



Experiential Learning:

The Key to Effective Employee Development



Whether on its own or combined with other training strategies, experiential learning can transform your employee development strategy.

Have you been looking for a fun and engaging way to teach new skills and create lasting behavior change in your organization? Read on to learn more about the impact experiential learning can have on your organizational training and development initiatives.

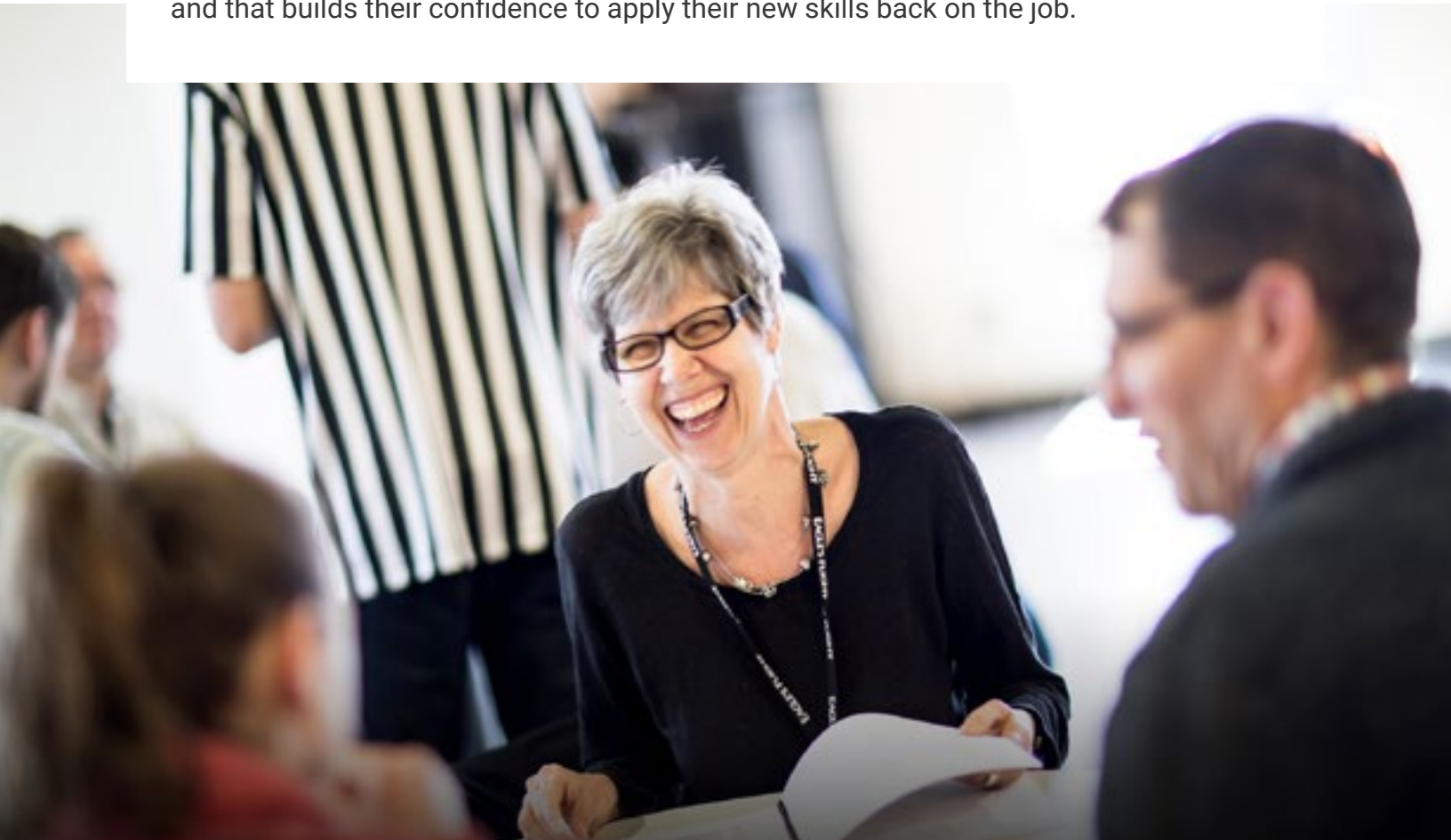
WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

The Definition of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a training approach that yields typical retention rates of 80-90 percent. This is a significant improvement over traditional training methods that have retention rates as low as 5 percent¹.

If you think of a teaching spectrum with isolated training activities on one end and simulations on the other, experiential learning is in the middle. The experience is clearly linked to the tasks participants must perform in the workplace, but it is not an exact replication of the work environment.

To be successful, an experiential learning program must include eight essential components². And it is when all of these elements are combined, that the result is a memorable, effective learning experience that participants are excited to engage with and that builds their confidence to apply their new skills back on the job.



The Eight Essential Components of Experiential Learning



Experiential Learning in the Workplace

Eagle's Flight founder and CEO Phil Geldart developed the essential components of experiential learning early in his career when he rose to the challenge of delivering an engaging and effective training seminar on time management for managers. Working for Nestlé at the time, he developed Gold of the Desert Kings as a metaphor for the daily reality of those working in the factory.

- ✓ He provided a **concrete experience** (an adventure through the desert to collect gold) that would allow them to understand a new concept (planning and time management).
- ✓ Rather than listening to a presentation or reading a case study, they were **learning by doing**.
- ✓ During the activity, they were able to draw from **prior experience**, both from their daily work and from the activity itself. As each "day" progressed in the adventure, they were able to learn from the mistakes and successes of the previous "days."





- ✓ A debrief at the end provided the opportunity for **reflective observation**.
- ✓ Through this debrief, participants were guided through the **abstract conceptualization** necessary to link the activity to their daily work and consider how they could manage their time better on the job. This led to an **aha! moment** that allowed participants to see how the training concepts could be applied in real life.
- ✓ They were then able to use **active experimentation** in the workplace to see the results of changing their behaviors.

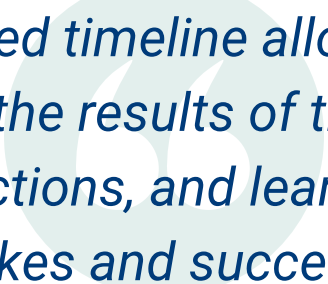
Eagle's Flight continues to apply all of these tried-and-true concepts today in all of our experiential learning programs. In addition to time management, we use experiential learning to teach concepts such as teamwork and collaboration, sales effectiveness, customer centricity, leadership, and more.

How Experiential Learning Works

An engaging, immersive experience pulls participants out of the daily grind. Most of the time, they're having fun working together to overcome a challenge, and they are not even aware that they are learning valuable new skills. This is because the use of a well-crafted metaphor allows participants to test new skills and behaviors in a safe setting outside of typical workplace scenarios.

An accelerated timeline allows people to quickly see the results of their actions, make corrections, and learn from their mistakes and successes. At the end, a facilitated debrief links the lessons learned in the experience to situations in the workplace. Participants can see how their new skills can be applied in the situations they experience on a daily basis.

All of this leads to behavior change because participants have personally experienced the results that come with applying their existing skills (both successes and failures), and they are then more inclined to do things differently next time. They draw their own conclusions about the power of applying new approaches and behaviors back on the job, which is why experiential learning has a higher retention rate than other training methods.



“An accelerated timeline allows people to quickly see the results of their actions, make corrections, and learn from their mistakes and successes.”

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OVER TRADITIONAL TRAINING: WHY IT'S WORTH THE INVESTMENT

Traditional Training Methods & The Differences

- Classroom learning
- Role playing
- Lectures
- Case studies
- Reading manuals
- E-learning
- Videos
- Training games
- Seminars

The primary difference between these methods and experiential learning is that experiential learning focuses on learning by doing and allows participants to test new skills in a safe environment. Another key element that experiential learning provides is a facilitated debrief that connects the training content to real-life situations in the workplace.



Pros and Cons of Experiential Learning

Like any type of training approach, experiential learning has both pros and cons.

Some of the pros of experiential learning include:

- ✓ Fun and interesting training sessions that engage participants
- ✓ Relevant to participants regardless of differences in career level or culture
- ✓ Higher retention rates (up to 90 percent, compared to as low as 5 percent for passive learning methods)
- ✓ Builds conviction among participants, which leads to lasting behavior change

Some of the potential cons of experiential learning are:

- ✗ Potential for higher upfront costs
- ✗ Logistical challenges of having all participants together in the same room
- ✗ Risk of not having a competent facilitator to provide an effective debrief

Fortunately, many of these possible challenges can be easily overcome. For example, costs for experiential learning are comparable to other types of training, and a strong and measurable ROI means that over the long term, you're actually getting more for your money. Additionally, the risk of not having a competent facilitator can be avoided by working with the experts at Eagle's Flight.



Experiential Learning Benefits

There are many reasons to incorporate experiential learning into your training and development strategy. Many people choose to invest in this training approach because it:

- Increases engagement
- Can be personalized for maximum impact
- Provides a safe learning environment
- Allows participants to see the impacts of their own behaviors
- Connects theory and practice
- Impacts behavior in the workplace
- Helps shift mindsets
- Produces measurable outcomes
- Delivers excellent return on investment



Experiential learning works because an intense shared experience fosters new connections between team members that carry through to the workplace. Coworkers gain a new sense of trust and also encourage each other to continue applying their new skills.

Why Experiential Learning Works

An all-encompassing theme with an immersive experience ensures total engagement. Participants in an experiential learning program are only thinking about the task at hand. On the other hand, at a passive learning event, like a lecture or seminar, participants can mentally (and sometimes physically) check out. With experiential learning, learners are all in for the duration of the program—and they're having a great time!

Because experiential learning is fun, trainees want to participate. They want to win the challenge. After completing an experience, participants have a chance to reflect on what just happened and why. With the help of the post-experience debrief, they come to personally see the link between their actions and their results. They make the connection between how to win in the game and how to apply the same lessons to win at work.

The Importance of the Debrief

The debrief is a critical element of experiential learning. It's the point where the metaphor is revealed, and participants can connect the dots between training and real life³. This is when they see that by applying the same actions and behaviors, they can win at work in the same ways that they were able to win in the experience.

The debrief must happen immediately after the experience, while participants are still engaged, in order for them to see the link between their actions and their results. During the debrief participants examine alternative actions or behaviors, which reinforces the value of developing new skills and behaviors to see better results next time. Additionally, the facilitator must have the expertise to guide the discussion in the direction that will stimulate the participants. To do this, they must be familiar with the group dynamics and have a deep understanding of the challenges the participants typically face at work.



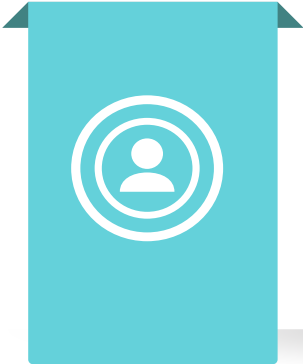
Return on Investment

When making an investment in training, you naturally expect to see a return. Measuring employee development validates your efforts and allows you to see how training impacts performance and profitability. Identify the key performance indicators that are most relevant to your business, as well as your training goals, and measure against them.

Experiential learning provides a better ROI than other training methods because of higher retention rates and strong motivation to apply new skills in the workplace⁴. Implementing a measurement and retention strategy can help you maximize ROI, so consider this as you roll out your experiential learning program.

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: HOW IT CAN BE USED



LEADERSHIP

- Mentoring and coaching
- World-class communication
- Change management
- Empowering others
- Developing and executing strategies

COMPANY CULTURE

You can shape employee behavior and mindsets through experiential learning to create a culture that emphasizes values such as accountability, safety, and customer centricity.



SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

- Time management
- Effective presentations
- Project management
- Communication
- Customer service
- Process improvement

TEAM BUILDING & CORPORATE EVENTS

Providing team members with the skills they need will enable them to work together more effectively. By its very nature, experiential learning fosters teamwork and collaboration, though you can go one step further and tailor training and corporate events to make this a focus.



FAQS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

What evidence exists that shows experiential learning works better than other forms of training?

Experiential learning is not a new concept, and its benefits are well documented. The true results of experiential learning are determined by measuring outcomes. The right metrics will depend on the desired competencies but could include repeat sales, more billable hours, or higher results on internal employee satisfaction surveys.

Feedback from participants has shown us time and again that experiential learning works. When individuals tell us years after training that it was the best training they ever experienced and it is still used today, we can say with confidence that experiential learning creates lasting behavior change.

What levels within an organization respond best to experiential learning?

People at every career level can benefit from experiential learning⁵. It is important to tailor each program to the mix of experience levels in the room or to any cultural elements, but because it is so customizable, experiential learning can be used to teach everyone from entry-level employees to seasoned executives all over the world.

How does experiential learning differ from simulations?

Although experiential learning often feels like playing a game, the primary factor that distinguishes it from simulations is the debrief that links the game-like experience to the real world so participants understand how they can apply what they learned to their jobs. This is what makes experiential learning different from a simulation, which is an exact replica of what individuals will experience in the workplace. Simulations are essential for some industries and helpful for others, but they have limitations with respect to the types of skills and concepts they can teach.

How much time is needed for experiential learning?

Experiential learning can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Because experiential learning is significantly more effective and provides lasting results, the payback is greater for the time and money invested.

In comparison to other types of training, participants who spend the same amount of time in an experiential learning program will be much better prepared and more enthusiastic about implementing their new skills in the real world, and they will remember the content they learned for longer.

How does the cost of experiential learning compare to other training?

The cost of experiential learning is comparable to other types of training, though because the results are longer-lasting, it is a more cost-effective solution. Participants often retain the information for much longer so you do not have to retrain them year after year.

Why is experiential learning a more effective training option?

With experiential learning, you can build conviction by demonstrating a knowledge gap that leads to poor results or unfortunate consequences. When participants see that they do indeed have something to learn, they become invested in the training process. Building conviction ensures that participants become motivated to learn new skills and apply them back on the job.

Rather than relying on the memory of a video or book, individuals who have learned lessons in experiential training by making mistakes, taking steps to improve for next time, and understanding what behaviors contributed to their success will be more likely to change in real life.

What role does experiential learning play in post-course content retention and application?

Experiential learning gives participants a universal reference point and a common language they can use long after the event in order to apply the lessons learned. It's not uncommon for these shared experiences to become part of the company culture and stay ingrained in the minds of participants long after the event.

More importantly, you can expect them to continue to apply their new performance optimization skills for the rest of their careers. Support post-course content retention with periodic discussions about the successes and challenges that individuals have faced since the training. Measuring improvements and rewarding individuals for their success are also important motivators that can help keep up the momentum and encourage individuals to continue to apply their new knowledge.

How is experiential learning received by today's workforce?

For younger generations that are just starting out, experiential learning is widely accepted because they have grown up learning through games and activities⁶. While experienced professionals who have already had to sit through their share of passive learning programs find experiential learning to be a refreshing change of pace and a more effective alternative.

When should experiential learning be used?

The goal of experiential learning is to build competence, so it can be used anytime there is a desire to do this. While it can be employed as a stand-alone event, if your business strives for continual improvement, experiential learning should be a regular component of a progressive training program.

What types of training programs can benefit from experiential learning?

Experiential learning can be used on a stand-alone basis or as a part of a training program. Training programs that require intense simulations or physical skills, like piloting an aircraft or captaining a ship, are not good fits for experiential learning. However, even those professionals can benefit from learning the skills and competencies necessary for leading teams or making strategic decisions.



GETTING STARTED: CHOOSING YOUR PARTNER IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The impact of being part of a powerful experiential learning event can be transformative. It can alter how we see the world, how we interact with others, and how we approach our commitments.

Ultimately, we are all on lifelong learning journeys. We will be working to master the skills taught in experiential training sessions long after the doors close on the day. And what we've discovered for ourselves in the session are principles that we make our own, usually to the benefit not only of ourselves, but also those around us and with whom we work.

When you think of this in regard to your current training and development program, it may explain why you haven't seen the level of engagement necessary to build lasting behavior change and produce the desired results. To change how people think of their learning and development journeys at your organization, and to maximize your investment, selecting the right partner is essential. Look for a strong track record of success across companies of all sizes and from a broad range of industries.

The Importance of Having a World-Class Team to Deliver Experiential Training

An expert debrief is critical to the success of experiential learning. Without it, participants have a fun training experience but don't know how to connect it to the real world. In-house facilitation is possible, but the individual must have the necessary skills and experience. Working with a trusted partner like Eagle's Flight ensures that the necessary facilitation skills are provided while alleviating the burden from your internal resources.

What Makes a Great Facilitator?

No matter who facilitates, they must have certain core competencies, including the ability to recognize which skills and abilities need more attention during the training, as many programs support multiple training goals. They must also be able to subtly guide a discussion in a certain direction. To do this, they need familiarity with the group dynamics and team challenges, as well as sufficient knowledge of the industry to encourage an informed discussion.





EAGLE'S FLIGHT

YOUR PARTNER IN EXPERIENTIAL EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT

Since its founding in 1988, Eagle's Flight has developed and refined a framework for creating predictable, sustainable behavior change. We specialize in experiential learning and provide organizations with a better outcome by truly engaging the learner. Successful organizational development programs require ongoing work, but this can easily get lost in the shuffle of daily tasks that feel more urgent. Partnering with a provider that has a strong track record of helping organizations achieve long-term measurable change will help ensure that your development goals are met.



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If you would like to learn more about what a partnership with Eagle's Flight could look like, contact us today.

CONNECT TODAY

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