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HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR

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HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR: THE NEW NAME FOR HC MAGAZINE

Switched on & READY TO LEARN?



How can you improve the readiness of your employees to undertake learning initiatives? **Lisa Rubinstein** outlines one fail-safe approach

Globally, companies spend an estimated \$135bn p.a. on training and development. However, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, approximately 90% of new skills learned are lost within a year, representing a massive waste of time, energy and resources, as well as a missed opportunity for companies and employees.

Unfortunately, the majority of organisations do not take into consideration not just the degree to which people are able to process the information being delivered but also the extent to which they are actually open to new ideas and *ready* to learn. It's a critical difference that can make or break any initiative.

How can you ensure your people are ready to learn?

SWITCHED ON OR OFF?

As opposed to being able to learn, being ready to learn can be defined as a *mental state of awareness and responsiveness to your internal and external environment that allows for learning and adaptive behaviour*. In other words, to learn, one must be ready to take the time to respond constructively to what is being conveyed and then use it to alter one's thinking and corresponding behaviour.

When we're racing to meet that critical deadline, with 300 unread emails in our inbox, and back-to-back meetings all day, we're unlikely to be interested in training on a new IT system. We just want to get things done.

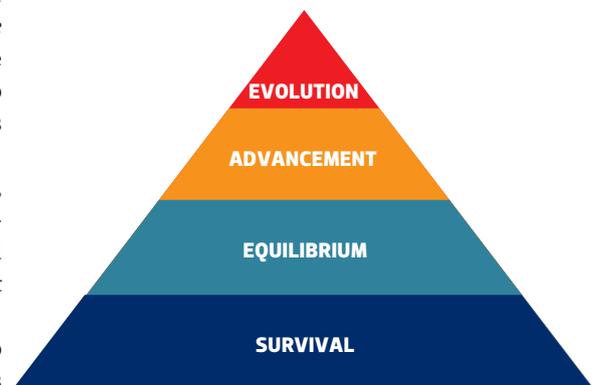
As opposed to being able to learn, being ready to learn is not simply a function of an individual's

capacity to process and utilise information. It's actually a function of three interrelated factors that work in concert to influence one's readiness to step away from current activities to engage in a learning process. This pertains to any learning experience, from a formal program or evaluation, to a casual exchange of ideas or even a momentary examination of current behaviours.

Those three interrelated factors influencing our readiness to learn are our individual capacity for learning; the people around us that influence our mental, emotional and physical well-being; and our internal and external environment.

Our potential for learning can be improved the more ready we are to take in and process new information. That readiness depends on our perspectives that drive current behaviours, how we relate to others and deal with our circumstances.

HIERARCHY OF PERSPECTIVES



Consider that our perspectives fall into one of four categories: survival, equilibrium, advancement, and evolutionary thinking, together forming a 'Hierarchy of Perspectives' pyramid.

The base of the pyramid is survival, which occurs when we are in a situation that triggers a threat state in the brain. This occurs in situations ranging from a new and challenging role, to suffering from an illness or lack of sleep, to coping with a difficult colleague, large structural or strategic changes, or just a simple busy day.

Any situation in which we feel stressed may trigger a survival perspective. The brain experiences a cognitive narrowing as we focus on the immediate and urgent and put aside any consideration of future ideas. This also occurs in new situations requiring focused attention demanding conscious effort and energy.

Next is a state of equilibrium in which one experiences a sense of stability, predictability and order. This can involve anything from settling into that new role, to acclimatising to the high pace so that we no longer feel stressed, to working in the same role every day for years on end.

The brain craves certainty and is wired to want to predict what will next happen. That sense of certainty triggers a reward response – a release of dopamine, which results in a similar feeling to eating a piece of chocolate or having that first sip of coffee in the morning. It feels good. That response will be more acutely noticed the greater the change in situation. So, receiving your morning newspaper generates less of a reward response than when that new promotion finally comes through.

When we experience certainty, stability and order, we are then able to move forward, take risks and try something new. However, if we are too dependent on certainty and too resistant to change, our readiness to learn will also be very low.

Gaining that sense of certainty enables us to then move forward to the next level, which is advancement thinking. At this level, we are very focused on ourselves. This occurs in situations when you notice that you need to focus on yourself.

You may seek to improve your diet, begin exercising or get more sleep, or to take time off work and recharge your batteries. This is the time when you focus on your needs, which can be very necessary and important. It is also when you will be open to learning something that will enable you to

develop personally or advance your career objectives.

However, there is a dark side to advancement thinking and that is when your focus is solely on yourself, often to the detriment of others. It is when your interest is only in gaining more power, money or status that you risk the kind of narcissistic thinking that leads to a reduced capacity to make the right decisions.

For instance, advancement thinkers in a sales role can produce excellent short-term results but struggle to develop the long-term relationships that are crucial to building a sustainable business as they aggressively pursue that one win. Advancement thinking leaders will tend to be very dominating, autocratic and self-centred, stifling independent thinking and autonomy.

This type of advancement thinker will be disinclined to be introspective, and closed to learning. They are highly likely to deflect any perceived criticism or challenge to their world view. These are the bullies, the cheaters and autocrats. Their value needs to be carefully weighed against the damage they can inflict on others and the organisation as a whole.

TOP OF THE PYRAMID

Finally, at the apex of the hierarchy is evolutionary thinking. When we feel free enough to think about the future and plan, create or dream, we are in an evolutionary frame of mind. This is when we experience success in the wins of the people around us and are focused not just on ourselves but also on the people around us.

Evolutionary thinkers make excellent leaders. They tend to be self-reflective, with a high resilience. They seek out challenges or opportunities to learn and grow. Therefore their readiness to learn will be very high and they will be open to any opportunity that enables them to contribute more towards others and the overall success of the organisation.

It's important to have a range of perspectives in any organisation, as each level offers valuable thinking and corresponding behaviours. However, there are also pitfalls to be aware of. Knowing where your people are thinking from and what their priorities are will enable you to effectively tailor your initiatives to the specific focus of your target audiences and improve their readiness to engage in the process and learn. **HRD**



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