



The Case for **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**



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“Much of that which passes for experiential learning confuses *play* as learning with *learning as play*.”

There is no “new normal.” Welcome, however, to the new reality. Managing uncertainty isn’t for the faint of heart. The “great exit” door remains wide open. Hybrid employment is quickly becoming the only game in town. “Just in time” is returning to “just in case.” The technology that underscores the fourth industrial revolution lies waiting to pounce.¹ There is a discernable shift in power from the enterprise to the employees. And somewhere in the cornucopia of concern lies the reality that you can’t grow the business unless you grow the people in the business.

Selecting and promoting the right people, succession, coaching, and mentoring are all central pillars in people growth. As are a plethora of training and development initiatives. Technology, of course, is starting to play an ever more significant role. Shipping talent off to a well-known business school is still a popular option. Three shortfalls emerge, however: (1) cost; (2) the programs are generic; and (3) one swallow doesn’t make a summer. Developing one leader at a time is a little like playing golf on your own. You might be able to keep score but the real learning – learning from and sharing the experience with your colleagues – is missing.

Enter, stage left, in-house leadership development. Virtual being the less expensive and convenient option. Here we have to factor in the emerging economic reality. Organizations will be tempted to strip out cost – limiting their investment to only that which can be delivered online. Effective possibly. Inspirational, not so much.

The problem with taking the low road is that conferences, workshops and seminars send an important message. A buoyant (fully funded) leadership development agenda tells your most talented employees, “We want you to grow.” “We care about you.” “We have a vested interest in ensuring you have currency in the job market.” Cut back on the organization’s investment in learning and expect the problem of retaining talent to further fuel retention concerns. It’s a clear case of pay now or pay later.

¹ The thousands of railway workers resorting to aggressive union action should be cognisant of two words: “driverless trains.”



Investment that doesn't deliver defined value is an act of irresponsibility. Those charged with leadership development thus have to be ever vigilant in ensuring appropriate return on investment. Assuming that the culture the organization needs to create frames the context,² regardless of the approach, a well-designed leadership development intervention has five discreet elements: (1) new ideas, theory, knowledge, best-practice, competencies and/or skills; (2) inquiry – testing, validating and challenging the thinking/ideas presented; (3) unlearning and practice; (4) reflection; and (5) follow up. The ROI of the workshop is diminished if any one of these dimensions is not fully covered off.

Here one needs to factor in that today's participants are a far cry from yesterday's audience who would sit patiently as the lecturer read aloud the text that filled each of their PowerPoint slides. By comparison, the internet, social media and slick TV ads have made today's participants, especially those who believe that multitasking is their birthright, highly visually literate; a quality that, not infrequently, appears to induce a shortened attention span. The rule? Less PowerPoint and more power to.

Today's fast moving, interactive, wired era might be polished and image dominated, but learning by doing still has primacy when you need to change not what people do but how they think (mindset). Experiential learning, a standby in successful organizations since the 1960s, received a new lease of life in the pre-COVID leadership development world. Indeed, few workshops were complete without its cooking experience, pizza making, strategy war room, blind-walk, ropes program, outdoor experience, and/or drumming class, etc.

Even in a wired world, there is still room and a need for experiential learning. The dilemma? Much of that which passes for experiential learning confuses *play as learning* with *learning as play*. We need to organize a workshop on introducing the new business approach ... but as intended it would be pretty dull fare. We need to jazz it up. We need to make it fun. We need to do something different. Hey, let's do cooking! Let's have a ropes program. Now this is not to discount the entertainment factor entirely, but it raises the question, does the experiential component add value? Great feedback doesn't always mean time well spent. And forget about the ubiquitous "team building." Throwing people together and hoping for the best isn't much of a strategy.

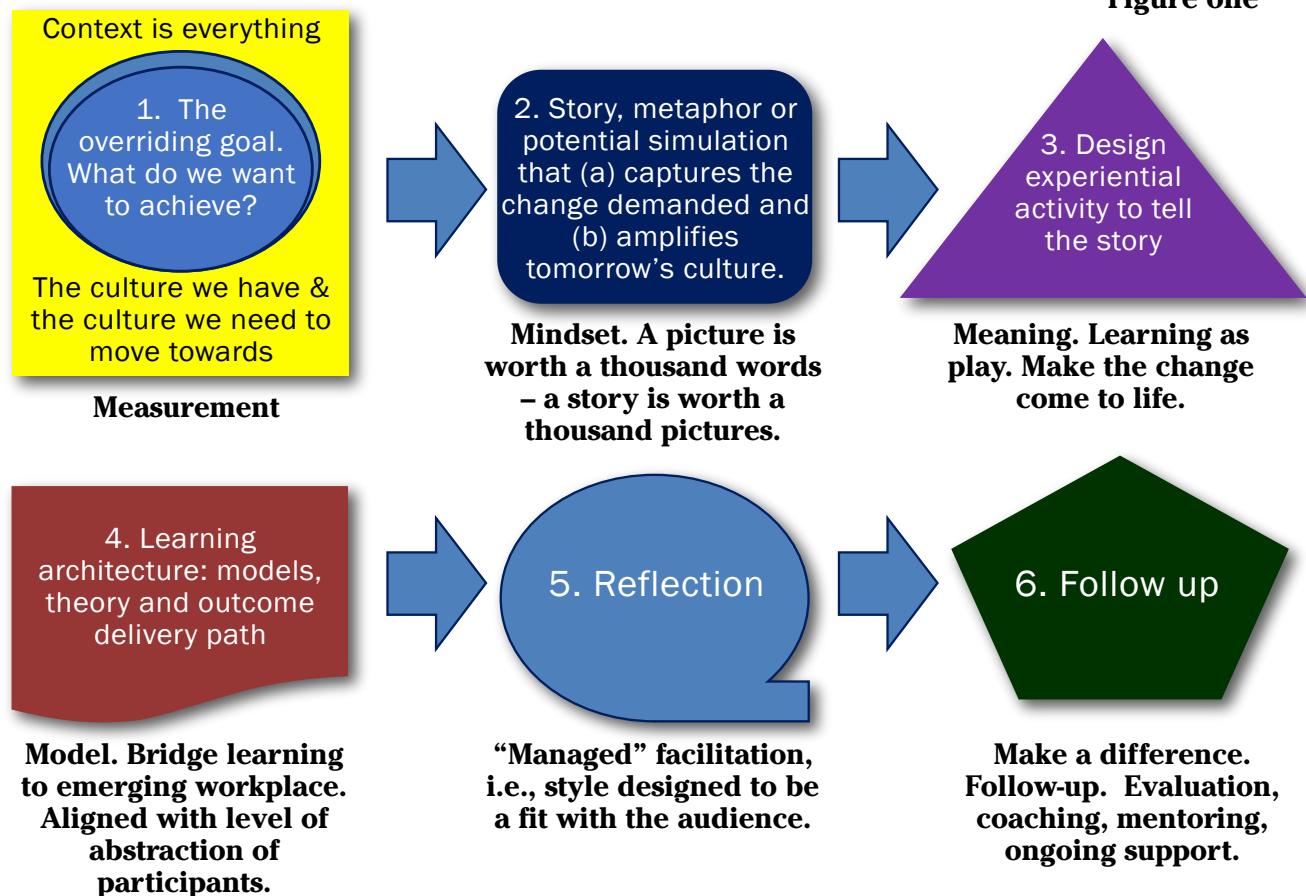
Learning as play works from an entirely different mindset. It introduces the experiential element not as merely something to toss over the wall, but as being central to the learning experience. Incorporating the five elements of good design identified earlier, designing and developing meaningful experiential learning draws on six critical building blocks. See **Figure one**.

2 It's difficult to understand why organizations embark on leadership development initiatives without agreeing on the culture the organization needs to create. In today's world, strategy is, at best, a work-in-progress. In fact, long after the strategy has been shredded, what will endure is the organization's culture.



1. **Measurement.** Clearly the outcome demanded in the workshop is of primary importance. Identifying the competencies, skills and/or knowledge participants need to acquire is essential. No less important is the context. Context has two dimensions. One: where do the competencies, skills and/or knowledge already thrive inside the organization and how can we take those examples and weave them into the workshop? There is no success like success! Our mirror neurons should not be denied. We are behavioural copying machines. Two: the organization's culture. The assumption that tomorrow will be a replay of today is to fail before even entering the fray. However, getting at culture demands more than a "consultative approach." If asked, those in the middle of the organization are likely to be more critical than is warranted. Meanwhile, because they created the way things are, those at the top can be more defensive than is always helpful. What is demanded is a robust tool to define the: (1) culture we need to retain (roots); and (2) the culture we have to create

Figure one



Experiential learning in six



(wings). A three dimensional view of culture is garnered by also assessing how both key customers and the capital markets view the organization.

Key learning: you can't manage what you don't measure.

2. **Mindset.** Before designing the experiential element it is important that those responsible translate the change demanded in the workshop into a story, metaphor and/or simple framework for a potential simulation. Several years ago I was asked to design an experience that brought to life the leadership shift demanded in a major mining firm. The metaphor that captured the leadership change was from “shark” to “dolphin.” A number of “dolphin camps” were conducted around the world – the first at the Epcot aquarium in Orlando, Florida, where participants, including the CEO, literally had lunch with the sharks and dinner with the dolphins. The hands-on instruction provided by the dolphin trainers adding unique grist to the learning mill. Dolphin leadership became a key factor in how the business was run. The business was later sold to a major competitor at a very high premium.

Key learning: we explore the world through metaphor and learn through stories. Trying to make what you have on the shelf work is a poor substitute for designing the activity around a compelling and relevant metaphor.





3. **Meaning.** It is important that the experience created has emotional impact. Activities such as race car driving can work, but aggressive sports can turn some participants off. Making the activity **REAL** means: **Relevant** - participants can follow the golden thread between the activity and what has to change; **Engaging** - action oriented, little waiting around time, creative tension, stretch and safety; **Allow** everyone to make a full contribution – optimum participation, team interaction; **Lasting impact** - the best experiences stay with people months, even years after the workshop.

Although involved in the design of elaborate experiential activities – a firefighting experience for a Swiss company at a high-tech firefighting center in Florida; and storytelling with Australian Aboriginals for a group of international executives being examples – I have discovered that the intervention need not be costly or extensive.

In fact, some of our most successful designs have been incredibly simple. Establishing competitive window cleaning businesses where teams were asked to come up with a differentiated value proposition, organizational values and bid to clean all the windows in the hotel comes to mind. The hotel manager listened to, provided a rationale and chose the winning bid. The learning provided the framework for the organization, in question, to revisit their business model.

One successful experiential activity was with an executive team in Brisbane. Newly formed, they were given \$200 dollars, that by legal means and working as a team, they had to double in one day. By registering as a charity and using the funds to set up collection boxes in some of the roughest pubs and bars in the city they raised several thousand dollars. And when, at the end of the day, a representative from the Children’s Hospital delivered a congratulatory certificate signed by a young boy with leukemia there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. No less important, the team experienced in a single day what would have otherwise taken months to evolve.

Key learning: analysis and information are needed to get people’s attention, but change (buy in) is ultimately rooted in emotion.

4. **Model.** Kurt Lewin said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Experiential learning is referred to as “learning” for a good reason. It’s not about the experience; it’s about what happens afterwards. The challenge is to bridge the workshop with the workplace. An activity where the goal is to take the team to the next level of performance being an example. It matters not how stimulating in the workshop, those insights have to be translated into action. People are busy, priorities quickly overwhelm good intent. Equally important, goals alone do not live long in a vacuum. Participants are significantly aided, therefore, when supported by a team model,³ one

3 A template that captures the building blocks of a successful team.



that allows them to quickly and easily calibrate: (1) where the team is today; and (2) the actions (specific outcomes) they need to work on back at work. When supported by the right experiential activity and an outstanding facilitator, the pieces are in place for the change to actually take place. Note: reference is made here to a team model but based on the outcome needed, there are any number of models that can be accessed or, better still, created.

Caution: invaluable as theory and models are, it has to be the right theory and/or model. It is important, therefore, to understand the level of abstraction of the participants. Some theories confuse a young, inexperienced group. By the same token, a model that is too simple will not engage an executive team.

Key learning: the greater the degree of change, the greater the value of a conceptual framework.

5. **Managed facilitation.** There is no learning without reflection. Reflection is, typically, orchestrated through facilitation. Reflection unsupported by appropriate theory and the right model is somewhat like trying to guide somebody through difficult terrain without a map. Moving forward means reflecting on the experience, matching reality





with the model and asking, “Where am I today and what steps do I need to take?” Unfortunately, the typical approach tends to be more along the lines of, “You have now been through the experience, what does that mean for you back at work?” The assumption that the participant, without access to theory, template and/or an elegant model, can unbundle the degree of complexity involved is a big step for the facilitator and a giant step for the participants.

As with the theoretical underpinning, reflection benefits from the right facilitation. Three forms of facilitation are available:

- i. Warrior facilitation. Difficult to pull off for the inexperienced, the in-your-face, aggressive, hold nothing back, shake ‘em up, warrior facilitation is often the right fit for a group that operates in a highly competitive environment. People learn at the edge. A group that spends their life hitting fastballs is unlikely to connect with the facilitator who pitches balls that their grandmother could hit out of the park.
- ii. Deductive facilitation. The facilitator as coach. Although guided if they stumble, participants identify both the questions that the experiential activity draws out





and the meaning behind the experience. Caution: it takes a special skill to be the orchestra leader when all the musicians come “armed” with brass instruments. A seasoned, highly experienced group often benefits most from a light touch.

- iii. Guided discovery. The facilitator acts as a full partner in the learning process. Using story, metaphor, symbolism and questions that challenge the participant’s mindset, the facilitator helps build the bridge between the experience and the “What to do differently Monday morning?” A young and/or inexperienced group benefit most.

A facilitator doesn’t simply turn up, run an entertaining session, ask a few questions and then depart. To be a good facilitator is to be the alter ego of all of those inside the organization who are charting a better way. The role at the front of the room is thus to subtly reflect the organization’s story, reinforce the organization’s values, project the change that the business seeks to bring about, and inspire participants to take the first hesitant steps. Anyone engaging an external facilitator is advised to reflect on one simple question: “Is this an individual I would personally choose to follow?”

Key learning: An international team is best supported by a facilitator with international experience.

- 6. **Make a difference.** The most limiting aspect of leadership development is lack of follow up. This applies especially to leadership workshops. Follow up implies an unambiguous, value-creating reason to hold the workshop - complemented by goals and outcomes that define not only skills and competencies but the culture shift being chartered. The tried and trusted trinity of follow up are: (1) measurement; (2) opportunity creation;⁴ and (3) ongoing feedback/coaching.

Key learning: without follow up, success is a fleeting concept. Without opportunity to practice the new behaviour, past performance dictates future action. And if the manager one-level-up doesn’t or cannot coach, then the needed change cannot be sustained.



In what seems to be an age ago now, I organized a leadership workshop in Portugal for a global organization based in Northern Europe. To take advantage of the local culture and to reinforce a metaphor emphasising nimbleness and agility, the experiential element of the workshop ended up being bullfighting. Not watching a bullfight, but learning how to fight the

4 Not a few leadership workshops focus on skills and competencies that the organization needs but, in reality, cannot be practiced.



bull! Now for those who love animals – I should point out that this was Portugal where the bull's horns are covered and the animal does not get injured. Either way I made a tactical error. The charming patron who owned the farm where they trained the bulls pointed out, what looked to me like, a rather fierce and overly large animal. I held out for a small bull but failed to notice the owner's apologetic smile when he accepted my suggestion. To cut a long story short, we quickly found that not only are smaller bulls built, well, like a bull - but they accelerate like a Ferrari. Fortunately, none of the injuries were too serious and afterwards, in admiration of its spirit, the CEO offered to buy the bull.

The safety considerations aside, there is an important principle to be drawn from the Portugal story - one that has implications for learning universally. *How* we learn is invariably more important than *what* we learn! The learning approach should model the emerging culture. Simple, instruction-based, follow the leader, downloading of how we want people to behave is not how a successful, twenty-first century organization must operate. Agile, figure it out, resilient, team-based, learning how to learn is both symbolically and practically the way forward. And the learning disconnect might well derail your wider cultural goals. Keep that essential learning principle and the six building blocks of experiential learning in mind the next time you are asked to organize a leadership workshop. Oh, and stay away from any and all short-legged bulls.

As organizations seek to grow their talent, much of the emphasis will be on virtual learning. The research suggests that the results can deliver a high ROI. There are times, however, when you need to work at the level of mindset. Times when getting better at doing what you have always done isn't going to get you to where you need to be. Times when team chemistry is an essential ingredient. Times when leaders have to recognise that they are in the emotional transportation business. Make experiential learning one of your leadership development options. And remember, it's called experiential **LEARNING** for a reason!



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*“Learning that
emphasises
agility and
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power to.”*

- J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around

the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs. Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award.

John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture.

As can be understood from the text, John has extensive experience with experiential learning. Much of it with major organizations, delivered internationally.

