



# Learning Effectively Through Necessity

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**A recent case study in the *Harvard Business Review* asked, “Leadership Development: Perk or Priority?” A provocative question perhaps, but the real question should not be whether to invest in leadership development, but how.**



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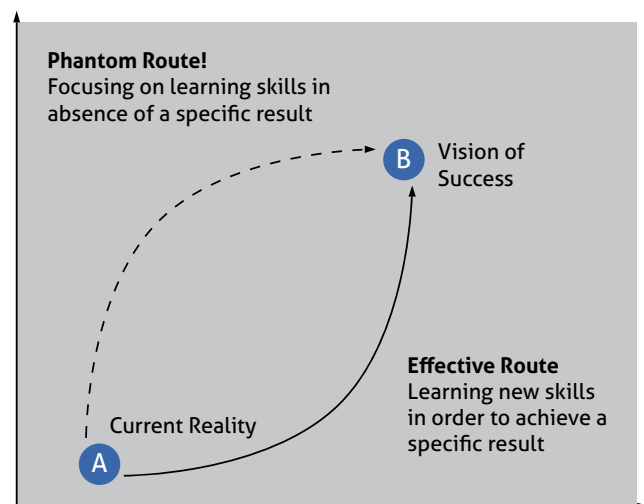
Seth D Tyler

In a world of rapid change and global competition, all companies have to be constantly achieving better financial and operational results if they are to stay competitive. But how do you achieve this year-on-year improvement?

Ultimately, companies can only run at higher and higher levels of performance if they are continually learning new things that make them better at what they do. Ensuring this happens should therefore be one of the central responsibilities of any leadership team. However, whilst much attention is given to making technical improvements in the business, often little or nothing is done to improve the area that will have the biggest impact on long-term success: increasing the capability of the business to **learn** to do things better.

Many organizations don’t invest appropriately in developing their capability to learn because their experience has been that past investments have failed to deliver any real value.

This is because their investments have largely followed the **Phantom Route**. What they have done is to identify skills that they believe are needed in the business and then enrolled people onto training courses to learn these skills. This approach is fatally flawed due to two important points about learning.



The first point is that humans only really learn anything through necessity: a need to achieve a specific new result or outcome. Managers on a training course will only acquire any new skills if they first recognise that they want to achieve something that they currently cannot, and that the skills delivered by the course are necessary to achieve this objective.

The second point is that new skills cannot be learnt without practice and an understanding of the real context in which they will be applied. Imagine you had never played golf before and were enrolled on an “Essentials of Golf” course held by some crack facilitators at a pleasant hotel or training centre. Over the duration of the course, the facilitators explained to you the objective and rules of golf, the physics and mechanics of the golf swing and the sequence of movements that were required to take the club head from its address position, to the top of the back swing and back to impact with the ball. At the end of the course, you head out to tee off for the first time. Is the ball going to fly down the fairway? Well, probably not.

Even assuming that you do actually have a real desire to learn how to play golf and therefore really wanted to learn (our first point above), the reality is that when you get on the course, the theory that worked so well in the hotel meeting room suddenly starts to look very different and you realize that it is going to take a lot of practice to really learn to play golf (our second point).

"Essentials of Golf" is an example of **Phantom Route** learning and in isolation is likely to leave you frustrated and feeling that you have had a poor return on your training investment. What is true for learning golf is equally true for learning skills to help improve business performance. This does not mean that all training courses are bad, but that courses alone are unlikely to deliver real increases in capability.

Learning through **doing** is a better approach. Focusing on a clear outcome and practising the skills you need to achieve it in situ will ensure that you really learn the things that help you be successful. But there is still a snag. If you just turn up with your clubs at the course and "have a go" until you get it right, you may end up with a very solid golf game. The downside however, is that it is likely to take a very long time, be hard work, frustrating and expensive. Whilst people do learn through their mistakes, unstructured learning for businesses is expensive and probably means you are losing ground to your competitors.

Happily there is a third and truly **Effective Route**, which is to create a meaningful challenge for teams and individuals to strive for by defining a clear result, and then support them in the realization of that result with the right blend of theory, coaching, and targeted on-the-job training and support, so that while people are working to deliver the result, and learning new skills through the process. The need to change presents an opportunity to learn.

In golfing terms, this would mean seeking out the support of your local golf professional to help you learn the game. He will not play the game for you (or how could you learn anything?) but he will provide you with the pointers to get you going, support you through your learning journey with encouragement, provide discipline and solutions to particular problems and, critically, give you enough understanding of your swing and the swing



you should be working towards to enable **you** to work out where you are making mistakes and how you can put them right. So rather than teaching you how to play golf, what he is really providing you with is an effective process through which you **learn how to teach yourself** to play golf.

For this to work in the world of business means that all companies need to have the performance improvement equivalent of the golf pro. Offloading this responsibility to the HR or training function tends to perpetuate the **Phantom Route** approach. Instead, leaders and managers at all levels of businesses need to recognise that this should be **their** responsibility.

But here lies perhaps the biggest challenge that companies face. Most organizations have leaders with much experience, many of whom lead intuitively. But very few have leaders with the explicit, in-depth knowledge of leadership tools, techniques and approaches who can act as coaches to the business at-large.

This will likely mean that it is the leaders of the business who need to develop conscious competency around their skills before the rest of the business will have the right support in place to really change performance. This is exactly where Leadership Development needs to play its role. If the **Effective Route** is adopted, then the business will have learnt how to improve performance, and Leadership Development will not be seen as a perk, but as a key success factor.

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