



Are your people ready to learn?

Lisa Rubinstein

Making a case for learning initiatives may always have its challenges, but in recent years, with increasing time and financial pressures, it's become even harder. No-one has much free time on their hands and while people may theoretically be open and interested in growth and development, they are also often caught up in immediate and urgent issues that dampen their enthusiasm for anything perceived as time away from work or adding to the current load.

Over the years I have been interested in the underlying factors driving our perceptions and corresponding behaviours. Through research into the source of performance, I have found that behaviours are often a function of a particular operating state people are in that drives certain priorities and mindset.

Recently I developed a matrix that helps distinguish the greater cultural and often unseen issues driving those behaviours. Understanding where people are thinking and operating from can be useful in assessing their readiness to learn.

Consider that our performance and results are a function of the degree to which we take action with integrity. By integrity, I don't mean in the moral sense. Rather, it is the extent to which one fulfils their promises and behaves in ways that are both appropriate to the situation and help maintain a wholeness or workability of the relationship, team or organisation.

People's behaviours can then be categorised into one of four quadrants, which I have labelled as: Critical Thinking; Peak Performance; Learned Helplessness; and False Logic. Each corresponds to specific behaviours, mindset, challenges and results.

First the good news!

Critical thinking

This quadrant represents the open learner who is already willing to give up 'doing' time for reflection and development. They

manage their time effectively to step back from other activities to plan, vision, assess or reappraise.

People in Critical thinking are more likely to be in a positive, productive state of mind, accessing their creative brain for brainstorming, lateral thinking, troubleshooting and detailed planning. One would also expect to see them exercising greater cognitive and emotional flexibility and control, and be open to learning and development.

When communicating a development opportunity to someone already in a positive learning state, you know that most of the hard work has been done. You'll then just need to ensure that your plan fits in

that needs to be taken into consideration when proposing your initiatives.

Peak performance

As in Critical thinking, when in Peak performance or flow, people generally are in a positive, highly productive emotional and mental state. They are able to monitor activities to move between taking action, and stepping back to appraise and adjust. This is the ideal operating state for people—where they move between Peak performance and Critical thinking—as this state is easily sustainable, ensuring the best results for efforts with the right levels of stress and challenge.

The brain shows high alpha activity, and is in a state of relaxed wakefulness with a heightened ability to concentrate, learn and perform. There is also greater coordination and efficiency of activity, firing only those regions necessary for the immediate tasks and thus allowing for sustainable performance.

Peak performers will be more open to learning opportunities that will reinforce their ability to perform and achieve. This will include less tangible soft skills as long as they are linked back to the learner's key priorities. Communication and building partnership will be essential to gaining approval for your initiatives. But as with people in Critical thinking, you'll find a willing learner.

Now for the bad news.

Understanding where people are thinking and operating from can be useful in assessing their readiness to learn.

with their key objectives and brings in an expected return on their investment of both time and money.

Performance zone

People operating in this quadrant are working at a level of either high or peak performance. More than just semantics, there is a world of difference between the two operating states

High performance

Unfortunately, this is where the majority of people in the workforce operate. While people will vary the degree to which they act with integrity, their level of activity is quite high. This high performance corresponds to an increase in mental and physical stress as this shift usually is in response to time and resource-poor situations. The willingness to learn gets put aside for more immediate priorities as people become more reactive.

In a stressed state, the brain tends to switch control of behaviours to more primitive reactions that are more instinctual and automatic. This allows for fast reactions and is important in times of great activity; however, it comes at a cost as it may also lead to more rigid thinking, low empathy and poor emotional regulation.

High performers are more inclined to access known strategies based on what worked in the past, versus being open to learning anything new. There just isn't enough time to learn until they slow down, step back and plan. While they may seem open to the ideas, you may notice that meetings, conversations or scheduling gets pushed back farther and farther down the line.

Any proposed learning initiative will be measured against immediate and urgent needs, with the background concerns of lack of time and resource to cope with existing pressures. The bottom line is they are most likely just unwilling or unable to consider taking time out for training, or adding anything else to the 'To Do' list. You either need to ratchet up the pain associated with the status quo to get their attention, or hold off until things calm down.

False logic

People who take action with decreasing levels of integrity tend to display a lack of rational, effective, long-term thinking that can be either the result of recent stress, or an indication of a neurobiological problem. In either case, their willingness to learn will be greatly diminished.

In the case of transient false logic, people who are under great pressure and stress are less able to regulate their emotions. They are more likely to be irritated, moody and disinterested in discussing any activities beyond that which will get them past the immediate crisis. They will also exhibit a perceptual narrowing—their world view shrinks as they focus on immediate issues and crises.

Assisting them in prioritising and decreasing their stress will need to take precedent over everything else. They would tend to be interested in a 'quick fix' so park the long-term learning initiatives. They just won't be heard over the current noise.

Most problematic are those who operate from an ingrained false logic as they present challenges that go way beyond being open to learning. They are less capable of distinguishing right from wrong and lack the same level of moral ethics and aversion to risk that prevent most people from engaging in bad behaviours. These are your bullies, liars and cheaters, aggressively pursuing their own agenda, sometimes to the detriment of the organisation.

People operating with an ingrained false logic also have an impaired ability to think rationally and plan ahead. More importantly, is they are less emotionally aware and unwilling to shine the light onto

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themselves. While they may participate in a learning initiative, they'll be the ones heckling from the back of the room, threatening to derail the programme or claiming it's a 'waste of time'.

This 'toxic' person often has a profound effect on team and organisational culture. More than just assessing their readiness to learn, their future in the organisation should be questioned.

Learned helplessness

Whether it is in reaction to the inappropriate behaviours from others, general organisational cultural issues or overwhelming time pressures, people can quite easily feel the effect of their circumstances and give up.

People in a state of learned helplessness often shut down and dissociate as neurochemical changes affect the flow of energy and information to the brain in ways not too dissimilar to a traumatic experience. They may still get the job done, but at a quality below their ability, or they may procrastinate from a sense of overwhelm, or second guess themselves and 'choke'.

In the case of a learning initiative, they may experience a diminished self-esteem and have concerns about their ability to participate in the program, or feel overwhelmed at the thought of adding more to their schedule.

The good news is that while they may be resigned to varying degrees or may think that their situation is intractable, they will be open to assistance in resolving the issues and moving past the pain.

Conclusion

In any situation that requires intervention, it is critical to identify all the factors involved with their current state of mind, including the greater cultural issues that led to their behaviours. There may be a need for stress or time management, conflict resolution or even coaching to help people deal with the challenges that have contributed to their current state of being. Knowing what state people are operating in and whether they are authentically open to learning will assist in determining the most effective way to gain buy-in for your initiatives and save you time and aggravation in the long run. ■

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