



# Expand Learning

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Going beyond sustainment to a higher level

What happens after a learning and development event? Much has been written about the importance of sustainment and follow-through. But the dearth of effective action after learning events is the ongoing Achilles' heel of learning and development.

Perhaps one reason that we never seem to arrive at the final solution for sustainment is that we have been taking the wrong approach from the start. "Sustainment" is the support or maintenance of someone or something. This implies that the pinnacle of the learning journey was the event, or moment of introduction to a new concept or skill.

The rest of the journey is simply support and maintenance with the assumption that you'll gradually glide downward from that point. At worst this equates people to machines: once set up, they should always run efficiently with simple upkeep.

Most recognize that the real impact of development is found in the continuous journey of learning and skill mastery. We offer an alternative to learning sustainment. Rather than sustain learning, your objective should be to expand it.

Let's throw out the word sustainment and make expanding learning our

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starting point. This suggests there is an ever-escalating potential in the learner. The pinnacle of learning has yet to be reached. Expanding learning recognizes the individuality of the learner and the fast-paced changes within the world of work.

People don't win the 100-yard dash by running extremely well for 50 yards and then coasting. What do we know about expanding learning that increases the likelihood of a full 100-yard sprint?

#### **Formula for expanding learning**

*Expanding Learning =  
Motivation × Clarity × Support ×  
Practice × Measurement.*

We have deliberately placed multiplication symbols between each of the elements. If any one factor is a zero, the outcome, no matter how large the other elements, will also be zero. A review of each component explains why we take such a strong stand on the importance of each.

#### **Motivation**

There is compelling evidence that our traditional beliefs about motivating people are outmoded and incorrect. In a nutshell, extrinsic “carrot and stick” motivation only works when the assignment neither inspires deep passion nor requires deep thinking.

Many sustainment efforts come from a place of fear. Fear that if someone doesn't prod, learners will stay inertly in place; when they do move, they will aimlessly wander without any direction. Well-intentioned sustainment efforts can destroy motivation.

Expanding learning is all about creating the conditions for people to do their best learning. The truly powerful motivators are as Daniel Pink describes in his book, *Drive*: autonomy, mastery of one's work, and a strong purpose that gives work a deeper meaning. This intrinsic motivation creates the determination and stick-to-itiveness essential in learning and development. The reality of motivation is that it lies within the individual. It cannot be mysteriously injected into a team mem-

ber at the will of the manager any more than it can be implanted into a teenager by a concerned parent. We can only create the environment in which motivation is more likely to be unleashed. Resist the temptation to control and expand learning by building on the individual's need for autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

### **Clarity**

Clarity is often confused with simply having a broad directional understanding of what needs to be accomplished, e.g. learning to speak French. On the surface, such goals seem very clear. But success, especially in developing a strength, hinges on knowing the specific steps required to put a new strength into place.

If a golfer wants to improve, they can go to the driving range and hit a bucket of balls. Alternatively, they can find a practice area and mark off a 12-foot circle, stand 20 yards away, and practice hitting balls into that circle until at least half successfully land inside. The first approach has close to zero effect. The latter approach is the key to expand-

ing learning through clarity because it establishes a target, defines actions, and states a goal.

Learners who aspire to improve by developing new behaviors must understand the importance of identifying how the new skills can be applied in the course of their daily work. They must also understand what effective execution of the skill looks like and establish personal targets, defined practice methods, and stated goals. These steps can be tedious but expanding learning with clarity will make a measurable difference.

### **Support**

The environment that surrounds a learner is complex and plays a huge role in whether or not learners are successful. We believe success is primarily the individual's responsibility; however, expanding learning means strategically leveraging others, especially the manager, to play a role. Our own research shows significantly better results when managers take an active role in supporting their team member's development. Unfortunately, this is often the exception rather

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than the rule. Finding ways to meaningfully involve managers and even holding them accountable for supporting learning will pay huge dividends.

With the growth in technology and what has been referred to as the “personal learning cloud” (the growing mix of online courses, social platforms, and interactive learning tools), learners can be supported with practice that is personalized for them. They can receive content at their own pace and use media that are optimally suited to their learning style or work environment. Expanding learning will bring together all the components of the environment, people and technology, to work together to support the learner’s development.

### **Practice**

Acquiring skills requires practice, both to learn the skill and to cement it into place as a guarantee of retention. Practice is also required if the person is to move up a notch. As our golf example highlighted earlier, practice doesn’t make perfect. Deliberate, perfect practice is the only thing that makes perfect.

When seeking to expand learning in your organization, opportunities for practice will come from on-the-job experiences. Many learners believe that an intellectual understanding is enough to be able to execute on concepts and ideas. The reality is that we need deliberate practice, feedback, refinement, and practice again. First, identify these opportunities in small aspects of the learner’s job. Then repeatedly perform that aspect of the job, collecting feedback and trying to improve each time, to create an ongoing work pattern of practice and improvement.

The commitment and structure of deliberate practice is essential. Expand learning through practice on tasks that can be tested quickly, where feedback can be offered, and can be repeated. Practice is the only way to become excellent in a new skill or behavior.

### **Measurement**

Measuring progress is a well-established mechanism to increase the likelihood of success in creating change and expanding learning. After all, “What gets measured gets done.” Since learning and develop-

ment happen every day in the building and maintaining of new habits, tracking behavior change can feel like measuring the intangible.

We know of no better way of measuring than a 360-degree feedback process. This provides an objective, relatively comprehensive view, highlighting whether or not the desired trait is being strengthened. It is quantitative, repeatable over time, and reflective of the learner’s context.

It also stands to reason that multiple measurement techniques together will help further refine the understanding and impact of learning experiences. Various software solutions are available that offer a way for people to track activities around developmental goals, record specific activities being undertaken, assess progress being made, and track overall movement. Cross-referencing organizational survey data, customer satisfaction data, and learner data can also provide valuable insights. Combining measurement techniques can be effectively applied to make sense of and refine how learning can be expanded for the individual and the organization.

## **Conclusion**

Success in expanding learning does not come from doing these things haphazardly or sporadically, nor does it come from doing them sequentially. It comes when they are put into place concurrently. We return to our formula with the various elements being multiplied, not added to one another. We're convinced that if any one of the elements is missing, the result will be zero.

Most organizations as a whole, and the people in them, have untapped potential.

The most effective way to maximize that potential is through a mindset and practice of expanding learning. This approach will help empower people and the organization to achieve new heights.

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## About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.