Changing the Learning Strategy:
Informal Methods for Enhancing a Learning System

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Creating a Learning Ecosystem

- Informal learning is discretionary and occurs outside of formal training environments
  - Different types of informal learning vary in intentionality and consciousness (e.g., may happen without awareness)
  - Seen as an extension to formal learning and as the ability to practice in the real world

- 70-80% of all learning in organizations is informal
  - Must capitalize on this opportunity and ensure that these experiences are meaningful!
    - Informal, just like formal learning experiences, should focus on “the right” skills (e.g., skills employees are weak at)
  - Need methods to capture and make sense of associated data
Facilitating Informal Learning

- Two broad classes of antecedents
  - Personal variables (personality traits; demographic variables)
  - Situational variables (resources; support; opportunities)

- Stronger support for the impact of situational variables (Cerasoli et al., 2018)
  - Support variables (e.g., formal organizational policies; mentorship) hold particularly strong relationships with informal learning

- Focal learning methods
  - Social Learning
  - Developmental Work Experiences
Importance: All people learn continuously just by watching and observing

Relevant Past Work/Research

- Bandura (1961): Children who observed aggressive behavior are more likely to demonstrate those same behaviors
- Langkamer (2008): Subordinates whose leaders engage in self-directed learning are more likely to do the same
- Flanagan et al. (2015): Soldiers in initial officer training mimic the social skill behaviors exhibited by their instructors
Stealth Training: teaching an unrelated curriculum (e.g., leadership) while simultaneously developing other skills (e.g., marksmanship)

Data collected on instructors and students in an Army initial leadership course
- Some instructors were trained to interact with students in a manner that promoted good social interactions
- During training events, students participated in a challenging role play negotiation session (mock Key Leader Engagement; KLE)
- During the KLEs, students whose instructors engaged in Stealth Training techniques were more likely to mimic the positive social interaction behaviors (e.g., demonstrating respect) they saw in their instructors

Applying Social Learning: Use Case

IBOLC Student Pre- vs Post-Training comparisons

Significance at $p < .05$
Implication: Leaders can be trained to *strategically* exhibit behaviors that contribute to employees learning across multiple domains

- Leaders need to also strategically place subordinates in situations where they can observe good behaviors that they learn to emulate

Challenges

- Identifying quantifiable data streams (e.g., What activities should be measured? How should we measure them?)
- Assessing learning and growth
- Must consider the “dark side” of social learning
  - Makes it even more important that leaders are trained to be strategic in their interactions
Importance: Work experiences – intentional or not – have the ability to challenge individuals

Relevant Past Work/Research
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD: Vygotsky, 1978)
  - Work experiences/training must be just challenging enough to promote learning
- Deliberate Practice (Ericsson et al., 1993)
  - Gain exposure to and practice skills at which you are deficient
  - Expertise is a function of the amount of deliberate practice combined with feedback
Use case: Nurse triage skills

Focus on “organic” deliberate practice that occurs on the job

- Do nurses who engage in triage cases where they are less experienced develop skills more quickly than nurses who do not?

Potential training impact

- If data illustrate that nurses who engage in more deliberate practice have greater rates of skill acquisition, case assignment should be less about schedule and availability and more about learning needs
Implication: Exposure to challenging/stretch work experiences can and should be made more deliberate

Challenges

- Must have a “map” that links skill needs/learning objectives to specific work experiences
  - This map must account for future career goals and push individuals to the edge of the ZPD
- Measurement and assessment
  - How are data collected and used to inform growth assessments?
Summary and Recommendations

- Informal learning can enhance and supplement formal learning
- Measurement of informal learning is key
  - Sensors are ubiquitous but what data will tell us if and how learning is occurring?
  - Measurement must also be theoretically meaningful
- Once we can measure and make valid assessments, we must ensure that *meaningful* informal learning continues to happen
  - Train organizations and leaders on how to capitalize on these events
  - Ensure that individuals have the skills needed to learn effectively in these environments (i.e., must learn how to learn)
  - Individual learning paths should include recommendations for both formal and informal learning
To create a total learning ecosystem, consider...

- **Formal and informal learning experiences** when developing personalized training recommendations

- **The learning environment** (What work design factors will help/hinder informal learning?)

- **The learner** (How do personality and individual differences influence what informal learning experience will be most relevant and/or effective?)

- **The learning experience** (Which type of informal learning experience is most appropriate/effective for training the specific skills of interest?)
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