



FAQs of Experiential Learning for **Organizational Development**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?	2
WHAT TYPES OF TRAINING PROGRAMS CAN BENEFIT FROM EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?	3
WHAT LEVELS WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION RESPOND BEST TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?	3
WHAT EVIDENCE EXISTS THAT SHOWS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WORKS BETTER THAN OTHER FORMS OF TRAINING?	4
WHY IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MORE EFFECTIVE?	5
WHEN SHOULD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING BE USED?	6
HOW IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING RECEIVED BY TODAY'S WORKFORCE?	6
HOW DOES THE COST OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COMPARE WITH OTHER FORMS OF LEARNING?	6
HOW DOES THE TIME REQUIRED FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COMPARE WITH OTHER FORMS OF LEARNING?	7
HOW DOES EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DIFFER FROM GAMIFICATION OR SIMULATIONS?	8
WHAT ROLE DOES EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PLAY IN POST-COURSE CONTENT RETENTION AND APPLICATION?	8
WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?	9

INTRODUCTION

Every organization, no matter how large or small, benefits from an investment in organizational development. Whether you want to teach specific job skills or encourage new behaviors, the only way to generate lasting results is through training. However, there are many ways to convey new information, and decades of experience have shown us that one of the most effective methods is through experiential learning.

Although it is a time-tested and proven teaching tool, experiential learning is a somewhat new concept to many people in organizational development. If you are committed to getting better training results in your organization, this list of frequently asked questions is a good resource for learning more about the benefits of experiential learning, when it is appropriate to use it, how it works, and why you should consider including it in your training budget.

WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning combines immersive activities that mimic real-world challenges with a targeted debrief that connects the lessons learned with the reality of the workplace. It allows participants to learn by doing and not by just listening, reading, or watching. Because they have personally experienced the results (both successes and failures) that come with applying their existing skills and developing new behaviors, participants retain more information and are more likely to enthusiastically apply their new knowledge in their real world back on the job.

It is important that the experiential learning exercise mirrors reality, but takes participants outside of their day-to-day environment into another context. For example, an experiential learning event designed to highlight the importance of customer focus might employ a scenario in which teams must work together in order to supply a company that is building a railroad, while making a profit on the supplies they are reselling.

In the course of the exercise, the teams learn that certain items have a higher profit margin than others, so they typically focus on buying and selling those items, with the goal of making the most money. However, when the customer announces that they no longer need these high-profit items, the teams are left with excess inventory, no demand for it in the marketplace, and depleted resources from investing in the inventory they cannot sell.

The exercise uses a theme that engages participants and requires them to use their existing skills, but within that context teaches an important lesson: that not paying close attention to the customer's needs might produce short-term gains, but ultimately results in long-term lost opportunities.

This information is brought to life through a debrief that enables the participants to understand and appreciate the lessons they have learned, strategize about how they could have done better, and discuss how they can apply their new knowledge to their real world. Because they have now had personal experience with learning how not paying close attention to the customer's needs can have a negative impact, they are more likely to take a different approach to similar situations at work in the future.

This is just one example of how experiential learning can capture attention and produce lasting results in a way that a PowerPoint presentation or lecture never will.



WHAT TYPES OF TRAINING PROGRAMS CAN BENEFIT FROM EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning events can be used on a stand alone basis or as a component of almost any form of traditional training program. The types of skills that can be taught through experiential learning run the gamut, and include:

- Improving processes
- Serving customers
- Working in teams
- Running meetings
- Giving presentations
- Managing projects
- Delegating tasks
- Supervising individuals
- Managing time
- Leading teams

Notable exceptions are training programs that require intense simulations or physical skills, like piloting an aircraft or captaining a ship. However, even in those types of industries, individuals can benefit from experiential learning in order to gain competence in areas such as leading teams or making quick decisions.

WHAT LEVELS WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION RESPOND BEST TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

One of the many benefits of experiential learning is that individuals at every career level embrace it. It is not uncommon for a seasoned professional to resist time spent in training, but in our experience, even the most staunch objector comes around as soon as he or she starts to engage in experiential learning events. Because this type of learning is fun and captivating, many people don't realize that they are actually participating in a training exercise while they are doing it. However, when the time comes to debrief and discuss what they have just experienced, and how it can be applied to the real world, individuals at every level inevitably come away with a positive feeling about the training, and are excited about using their new knowledge.

WHAT EVIDENCE EXISTS THAT SHOWS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WORKS BETTER THAN OTHER FORMS OF TRAINING?

Experiential learning is not a new concept. In fact, even Aristotle wrote, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” More than two millennia later, researchers Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton concluded, “Knowledge that is actually implemented is much more likely to be acquired from learning by doing than from learning by reading, listening, or even thinking.”

A good real-world success story is the Toyota Production System (TPS). In addition to being the precursor to what is now known as “lean manufacturing,” the TPS incorporates learning by doing as one of the core requirements for continuous improvement. The company’s success speaks for itself, especially when compared to its competitors.

The true results of experiential learning are determined by measuring outcomes. The 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 the event that it was the best training they ever had and that they continue to actively employ what they learned, we can say with confidence that experiential learning creates lasting behavior change.

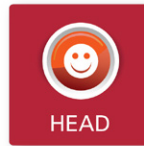


WHY IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MORE EFFECTIVE?

Experiential learning combines four important concepts in order to make it so effective. Each step builds on the last, and all of them are necessary for achieving success. The four critical steps in experiential learning are:



Heart
build conviction



Head
provide knowledge



Hands
teach skill



Harvest
see results

The first step requires building conviction so that participants become motivated to learn new skills and apply them in the professional arena. It is never safe to assume that the conviction is already there, even in individuals who are enthusiastic about their work. It is often the case that people don't know the value of training or are simply not aware that they can make dramatic improvements by gaining new knowledge. You can build conviction with an event that demonstrates a knowledge gap by producing poor results or unfortunate consequences. When participants see that they do indeed have something to learn, they become invested in the training process.

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Once participants understand the value of learning something new, the next step is to provide knowledge. There are a number of ways to deliver information, but some are better than others. Including a visual component, telling stories, and presenting the same information in multiple ways, will provide better retention than lecturing, but even these methods have limitations.

New information often does not stick if it is delivered in a presentation or video, at least not for the long term. On the other hand, teaching a new skill through experiential learning will produce lasting results, because participants will have more to draw on in the future. Instead of relying on the memory of a PowerPoint presentation, individuals who have learned lessons by making mistakes, improving along the way, and understanding what behaviors contributed to their success will be more likely to implement lasting behavior change.

Ongoing engagement is an important element for retention of new skills after an experiential learning event. When you experience the positive results from experiential learning, recognize the success, and are rewarded with improved results, the new skills acquired during the training are reinforced. Periodic check-ins and refresher exercises also help keep the new information at the forefront.

WHEN SHOULD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING BE USED?

Organizational development is about meeting or exceeding objectives—increasing productivity, improving communication between departments, etc.—and experiential learning can help you achieve them. The goal of experiential learning is to build competence, so it can be used any time there is a desire to do this. While it can be employed as a stand-alone event, if your business strives for continuous improvement, experiential learning should be a regular component of a progressive training program.

HOW IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING RECEIVED BY TODAY'S WORKFORCE?

Occasionally we encounter some initial resistance to experiential learning, but, without fail, participants at every level in the organization respond positively after the event. For the younger generation that is just getting started in the workforce, experiential learning is widely accepted, because they are used to learning through games and activities. People who have been employed for at least a few years generally welcome the opportunity for personal and professional growth. Experienced professionals who have already had to sit through their share of PowerPoint presentations find experiential learning to be a refreshing change of pace and a more effective alternative.



HOW DOES THE COST OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COMPARE WITH OTHER FORMS OF LEARNING?

The cost of experiential learning is comparable to other types of training, but because the results are longer-lasting, it is a more cost-effective solution. Because participants retain the information for much longer (in many cases, a lifetime), you do not have to invest in training as frequently.

HOW DOES THE TIME REQUIRED FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COMPARE WITH OTHER FORMS OF LEARNING?

Like any other type of training program, experiential learning can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days. In addition, because experiential learning is significantly more effective and provides lasting results, the payback is greater for the time and money invested.

For example, consider a four-hour training session to learn how to successfully lead meetings. A standard training with PowerPoint slides and a couple of role-playing scenarios might teach a few new skills that participants will use for the following weeks. However, most people are likely to return to their regular habits after the training is no longer fresh in their minds.

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On the other hand, a four-hour immersive experiential learning session that requires participants to work in groups in order to solve a series of crimes is much more engaging. When the group's "detectives" become overwhelmed with information "evidence" and a facilitator gives them a process for overcoming the challenges caused by the deluge of information and opinion, they can immediately see the benefits. As the session progresses, the crimes become more and more complicated, but by using their new skills and repeating the process, the groups become more adept at solving them. They experience the success that comes with using their new skills. In comparison to a lecture-based training, this group will be much better prepared and more enthusiastic about managing meetings in the real world, and remember the content learned for longer.



HOW DOES EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DIFFER FROM GAMIFICATION OR SIMULATIONS?

Simulations and gamification are both effective teaching tools, but they are distinctly different from experiential learning. Although experiential learning often feels like playing a game, the primary factor that distinguishes it from gamification is the debrief. This important step links the game-like experience to the real world so that individuals understand how they can apply what they just so effectively learned to their jobs. Experiential learning is fun and engaging, much like a game, but it has more value, because it uses a powerful debrief to bring participants to a personal awareness of the power of applying new skills, and a conviction to do so.

This use of metaphors is also what makes experiential learning different from simulations. A simulation is an exact replica of what individuals will experience in the workplace. For example, it could be the helm of a ship, an assembly line, or a mock call center used for training. 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. For example, a mock call center might teach individuals the various protocols, scripts, and technical skills necessary for providing customer service, but it cannot teach them the inherent value and benefits of customer-centricity.

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. How many times have you heard a colleague say, "Remember that great e-learning course we did a few years ago?" Probably never. On the other hand, you can expect participants to continue discussing the time they all worked together in order to "mine gold in the desert". More importantly, you can expect them to continue to apply their new performance optimization skills for the rest of their careers.

Remember the fourth step in experiential learning: Harvest. You can (and should) 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.

WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

The benefits of experiential learning have been largely discussed throughout these FAQs. In order to summarize, experiential learning:

- Is fun and engaging for participants at every level within the organization
- Instills a personal conviction about the value of changing behaviors
- Shows individuals how to apply new skills in the real world
- Creates new desirable behaviors that last
- Provides a shared experience that participants can reference in the future

The biggest potential risk with experiential learning is not having an effective debrief. This is an important step for tying it all together and showing participants how they can apply their new skills in the real world. Undergoing an experiential learning event without a competent facilitator could result in a fun and engaging day, but without the benefit of the lasting results you want to see in your organization. Fortunately, there are expert facilitators whom you can work with in order to tailor an experiential learning event for your organization.

The best way to comprehend the value of experiential learning is to participate in a training event and see the results for yourself. If your company is working toward achieving organizational development objectives, identify what types of skills are necessary in order to help you get to the next level. Chances are, there is an experiential learning program that can help you build those skills. Contact Eagle's Flight today to learn more about which training programs make the most sense for you.

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EAGLE'S FLIGHT'S NEW BOOK "EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, THE FUTURE OF TRAINING" WILL BE AVAILABLE SUMMER 2016.

