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## Hidden in practice: the management activities that foster employee learning

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For frontline managers, the practice of facilitating learning and development for their employees appears to be one that focusses, in the first instance at least, on learning and development with the purpose of meeting an employee's job performance, key performance indicators (KPIs) or team target. Generally, it is not about the facilitation of learning simply for the sake of learning rather it is about the development of relevant skills and knowledge, so that the immediate job gets done and gets done well. Given that management jobs are, after all, primarily about overseeing and coordinating the work of others, so that the work gets done, this is not surprising. Nonetheless, typical management activities, centred around getting the work done, do indeed afford frontline managers opportunities to facilitate employee learning. For many frontline managers, such employee learning opportunities are often so deeply embedded in other management activity, they go unnoticed. Accordingly, the opportunity to facilitate employee learning dissipates.

This paper builds on recent discussions on the inseparable nature of working and learning: peripheral management practice that facilitates employee learning (Cohen, 2014) to focus on the practical activities that frontline managers can do to promote and facilitate employee learning. The purpose of this paper is to bring to light, for frontline managers and human resource professionals alike those management activities that also provide an opportunity for learning at work, so that broader employee learning and development can be realized.

### Learning at work and the role of the frontline manager

According to Gibb (2003, p. 283), "when frontline managers take a proactive role in the development of employees, there will be a better quality of L&D [Learning and Development] at work for organizations and individuals" and, for those frontline managers who are able to see the larger organizational learning picture – that is, the one beyond the four walls of a conventional training environment – the creation of opportunities for learning appears limitless. Frontline managers can facilitate formal and informal learning for their employees through the creation of a work environment conducive to learning and by planning for learning to occur.

### Informal learning at work

The fact that informal learning is both contextual and deeply intertwined and inseparable from work practice suggests that informal learning occurs best in organizations where learning is fostered, promoted and facilitated through groups, individuals and organizationally, or as Marsick (2009, p. 271) sees it, "in workplaces where the individuals can make a difference in what and how they learn; and where attention is paid to environmental culture and structure, often embodied in the workplace's leader(s)".

Indeed [van Rijn \*et al.\*'s \(2013, p. 612\)](#) research, which looked at informal employee learning from the perspective of motivation and self-identification highlighted three types of informal workplace learning activities: keeping up to date, feedback from supervisor and knowledge sharing. Asking for feedback from supervisors was defined as an “interpersonal learning activity” in which the employees “focus on one-to-one dyadic information sharing about their work” ([van Rijn \*et al.\*, 2013, p. 614](#)), such as discussing new approaches to work or having a career conversation which often leads to positive employee engagement in workplace learning activities. The findings from their study suggest that when the managerial practices of coaching (i.e. helping employees set clear career goals, providing positive and constructive feedback and setting job challenges) are undertaken, employee engagement in informal workplace learning is stimulated ([van Rijn \*et al.\*, 2013, p. 625](#)).

In the same way and given the sheer nature of their roles, frontline managers are afforded many other opportunities to promote and facilitate employee learning, simply through the very nature of their everyday interactions with employees. Specifically, employee learning opportunities arise through the everyday practical activities that frontline managers undertake, simply as part of their management role, such as observe their team members, conduct team meetings, listen and provide employee feedback, telling stories and talking as well as providing on-the-job learning opportunities.

### Management activities that facilitate employee learning

The following provides an overview of some of the practical activities that frontline managers often undertake that can be leveraged to promote and facilitate employee learning.

#### *Observing*

Whilst perhaps not considered a formal “learning activity”, frontline management observations of employee performance are fundamental to knowing what learning needs to occur for a particular employee, as well as providing some insight into what might be the most appropriate learning intervention. Observation provides frontline managers with a means of improving performance through clear identification of the learning need, and facilitation of learning can be the by-product of this observation.

#### *On-the-job training*

On-the-job training by an existing member of staff, known colloquially as “sitting next to Nellie”, is possibly the most widely used employee development method. “Sitting next to Nellie” is a learning intervention that frontline managers both facilitate and organize. They can either facilitate employee learning themselves or, alternatively, they can engage other employees to provide on-the-job training for a colleague. On-the-job training involves conducting training at the trainee’s workstation (desk), on the construction site or wherever learning needs to occur. Virtually, any type of one-on-one training between co-workers, or instruction between frontline managers and employees, can be seen as on-the-job training.

#### *Story-telling and “talk”*

Perhaps one of the most understated management learning interventions is story-telling. [Boud \*et al.\* \(2009, p. 323\)](#) maintain that “learning in workplaces is always mediated through talk”.

Another dimension of story-telling as a means of facilitating workplace learning is simply the “talk” that occurs at work. [Boud \*et al.\*'s \(2009, p. 325\)](#) study “Talking up learning at work” focussed on the usefulness of “chatting” at work. For example, one participant from their study stated: “I was going to ‘toss’ it around with the guys at lunch time and see what they thought”. Chatting that occurs informally, not in an acknowledged learning space (such as training) but “on the fly” in “hybrid learning spaces” ([Solomon \*et al.\*, 2006](#)), through engagement with participants in work communities, provides a rich source of workplace

learning. It is in hybrid learning spaces that so much learning can occur despite these spaces not being seen as affording any learning. This point is illustrated well by another participant by Boud *et al.* (2009) study who commented: "I don't think we think about it as learning. I don't walk about there (lunch room) thinking I learned something today". Yet, this is often exactly what occurs.

### *Team meetings*

By nature, the team meeting and story-telling and "talk" are closely aligned. Whilst the team meeting is an often understated or an unrealized employee learning opportunity, it can clearly be seen as an instance of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), one that embraces the promotion of the collective or group as being central to learning. The team meeting affords opportunities for the development of belonging within a community of practice, particularly for newcomers, as they gradually develop an understanding of the approved ways of interacting within the community, as well as what needs to be learnt, valued or disputed.

### *Listening and providing employee feedback*

While not exclusively associated with the facilitation of employee learning at work, listening and providing employee feedback is a principal means of identifying employee motivation, learning opportunities and the employees learning disposition.

Like observing, providing feedback and listening could simply be considered a standard frontline management competency, yet its importance, more broadly and in relation to the identification of employee workplace learning, is evident. According to Beattie (2006), giving time and showing understanding of another's situation, are at the foundation level of the hierarchy of developmental behaviours. In her study, these developmental behaviours were associated closely with the professional backgrounds of frontline managers (social care professionals). For most frontline managers, according to Beattie (2006), these skills are not necessarily aligned with their professional working background, yet are fundamentally important to creating appropriate learning opportunities and facilitating learning for employees.

### *Comment*

For many frontline managers, and a startling number of human resources personnel, employee learning and development has been rather narrowly and dubiously associated within the restrictive confines of the training room. Yet, clearly frontline managers, through the very nature of their roles are gifted with a myriad of opportunities to enhance employee learning at work, simply through common and everyday management activity they undertake.

For frontline managers, engaging with others, talking about work, sharing and telling stories, as well as actively participating in a community of practice are rarely acknowledged as assisting employees learning, yet this is often what is occurring naturally, socially *in situ*.

For many frontline managers, it may well be, in the first instance at least, about the realization that such opportunities to enhance employee learning exist. Learning at and through work activities, particularly those promoted and facilitated by frontline managers provide rich, meaningful learning opportunities for employees – they just need to be recognized and then fostered.

#### **Keywords:**

Coaching,  
Engagement and learning,  
Organizational learning,  
Work-based learning

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