than fifty articles and papers published between 1983 and 1993 concerning SDL in business and industry.

Foucher's (1995) interviews with HR practitioners revealed four organizational variables that promote SDL in the workplace:

1. the presence of a participative management style;
2. a supportive environment in which employees enjoy autonomy, and in which management believes the employees are competent and motivated;
3. support for experimentation and tolerance for error; and
4. support for unplanned, non-sequential learning activities.

Foucher's (1995) work corroborates Baskett's (1993) findings in his study of workplace learning. Baskett found the following factors important in enhancing organizational learning:

1. opportunities for employees to contribute to the organization's goals and values,
2. an environment of trust and mutual respect,
3. support for risk taking and innovation, and
4. collaboration among organization members.

One powerful way of promoting learning in general, and self-directed learning in particular, is to write learning goals into the learning agreement of every employee. If the learning goals are accomplished, the employee should be rewarded, as he or she would be for reaching any other goal.

Rewarding Individual Learning

Organizational reward systems should reinforce desired behaviors --those behaviors that support the organization's strategic plan and mission. The behavioral psychologists tell us, *Whatever behavior you reward, you get more of*. Managers must be careful about what activities they reward.

Every organization should be concerned about performance management. Performance management systems include goal setting, performance appraisal, and rewards (reinforcements for desired behaviors). As stated earlier, the learning agreement should clearly set learning goals for the individual. The annual (or semi-annual) performance appraisal should compare learning goals with actual learning accomplished. If the goals in the previous learning agreement have been met, they should be rewarded.

When using learning agreements, goal setting should be a collaborative process. If employees are involved in the goal-setting process, they are more likely to buy-in. Goals energize and focus behavior.

The goal-setting process should begin with a learning needs analysis. The goals in the organization's strategic plan should be considered first, followed by the goals of the department or group. The goals determined for the individual should be both personally satisfying and supportive of the organization's strategic plan.

Performance appraisals are essential because they provide a feedback loop for employees. Generally speaking, most employees are trying to do a good job, but they need guidance. Performance appraisals should be seen as the critical link between goal setting and rewards.

Organizations should, at minimum, consider using a 360-degree feedback system, in which employees receive performance appraisal feedback from supervisors, peers, and subordinates. More feedback data leads to more insight. Once again, feedback should be elicited on behaviors that are significant to implementing the organization's strategic plan.

The rewards themselves can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. Traditionally, organizations have relied heavily on extrinsic rewards (particularly money). But ultimately, the overuse of cash rewards will weaken the company's competitive position.

Intrinsic rewards can, in many cases, be more motivating than extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards involve the satisfaction derived from the work itself. Intrinsic rewards can be highly motivating in the learning process. If the employee is studying something interesting or beneficial for career advancement, he or she will be quite enthusiastic. So, clearly we want buy-in during the goal-setting process.

Capturing Individual Learning

Capturing individual learning is a necessity for converting individual learning into organizational learning.

The third step in writing the learning agreement involves how the learning will be documented. These documents (for example, thematic papers, reaction papers, annotated bibliographies, videotapes), once created, should be made readily available to organizational members. These documents can be posted on the company's intranet or in one of the more sophisticated electronic knowledge management systems that are now available. Of course, the old-fashioned methods still work too: file cabinets, memos, and hard-copy reports.

Capturing learning experiences eliminates a large amount of

duplicated effort. For example, if one employee finds a particular workshop to be a waste of time, the organization wants to be sure not to send anybody else. It is important is to capture these experiences.

We will look at the capture and transfer of knowledge in more detail in the next chapter.

Practice Log 4.1 - Who benefited?

When I was working in banking, our bank president approved my verbal request to attend a one-week workshop in New York City. All expenses (tuition, books, airfare, hotel, meals, and taxi fares) were paid--no strings attached.

As I was flying home after the workshop, I was looking over my notes and thinking about telling Bob (one of our senior managers) about some of the great ideas that were shared during the workshop. Bob had been wrestling with some of these issues for months.

On my first day back on the job, I saw Bob running down the hallway toward me. I could hardly wait to tell him about what I had learned. Bob saw me and said, "Mike, long time, no see. Have you been sick?"

"No," I quickly responded, "I've been at a workshop in New York."

Bob looked at his watch and said, "Glad to hear you are feeling better," then ran down the hallway.

Would you believe that nobody, not a single person, ever asked me about that workshop? Who benefited?

Organizations must promote individual learning, but organizations will not benefit from it unless the individual learning is captured and made available to organizational members. At a minimum, reaction papers (positive or negative) from organizational members who have attended workshops should be reviewed before an organization commits to sending more

participants to the same workshop.

Benefiting from Individual Learning

The literature on organizational learning speaks of individuals learning new KSAs (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) for the benefit of the organization. It is important to analyze the learning needs of both the individual and the organization. Confessore and Kops (1998) state, "the learning organization must account for the learning needs of both the individual and the organization" (p.371).

The new individual KSAs must then be collected and transformed into organizational learning. Confessore and Kops (1998) believe, "all the perspectives used to describe organizational learning include some dimension of transforming individual knowledge into collective knowledge--that is, knowledge determined, shared, interpreted, and used collectively throughout the organization" (p.366). Dixon (1994) defined organizational learning as a process by which information (determined by the organization as meaningful) is communicated by and throughout the organization. Other writers, including Senge (1990), emphasized the importance of a systemic approach to learning in the organization.

Watkins and Marsick (1993) defined six imperatives for an organization to benefit from learning in the workplace:

1. creating continuous learning opportunities,
2. promoting inquiry and dialogue,
3. encouraging collaboration and team learning,
4. establishing systems to capture and share learning,
5. empowering people to have a collective vision, and
6. connecting the organization to the environment.

Summary

The concept of the learning organization, while inspiring, will remain only a concept without the use of SDL and learning

agreements.

An organizational culture in which continuous learning occurs at every level of the organization should be the goal and definition of the learning organization.

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