HOW MAY WE LEARN, UNLEARN AND RELEARN?

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How may we Learn, Unlearn and Relearn?

For me, this is an incredibly important question and one of the key topics I’ve been exploring over the course of the last year. I first want to thank all the people involved in the ideation process for their invaluable input, engagement and participation.

During my Think Tanks, I bring groups of diverse thinkers together to workshop answers to critical business and industry ‘hot spots’, and this topic has generated an incredible amount of interest. Throughout the last year, How may we Learn, Unlearn and Relearn? has been explored by more than 500 learning leaders from across the globe, generating over 3000 insights which I have categorised into four key themes. I need to thank Learning Seat, IAG and the Profusion Group for sponsoring some of the Think Tanks that helped generate these insights over the past year.

Today, technology and knowledge are moving at such a rapid rate that it’s getting harder for people to maintain pace. Within corporate organisations, learning functions are grappling with the challenge of ensuring that staff receive learning that’s meaningful and impactful, while dealing with an increasing amount of change where people are expected to adapt almost immediately. One of the critical failings of learning and development is that most learning is still developed with methodologies of knowledge retention, which is fast becoming redundant.
We can distil the results of the Think Tanks into four common themes: leadership, environment, aptitude and purpose. Before we explore these in detail, however, it's important to better understand the initial question: How may we teach people to learn, unlearn and relearn to cope better with the pace of change?

Let’s look at the question by going through its three components.

How do you teach someone to learn?

This component of the question was probably the least controversial, yet still created lots of conversation. There were many assumptions that people were simply able to learn when given the right tools, information and reinforcement activities. We debated if this was enough. This led to the major theme of aptitude, as we continually came back to the fact that the learner themselves needed certain skills to effectively learn in the first place.

Can you ever actually unlearn something?

Without doubt, this part caused the most debate and was explored in a lot of detail – including discussions of whether it was even relevant. It carries a risk of misinterpretation; however, it does not refer to forgetting useful information to make room for new things. For the purposes of our exploration, ‘unlearning’ is something required to remove a negative behaviour or process, replacing it with a positive one. In other words, we’re talking about unconscious incompetence being replaced over time with unconscious competence.

The four key themes provide insight into what’s required to create the right opportunity for people to not only effectively learn, but also unlearn. The role of the leader is critical here – are they rewarding or punishing people for continuing the old behaviours or starting the new behaviours?

What is the relevance of relearning?

Relearning was interpreted as something that’s required to enable you to deal with the skills and behaviours that you’ve already learned but are only needed on occasion. These are the tasks that you need to re-think about in order to perform effectively.

Such skills, behaviours or tasks are things that don’t necessitate taking up valuable space in your brain or require intimate knowledge. Rather, they require you to be able to recall where and how to access the right information, to quickly re-discover how to apply your knowledge. This in essence becomes your ability to find, analyse, synthesise and apply information easily in a ‘just in time’ approach.
So, in summary of the initial question:

- Your ability to learn is based on some specific skill sets to create the right mindset.
- Your ability to unlearn is required when an unconsciously incompetent behaviour is producing a negative impact and requires change.
- Your ability to relearn is required when you need to access ‘just in time’ information and understand how to use it to perform a required task.

Let’s now look towards the four themes from the Think Tanks as a way to answer our initial question of how we can teach people to learn, unlearn and relearn.
Leadership came out as, by far, the most important factor in helping someone to learn, unlearn and relearn. This was no surprise, given almost all popular learning theories focus on the importance of the manager’s role.

Leadership, especially the manager’s role in coaching the learner, is an accepted component to driving success. Within this skill, the competence of a manager has a huge influence on how well the transfer and application of learning can occur. There are also many programs teaching the skill of coaching. So, because of how well known and how well documented this element already is, I’m simply going to suggest that you follow the established practices. What I want to highlight is the nuances which are sometimes overlooked in great leadership.

Specifically, the element identified as even more important to consider than coaching can be summarised as: ‘unintended punishments for doing the right thing, and unintended rewards for doing the wrong thing’. But what exactly does this mean?

Imagine that you’re a leader in a call centre; you’re responsible for a team of 15 staff. All the staff have the same responsibilities, and you allocate work to them at the start of every day in an equitable manner. One of your staff members is highly efficient, an outstanding performer and almost always clears their list of activities by lunch time. Another staff member hasn’t been able to get through a third of their list by lunch and it’s obvious that they won’t achieve their daily target. As a leader, you’re measured on the overall team performance and your annual bonus is dependent on what the team achieves. So what do you do?

Most of us would ask our high performer to help any team members who were struggling. This sounds like a good strategy to get the team’s targets achieved and is also a great way to keep your high performer going. But what are the unintended outcomes?

First, the person who hasn’t gotten through their workload receives an unintended reward for doing the wrong thing. What’s the point of working hard when someone else simply picks up whatever you haven’t been able to finish yourself? Second, the person who’s achieved their targets efficiently has now been unintentionally punished for doing the right thing. By doing a good job, they’re given someone else’s work.
The flow on effect is that at the end of the year, when it’s time to determine bonuses, everyone in the team gets a very similar (if not equal) reward, further punishing and further rewarding the wrong behaviours. This often leads to your high performers looking for another job.

While this is a simple example, the notion of it is exceptionally common. Leaders are often not paying enough attention to the unintended rewards and punishments tied to their actions. We get so focused and caught up on the targets that are set for us that we overlook some of the systemic issues that develop as a result. What doesn’t help this, though, is that a large number of leadership development programs would even encourage you to take such actions as a way of managing your team. The more pertinent response (while harder) would be to manage the underperformer and provide the over-achiever with more meaningful work and opportunities to grow and develop.

Learning is affected by unintended outcomes all the time. How often do people in your organisation not show up for training because they’re ‘too busy'? How many leaders in your organisation emphasise the importance of attending the training, but then ask people to delay or not attend because something more important came up? Or send their staff to training, but then talk immediately about increased workloads or how busy the office was in their absence?

These actions, while well intentioned, all send a message that learning isn’t important. Now, I’m not for a second suggesting that learning should be treated as the most important part of the business. I’m suggesting that when circumstances arise that require a leader to ask their staff to not go to training, that they do it in a manner which doesn’t undermine its importance.

Unlearning is affected by unintended outcomes on an even deeper level. By exhibiting behaviours that don’t encourage the new approach or change, you are in effect supporting the old and not allowing someone to unlearn. The process of unlearning becomes harder as you can be unintentionally rewarded for repeating the old and punished for trying the new.
Environment

This theme captures a broad range of topics, including the organisation’s attitude towards learning, the physical spaces available for learning to occur and even the presence of an innovation agenda.

Environment was considered critical in the Think Tanks, and was identified by participants as the hardest element of the four key areas to resolve. Many participants felt their reach within the organisation was not necessarily deep enough to influence overall culture. We’ll look at some of the specific areas discussed around this theme now.

First, the physical space available for learning was an interesting concept. Modern offices are being designed with open plan spaces, break out communal areas and agile scrum walls. These are great for collaboration and active learning, and even the colour choices made in these spaces are now intended specifically to enhance things like learning absorption. But what if you don’t have all these fancy modern facilities? What can you do with the physical space to make learning more effective?

One insight was to reduce the number of physical doorways that you have to move through during learning. There is research showing that simply moving through a doorway changes the way the brain interacts with information. We compartmentalise what we consider to be the most important things and prepare ourselves to absorb new information simply from walking through a door. Limiting the doors that we pass through while learning, or strategically determining when people should go through a door, will help your efforts in getting people to absorb learning more effectively.
There’s lots of research on physical spaces conducive to learning, and I encourage you to explore this, especially if you’re in a position of influence.

The culture of the organisation, in its attitude towards learning, was already touched on in the leadership section. We all know how critical the leader’s attitude towards learning is; however, beyond this we must explore the organisation’s attitude.

When budget cuts come, is the learning department one of the first to be hit? Are there metrics in all employees’ balanced scorecards against learning? Are learning impacts reported to shareholders? Is learning part of the value proposition to attract talent to your organisation? Is learning seen as a needed cost or a strategic enabler? Does learning have influence at all levels of the organisation?

If your answers to any of these questions are negative then there’s work needed within your organisation. How you influence this is another topic, which we’ll explore at another time. There is again plenty of research on this and I strongly encourage you to look into it. Look for anything that talks about making the learning function relevant through understanding what your stakeholders see as value and using your insight to uncover all this.

Finally in this segment it’s worth talking about the ‘innovation agenda’. I think that in recent times there isn’t an organisation that hasn’t added ‘innovation’ in some format to its core values or business plans (usually when talking about being agile). In the past, our language around this was simply ‘new product development’ or ‘customer insight’. However, few have turned this into something that truly drives a culture of innovation.

Learning and unlearning are critical components here. Without them you are unable to build, test and iterate your minimum viable product. Failing fast and learning from that experience is critical in your ability to innovate. Furthermore, unlearning the existing company rules (unwritten and written) is required to allow you to be creative in the first place.

We all know that the phrase ‘because we’ve always done it that way’ is the biggest killer of innovation out there. Unfortunately, that phrase is often not even articulated; it simply exists within the unconscious, especially for those who are deeply embedded in the organisation.
Aptitude

HAVING THE RIGHT SKILLS AND BEHAVIOURS TO LEARN IN THE FIRST PLACE IS SOMETHING THAT MANY THINK TANK PARTICIPANTS HAD NOT INITIALLY THOUGHT ABOUT.

Once someone identified this area, however, we explored it with enthusiasm and interest. Preparing someone with skills to be able to learn is often overlooked. We simply think that providing someone with an environment, time, materials and support from leaders and coaches is enough. Much of the research and methodologies discussing effective learning neglect to mention the actual skills and behaviours of the learners themselves.

Specifically, as the groups explored this topic, the following skills and behaviours consistently emerged as the most important in shaping an individual’s ability to learn.

- Complex problem solving
- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Emotional intelligence
- Judgement and decision making
- Design thinking
- Cognitive flexibility

The groups discussed each skill with varying levels of depth, initially referring to them in different ways. This list is the summation of many skills. Each warrants some additional insight to understand contextually why they are important when talking about learning, unlearning and relearning.

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**Complex problem solving**

This is considered one of the most difficult things to be able to do. We talked at length in the Think Tanks about tools to help problem solve, methods to help problem solve and how to overcome barriers to problem solving. There is a lot of research on this and even more methods and processes on how to do it. It’s not the intent here to tell anyone which method or tool should be followed. The important thing is that you actively engage your learners in activities that allow them to be part of the problem solving process, so that they can continually refine their skill sets around this critical skill.

**Critical thinking**

This can be summarised as the mode of thought that improves the quality of your thinking by skilfully analysing, assessing, synthesising, evaluating and reconstructing it. It is self-monitored and self-corrected. Critical thinking requires effective communication, problem solving and the ability to overcome limiting unconscious bias and egocentrism. This is a skill often identified within the category of emotional intelligence; however, the frequency with which this specific skill was identified made it important enough to be called out independently.

**Creativity**

A limiting belief here is that you are either creative or you aren’t. People frequently describe themselves as not being creative. However, creativity for the purposes of unlearning is focused more on your ability to think differently about a problem or situation and try something different.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration is one of the more important skills to have to be able to learn more effectively. Participating actively in something and learning from peers through application was considered critical here. We also highlighted the use of team skills to leverage strengths (being able to identify and motivate others to participate), and to ask for help – not to get someone else to do your work, but to learn from them.

**Emotional intelligence**

This has already been touched on; however, it was widely acknowledged that the capabilities associated with emotional intelligence are synonymous with those of proficient lifetime learners.
Judgement and decision making

It’s odd that this skill needed to be called out – good judgement and decision making are a little like common sense. It’s expected that everyone can just demonstrate this; however, nothing could be further from the truth. The ability to make a good decision (and to know when to make it) is a skill that needs more attention.

Design thinking

The inclusion of design thinking may have been slightly influenced by the fact that participants of the Think Tanks were being actively led through design thinking processes and techniques. I don’t want to devalue these skills at all; however, I do need to ensure that readers are aware that participants were actively exposed to design thinking techniques to undertake problem solving in the first place. This possibly influenced the identification of design thinking as a critical skill.

Cognitive flexibility

In its simplest terms, this is the ability to switch thinking between differing concepts and to think about multiple concepts simultaneously. With the pressures placed on the modern workforce, this skill will become even more important.
This began as a conversation about individuals’ mindsets; however, as the conversations evolved, we determined that you needed more than just a mindset geared towards learning. You needed a defined purpose, an intrinsic need to learn.

To truly get someone to learn we need to ignite this purpose. Take, for example, the need to make a birthday cake. It’s your child’s birthday and you want to make it special, so you need to learn how to make something extravagant. This pressure – to go all out with the cake – ignites your purpose.

Purpose will be the biggest influencer on how much learning someone is able to absorb, how much they take from the training room back to the workplace and how well they can then apply their learning.

It’s important to note that, at this stage, we also need to be clear on the difference between learning and communication. We tend to talk about all manner of things as learning, when in fact it’s merely information that we want to impart to others. I’m not devaluing this; I’m simply suggesting that we don’t confuse the two and we use each clearly for the right purposes.

This is important, as trying to ignite an inner purpose for your learners to use a different phone greeting (for example) would be a complete waste of everyone’s time. The building and encouragement of purpose must be reserved for true learning experiences where a fundamental change in behaviour or skill is required.
To do this in the most effective manner possible, we must ensure that we have great leadership in place, focused on supporting the learner through all their actions – including their unconscious ones. We need to promote an environment that is conducive to learning, both physically and culturally, especially in organisations that promote an innovation agenda. We need to provide learners with the right skills and behaviours to make them more receptive to learning in the first place, and we need to ignite a purpose within the learner when a change is needed.

Throughout the Think Tanks, we identified over 3000 individual ideas about how to do these things. They ranged from actions that could be implemented immediately to blue sky ideas that would require large investments and time. All these ideas have been distilled into the elements identified in this paper. More work is now needed to structure them into a format that’s useable for you.

Future Think Tanks are planned to solve more challenges facing the learning industry. If you’d like to be involved in any of these, please don’t hesitate to contact me.
About the author

Ashley Spowart is a highly experienced Learning and Organisational Development leader, driving transformational change within organisations through strategically aligned people solutions that deliver measured financial results and an achievement oriented culture.

LinkedIn recently recognised Ashley on its 2017 Power Profiles Australia list. He has also been recognised on LinkedIn as one of the seven most visited HR profiles in Australia. As the only Learning and Organisational Development specialist on the list, he's Australia's most visited learning expert on LinkedIn.

Ashley is the Managing Director of Vanguard Learning, an organisation that is focused on providing learning professionals with deeper insight to refine their skills. The focus is on creating communities of practice that collaborate and contribute to the professionalism of our industry.

Partnering with a range of learning providers, Ashley has also been running design thinking workshops that focus on problem solving key issues facing the learning industry. These Think Tanks have gathered an amazing amount of momentum and every event is quickly oversubscribed.

Learning Seat has been one of the key partners working with Ashley in the production of previous Think Tanks, with more planned for the future.

If you’d like to see more from Ashley and be involved in future Think Tanks, you can connect with him via LinkedIn.

About Learning Seat

Learning Seat is an award-winning compliance training expert that offers innovative solutions for organisations that require support in their online training and compliance obligations.

Recently, Learning Seat has been at the forefront of ‘adaptive learning’ and continues to focus on new elearning technology and designs to help support its clients.