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Catalyzing Employee Change With Transformative Learning

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Forum

Catalyzing Employee Change With Transformative Learning

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~~Abstract~~

Businesses, organizations, and government agencies have invested heavily in employee training. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reports these costs as 2.15%~~ percent~~ of payroll (ASTD, 2008). A large amount of this investment is directed at improving employee knowledge and skills. ~~While~~ Although most organizations are good at this, often a need exists to develop a deeper level of behavior change in employees. This type of change can be difficult to accomplish and sustain over time. Adult education theory, in particular transformative education theory, has enhanced the ability of organizations to bring about deeper change in employees through training and development. Therefore, human resource development professionals need to become

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familiar with this theory and its implications for employee training and development.

Thank you to Dr. Lee Dyer, Cornell University, and to Martin Daniel, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University—human resource developers/scholars extraordinaire—for their helpful review of this article.

~~Key words: training, human resource development, transformation, change, learning~~

~~**Introduction**~~

Businesses, organizations, and government agencies have invested heavily in employee training. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reports these costs as 2.15% ~~percent~~ of payroll (ASTD, 2008). ~~A large amount~~Much of this investment is directed at improving employee knowledge and skills. ~~While~~ Although most organizations are good at this, often a need exists to develop a deeper level of behavior change in employees. This type of change can be difficult to accomplish and sustain over time. Adult education theory, in particular transformative education theory, has enhanced the ability of organizations to bring about deeper change in employees through training and development. Therefore, human resource development (HRD) professionals need to become familiar with this theory and its implications for employee training and development.

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Transformative Learning to Promote Deep Change

Learning is about change. Change is transformative when individuals, groups, and organizations arrive at new perspectives and action that greatly differ from their past views and behaviors. Jack Mezirow (1991), the founding father of transformative learning theory, believes that adults transform by reconstructing their frames of reference. As individuals explore, question, affirm, and change these frames or meaning schemes, they are transformed. Transformative learning is thus defined as, ~~"~~"the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical reflection~~"~~" (Cranton, 1994, p. vii).

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Transformative learning contrasts with instrumental learning, defined as technical and skill-based, and communicative learning, focused on understanding others (Kreber & Cranton, 2000). Mezirow (2001) argues that instrumental learning relies on hypotheses rather than negotiation between individuals to determine the truth. This type of learning intends to control people or things. Communicative learning, on the other hand, works toward~~s~~ forming consensus around a best judgment through active negotiation and the use of metaphors and narratives. Best judgments in communicative learning focus on the purposes, values, beliefs, and feelings behind what people communicate.

Mezirow (2001) claims that instrumental learning and communicative learning are interrelated and either type serves as a foundation for transformative learning. Transformation based on instrumental learning occurs through reflection on assumptions related to process and content. On the other hand, transformative learning stemming from communicative learning occurs through critical reflection upon an individual~~'~~'s assumptions.

Mezirow suggests that individuals who learn to transform their frames of reference better adapt to the world around them, become more inclusive and open, and are more discriminating. Through this transformation process adult learners develop more autonomy in their thinking and decision making~~.~~.

Individual transformation often includes shifting from a fragmented or isolated view to a more interdependent systems view of work and the organization. ~~Rosabeth~~ Moss Kanter (1996) concludes that transformation can increase integrated and deep thinking as well as the ability to visualize and work across boundaries to improve personal and organizational effectiveness~~.~~.

Conditions for Transformative Learning

Mezirow (2000) argues that specific conditions including critical reflection on assumptions and reflective discourse are needed for deep change. Table 1 summarizes additional transformative learning conditions found in the literature~~.~~.

An emphasis on the learning environment through strong facilitation of learning by one or more individuals, critical reflection, and critical events are commonly found as conditions for transformative learning in most of the studies. Several studies also showed the importance of joint or supported action to sustain transformation.

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Transformative Learning and Human Resource Development

~~Homer~~ Johnson (2008) laid out a strong argument for the role of transformative learning for leadership development in a recent *Human Resources Development Quarterly* forum ~~(2008)~~. However, his proposition should be expanded to include the importance of the training and development function for all employees in an organization, rather than just those engaged in leadership development. Expanding this proposal is important, because~~since~~ transformative learning~~-~~-focused training and development is often the key to real and lasting change in employee thinking and behavior (Yorks & Marsick, 2000~~).~~).

Mezirow (1995) proposes that individuals pass through 10~~ten~~ phases of personal transformation: (~~1~~a) experiencing a disorienting dilemma, (~~2~~b) undergoing self-examination, (~~3~~c) conducting a critical assessment of internalized role assumptions and feeling a sense of alienation from traditional social expectation, (~~4~~d) relating one~~'~~'s discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues—recognizing that one~~'~~'s problem is shared and not exclusively a private matter, (~~5~~e) exploring options for new ways of acting, (~~6~~f) building competence and self-confidence in new roles, (~~7~~g) planning a course of action, (~~8~~h) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one~~'~~'s plans, (~~9~~i) making provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess feedback, and (~~10~~j) reintegrating into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. Critical reflection on assumptions and reflective discourse, the focal points of this process, encourage the development of transformative learning~~.~~ .

Culture and language immersion programs are one example of transformative learning at work in training and development. E~~An e~~mployees participating in an immersion program find~~s~~ the experience to be uncomfortable at first as ~~they~~ they realizes their~~ir~~ values or ways of thinking being challenged. They discover some of their stereotypes or strongly held beliefs are no longer true. They begin to explore this discomfort with others involved in the immersion program, discover others are going through a similar process, and begin to develop new ways to think about and interact with new-found beliefs. They take time to learn as much as they can about the culture to build new understanding and along the way set plans with others to share their new perspectives. Upon returning home, ~~the~~ employees bring~~s~~ their new perspective about the culture or globalization to their work. At first they frequently connect with their immersion cohort for support and to compare experiences. Over time, ~~the~~ employees become~~s~~ more confident about their new perspective and ~~they~~ rely~~y~~ less and less on the cohort for support~~.~~ .

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~~Since~~Because ~~“~~“HRD~~’~~’s legacy has been to design and deliver training programs for employees inside an organization~~”~~” that attempt to improve organizational performance (Ulrich, ~~2007~~2008[EDITOR: Ulrich 2008 OK? Yes thank you for catching this], p. 2), several implications of transformative learning for all employees are important. Specifically the role of the trainer needs to be that of an architect of the learning environment and a developmental facilitator of learning, rather than just an expert of subject matter. Developmental facilitators must be learner-centered more than content-centered, create transforming learning environments, use a variety of facilitation methods, be flexible, and also critically reflect on their own learning (Franz, 2005). This helps adults learn more often from each other, share their personal experiences and wisdom, and push and stretch each other~~’~~’s thinking and action (Wilson & Hayes, 2000~~).~~).

The second implication for human resource development is that training programs need to include conditions that enhance the transformative learning process. These may include providing mentors for learners to help facilitate transformative thinking, opportunities for individual and cohort critical reflection, critical events that promote change in thinking and behavior, and opportunities for learners to engage in joint and/or supported action or other mechanisms that support change over time. Training should also consistently include activities that promote critical thinking; and reflection activities such as action learning, scenario building, and the use of metaphors. Finally, technology should also be used to help employees explore and record reflections, as well as to promote critical dialogue with others throughout the organization (Mezirow, 2000).

To realize transformation at the organization level, administrators, supervisors, and HRD staff must demonstrate ~~ongoing~~ reflection about their assumptions on an ongoing basis through their work. This includes asking thought~~-~~-provoking questions, raising and testing propositions, showing curiosity, and being conscious about the ethics of their work (Brookfield, 2000). The HRD staff should also be seen as facilitators of change, carriers of the culture, learning oriented, and collaborators (Ulrich, 2008) .

Closing

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Making the case for transformative learning as the focus for employee training and development to promote individual and organizational change may not be easy. Today, the vast majority of training tends to focus on instrumental learning, such as learning a new skill or gaining information. Adopting transformative learning requires hard work by trainers, learners, and resource commitment from the organization over time. More contact hours between educators and learners may be needed to build the high levels of trust that promote

critical reflection for deep change. However, this investment in employee development will move individual performance toward~~s~~ improved outcomes. As more employees become autonomous decision~~s~~ makers and systems thinkers, HRD efforts will become the catalyst for organizational gains, addressing real organizational issues through transformative learning (Ulrich, 2008~~).~~).

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Thank you to Dr. Lee Dyer, Cornell University, and Martin Daniel, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, ~~human resource developers/scholars extraordinaire~~ for their helpful review of this article. [EDITOR: OK to include this Acknowledgments section?yes thank you]

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Table 1.~~:~~ Conditions for Transformative Learning

Franz (2005)	Cranton (1996)	Daloz (2000)	Mezirow (2000)	Yorks ~~&~~ and Marsick (2000)
Learning environment: strong partner facilitation	Others present for discourse and support is available	Presence of "the other" and a mentoring learning community		
Learning environment: critical reflection	Origin of beliefs is critically examined	Reflective discourse	Critical reflection on assumptions and reflective discourse	
Learning environment: critical events	Disorienting dilemma— old ways don't work		Trigger event/disorienting dilemma	
Fundamental difference between learning partners wrapped in similar purpose				
Individual independence with interdependence		Opportunities for committed action		Liberating parallel structures
	Individual readiness for change, freedom from constraints, alternative way of being is possible		Learner's emotional intelligence	A learning organization

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