

The Learning Spiral

A Powerful Tool for Learning in Teams

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We tend to make sense of the world by developing general 'theories' of how the world works, and testing and refining these theories through experience. When we learn something new, we integrate new knowledge with what we already know to progressively build up conceptual models of how the world works. The conceptual models - or mental models - exist in our heads and are not always made explicit.

The learning cycle is a model that emphasizes the process we use to make sense of the world, and is very helpful in making that process more explicit. We have developed a practical aid based on the learning cycle, called the learning spiral (see Figure 7.2). The learning spiral provides a way to build meaningful conceptual models, to build on experience, and make this explicit.

There are five main stages in the learning spiral. First, do something. It can be anything - take a decision, some form of action, or something familiar but done in a different way. Examples could include trying to persuade through negotiation rather than use authority, or try out real coaching skills. Second, reflect on how it went and, where possible, obtain feedback from people affected or observers (e.g. what your mistakes were, how they occurred). Third, build a simple model for how to do it better next time based on your mistakes and experience. It can be anything you like. Possibilities include checklists, diagrams, flowcharts, and mnemonics.

The challenge is to try and capture in terms that are appropriate to you-, given the situation you find yourself in, exactly what it is you should be doing to get what you are learning right. In effect you are writing advice to yourself about how to do something. The process works best if you avoid (or ignore) theoretical input at the outset.

The fourth stage involves trying out the task again, but this time with the support of your new 'model'. As before, reflect on how well it went, obtain feedback where possible, and revise your model in the light of mistakes and other experience. It may be helpful at this stage, but only at this stage, to seek more 'expert' advice on your model by additional reading, showing it to others, including training and development specialists. Do not, however, include anything that does not make sense to you in the light of experience. After this again try your targeted behaviour or action, but this time guided by the revised model.

The reason the process is a spiral rather than a loop is that you can go on testing and revising as much as you see fit, all the time increasing your skill and understanding.

There are two main strands in the learning spiral. The first increases understanding (by building your own theory or guiding principles) and the second increases your skill in doing or achieving something. Learning begins

with developing an understanding of the task in hand, and skill in carrying it out builds on this understanding. Eventually the two overlap and then spiral outwards with one or the other taking prominence as needed.

A feature of the learning spiral by comparison with the learning cycle is that the latter is a closed loop, whereas the learning spiral moves outwards into areas of the unknown. The areas where we do not have full understanding become the springboard for further learning. Some of this further learning may take the form of learning cycles that are attached to the spiral.

Another feature of the learning spiral is its dynamic quality. It is similar in some ways to a tightly coiled spring, which has pressure from within to expand outwards. Like the spring in a clockwork motor (an old-fashioned analogy to be sure) the unwinding must be done in a relatively controlled manner to obtain the desired benefit.

The learning spiral expects that things need not be done or understood perfectly. It expects mistakes to be made. Through reflecting on these mistakes and building them into an 'advisory' model or personal theory which is continually revised in the light of experience, the spiral optimises learn-from mistakes and successes.

The advice you develop for yourself using the learning spiral will be much more powerful than any other model or theory, however sophisticated and elaborate, which has been developed by someone else. This is even the case when compared to the models and theories of experts who make their living from giving advice. Because you have created a model in your own words, based on your own conclusions drawn from your own experience, you are able to achieve what we have called *internal- or deep learning*. This is in contrast to the *surface learning* that is often the result of lectures and more traditional teaching methods typical of so much training. We have also developed a group-based form of the learning spiral that can be a very powerful aid to learning (see Chapter 8).

Here is an example of a personal model (a tool) that I built up progressively in the light of my experience. The tool is designed to improve my public speaking, especially at conferences. I began by listening to tapes of several conference papers I had given. It was a painful experience. I then drew up a list of items that I needed to improve and tried putting them into practice. I reflected on my performance and also on feedback from a public speaking coach. I examined the adequacy of my guidance material and revised it in the light of experience and tried it again at the next public speaking opportunity. Again, I sought feedback on my own performance and also the adequacy of my personal tool to improve my performance. The tool will continue to grow and change as I struggle to improve my performance.

The first part of the tool consists of two diagrams that I created as part of the process of internalising what for me was most important. I drew on the 'theory' of public speaking but my own experience and this shaped what I needed. Too often, theory and guiding principles (beloved tools of trainers and consultants) are given precedence over personal experience and mistakes, with the result that theory and other people's experience dominates and

restricts rather than enhances personal learning. My two guiding principles are shown in Figures 7.3 and 7.4.

My next piece of creative graphics is shown in Figure 7.5. Here I attempt to capture the core process for me personally. The weight at the bottom of the chain threatens to break it. There is a separate list of my weaknesses and vulnerabilities that are not reproduced here. The chain will also break because of the weak links that are personal to me. For each of these I created separate tools. For example, I have created a decision-making and a committing process and a checklist of do's and don'ts when presenting.

This model will continue to grow and evolve. It is based on the learning spiral.

It works for me because it:

- Derives from my own experience
- Capitalizes on the mistakes I have made
- Is expressed in my own words
- Uses concepts and graphics created by me
- Avoids jargon
- Meets my personal (rather than general) needs
- Will work because I created it
- Will change as my needs develop.

Above all, it is based largely on my mistakes and my experience and is not shaped first and foremost by the theory and guidance of others.