

Learning Requires Developing Strong Anchors

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Have you ever wondered why learning some tasks are more difficult than others. While there are many dynamics that influence our ability to learn, one dynamic that we need to understand is how to anchor new knowledge. Remember when you were in elementary school and the first week of school seemed like a total waste; because all the teacher did was review what you learned last year. The teacher was actually setting an anchor for learning. What happens in the corporate setting is people often forget to set an anchor for learning and the result is the business or employee is unsuccessful in the endeavors. So to begin setting an anchor the instructor needs to understand if the skill requires training or developing.

The terms training and development are often used interchangeably, when the skills they provide are very different. Professionally speaking, most trainers are really developers, but since that industries rarely understand the difference, we identify ourselves as trainers. The process of training refers to providing learning for a precise skill or task that will be applied to a similar task. For example, learning to type on a keyboard is directly applied to another keyboard, or learning to use a palm pilot will be directly applied to using a palm pilot device. The training sets the anchor for the learning because once a skill is learned all the learner has to do is directly apply the skill and practice it to keep the skill fluent.

Development is about learning a general skill in order to better perform a business process. A course in communications is an example of development. This course provides general information to a wide range of audience participants. The communication skills learned have to be transferred by the learner back to their specific setting. This creates a large gap in the transfer of learning and the attendee can accidentally lose much of what is learned. The goal with development programs is to help learners narrow the gap in transferring knowledge from one setting to another. Development is most successful when the learning is anchored to past knowledge or experience. Have you ever attended a seminar and the instructor facilitating the program provided you with some great new ideas? So you leave the program motivated and willing to apply this knowledge, but a few days later you are still doing the same old things the same old way. The problem isn't that you are losing your memory!

In addition to setting the anchor for learning, the next best anchor is repetition, tell them what skill they are developing, develop the skill with practice, and then have them reflect on ways they will apply this newly developed skill in the work setting. Good anchors are also set with credibility in the instructor. Instructors should be able to dive deep into the industries needs, because once employees have developed a rapport with an instructor, then learning becomes faster and easier. Each new instructor has to establish credibility with employees and learn what the employees need, this takes away valuable learning time. So, the next time you get ready to learn something new determine if you need training or developing. If the skill requires training, then repetition is the anchor you need. If skill requires developing, then anchor the information on past knowledge or experience so that it can be transferred to the new setting.

As a rock climber, my anchors are very important to me for my safety. As a trainer facilitating learning, setting anchors for my audience members to develop skills is just as important. Remember we all learn and retain information differently. Research by D.G. Treichler in Audio-Visual Communications found students learn:

10% of what they read;

20% of what they hear;

30% of what they see;

50% of what they see and hear;

70% of what they discuss with people, whose opinions they value;

80% of what they personally experience; and

90% of what they teach to other people.

As Confucius said: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I experience and I understand."

Make learning an interactive and fun experience!