

I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU LEARN, ONLY WHAT YOU DO WITH IT AFTERWARD



Paul Matthews is definitely NOT a learning evangelist. He is an engineer who tries to fix things in organizations. Paul is a trainer and consultant and owns a learning software company on the side. As a Learning & Performance Expert, he has authored three bestselling books and is invited to deliver keynotes internationally. His topics cover harnessing the power of informal learning, capability at work, workplace performance, learning transfer, L&D strategy, and performance consultancy.

As a speaker, Paul's key skill is in using stories to explain concepts and making sure the audience gets practical tools and tips to take away and implement. He will talk with VOV- and Stimulearning members on the 4th of July. During this workshop, you will learn how to fix the knowing-doing gap. Members who will join his masterclass are expected to keep an open mind. And especially: the willingness to do things differently. I had a chat with Paul about learning, what it is and what it's not, how not to measure it and how L&D is in an incredible existential crisis.

CONSEQUENCES OF NOT LEARNING

So Paul, a man who trains and does webinars on performance, how can he say learning is not about events?

Paul: Learning can be about events, definitely, but they should never be the sole purpose of learning. I don't even like talking about learning as a whole. We should be talking about performance. In an attempt to professionalize or improve performance, then yes, events can happen. I always try to give participants a challenge at the end of an intervention. "What will you be doing differently, once you step out of that door?" Sometimes, people get cheeky and say "Nothing". Well, that's just a huge waste. It's a waste of time and money. They would go on and say "It's not like there are consequences if I don't do anything differently". I really want to get that misconception out of the world. If you go to training, it means there are at least 3 parties involved that believe in the difference the training can make. The trainer, who is there because he or she believes in making a difference. The L&D team, who wants to help their employees. The manager, who acknowledges the need and grants permission. Not doing anything with what you've learned, is a disappointment to all three. There are consequences to NOT doing anything with what you've just learned.

Does L&D need to do more with this misconception?

Paul: As an engineer, it fascinates me how L&D can set up learning events that have so little impact. Imagine I would build a machine that has a productivity rate like that of L&D. I wouldn't be a very good engineer, would I?

I wouldn't say L&D is wholly responsible. They've just convinced everyone that it's normal that training has low impact. It's not very ambitious to launch a new development programme and hope for the best.

IF ONLY MORE PEOPLE WOULD PUT ON THEIR SHINY UNDERPANTS

Would you say L&D are like politicians, convincing everyone that that's the new normal?

Paul: I'd never compare L&D to politics, no, but sadly they've convinced themselves it's normal to have such a low productivity rate. I don't even think we can put all the blame on L&D themselves. Senior management has also come to expect low results and thus limit the impact that the team can have. It's a self-sustaining situation there, and we'll definitely need someone who puts on their shiny underpants to break through. A superhero is someone who has a clear mission to realize something good in the world. I feel like L&D is missing that kind of purpose, or rather: has a misplaced purpose. I see all that energy going into "nice learning experiences" and none of it going into strategy development that can support the business.

So both L&D and the business are accountable for L&D not performing as they should be?

Paul: Yes, it's called the Conspiracy of Convenience, coined by David Wilson. Every time an operational manager finds a problem, he calls L&D. "I have this problem, fix it for me by setting up an appropriate training." So the L&D then goes into finding suitable training, setting up a learning event. The event is tracked in the LMS and everyone is content.

But if L&D's purpose would be: "How can we make sure we help people step up to execute a task perfectly and thus helping the business strategy?", they would ask more questions. Look at the bigger picture. Find the underlying issue.



IF YOU CAN'T DEFINE IT, DON'T MEASURE IT

Perhaps L&D should use a more scientific approach and measure the learning process.

Paul: I do agree with learning analytics, hugely. The problem is that people do them so badly, often trying to measure the wrong things. I know it's a hype nowadays, but I visit many organizations and when I ask them how they define learning, they can't give me a straight answer. It's always vague and often irrelevant for business strategy. If you can't say what it is, I don't think you should measure it.

A better strategy would be to measure performance, see how that is changed after a learning intervention. Performance diagnostics is something that misses from almost every L&D strategy and it's such a big gap.

Would you say that learning should always benefit the organization?

Paul: Well, quite frankly, if they're paying the check, they have the right to see some of that investment returned. I'm not saying that organizations should only invest in operational development and the obligatory compliance training. It all depends.

Some organizations might benefit from offering a learning programme aimed at personal growth. Others will focus on technical competence and that is okay as well. What I'm saying is that learning should support the organizational strategy.

I fear that learning focused on doing isn't the way people are used to learning, especially in our educational system.

Paul: Many educational systems are indeed aimed at the traditional classroom, where one expert dictates what a group of novices should memorize. I'm glad to see a gradual change, though.

However, many seniors have endured that traditional education, and that embedded paradigm creeps into their expectations of the L&D department. Which brings us neatly to the second gap in L&D strategy: the L&D brand.

A big part of L&D should be about expectation management; to manage your service as a brand. You want to create as many touch points with business strategy as possible, all aimed at increasing performance.

AVERSION TO LEARNING DOESN'T EXIST

We spoke of Performance Diagnostics as missing from L&D strategy, and now the L&D brand. Are there other things you see usually missing?

Paul: Yes, apart from performance diagnostics and the brand of L&D, there is usually no vision on how to manage informal learning and learning transfer.

Bridging that knowing-doing gap, it's of course the holy grail of L&D. However, with a clear purpose, I feel it's possible. Purpose, and preparedness to do something differently.

What if people are resistant to doing things differently?

Paul: Well, sometimes organizations frame this resistance as an unwillingness to learn. The good news is: people are hard-wired to learn. There is no aversion, just look at evolution!

If people are resistant to change, it's either one of two things, and most of the times, a combination of the two. People are very sensitive to how they are being asked to make a change. Managing expectations is hugely important here.

Another thing is controlling change. If someone doesn't have a choice, and you will not only be telling them to make a change but also stating exactly how you want them to, it creates resistance.

A good tactic here is to keep in mind the fixed versus growth mindset, proposed by Carol Dweck. People with a growth mindset will not mind change, but want to figure things out for themselves. Make it a challenge and reward experimentation.

When you encounter a fixed mindset, however, it's important to frame failure as something normal and inherently part of change. You can say things like, "There's no one who has ever succeeded from the first time, so it's likely you will have to try a couple of times". Always combine this with a "What's in it for them" perspective. Point to the reward of efficiency like "using this software will limit the time you spend on this task by 30%!". That's how you get people on board.

Thanks, Paul, some great insights in learning as a performance strategy! The participants of your workshop are definitely in for a treat! ■



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