

Skill Mastery in Four Steps

Try this framework for continuous learning.

BY WENDY TAN

The 70-20-10 model is the de facto framework used in development planning, but could it be flawed? Here's why: It offers no guidance on what to do after a learner participates in a project, speaks to a mentor, or attends a course. Talent development professionals can consider an alternative research-based process to guide development planning that more effectively leads learners toward skill mastery.

What it is

For my research, which involved in-depth interviews with 25 professionals on upskilling efforts they pursued to be successful in career changes, I discovered that four types of activities contribute to the adult learning process: input, reflection, application, and feedback. Together, they constitute the accelerated learning process.

How it works

Learning any skill typically starts with some form of input, such as courses, experts, community, or content. Inputs are the raw stimuli that give us new ideas, perspectives, and specific know-how. For example, Lily, an L&D manager, decides to learn about software development to communicate more effectively with her developers. She finds an online course and seeks out knowledge from her colleague, a chief technology officer.

As she watches the online course, Lily takes notes to help her focus on the key points (because many terms are new knowledge for her). Internally, she relates the new knowledge to what she already knows. She notes, for example, how coding is done with black-and-white logic statements and reflects on her frustration with the developers. Lily has an idea: "Perhaps I should lay out my thoughts in a specific step-by-step manner before my next meeting with the developers."

Lily later discusses her reflections with her CTO colleague who shares additional insights. The following week, Lily prepares a communication for her developers in a step-by-step fashion using some of the technical terms she learned from the online course. In the next interaction with the developers, she notices there is less tension. She even requests feedback, asking, "How is this meeting for you?" The feedback she receives—"The requirements are much clearer now," the developers responded—tells Lily that she is moving in the right direction.

She continues with the next spiral of learning to understand other topics, such as analytics. The input-reflect-apply-feedback cycle continues to deepen her understanding of software development. Over time, Lily becomes more confident to innovate tech-based learning solutions. Continuous learning cycles that include reflection and feedback eventually lead to skills mastery.



CHECKLIST

The Accelerated Learning Process



Input: Identify multiple types of learning resources so that learners benefit from the unique affordances each offers.



Reflect: Provide time and space for learners to reflect using guided questions.

Guidelines

Start with inputs—they provide the raw materials or stimuli for learning. Talent development professionals have a wide range of inputs from which to choose for development planning, such as articles, books, courses, mentors, and other resources. When developing a learning plan for yourself or employees, identify multiple inputs because each one yields different benefits. Programs and content are useful to get background knowledge quickly, whereas experts and community are useful for learners to ask specific questions and clarify doubts.

With the inputs, reflection is necessary for learners to gain insight or change perspectives and move toward application. During reflection, learners ask questions to make sense of their learning, examine their assumptions, and set intention for application. Reflection questions sound like: What is different? How is what I am learning similar or different from what I knew earlier? What are my assumptions, and are they still valid? What if I had done this instead? What do I want to try?

Without reflection, there is little insight or deeper self-awareness to propel change in behavior. Reflection requires time and space. As a trainer, incorporate guided questions into development plans that promote reflection. As a learner, pick a few questions from above and write your answers in a journal. A few minutes of focused reflection enhances learning.

Next up is application—which not only consolidates learning but also prevents the evaporation of new insights. Sure, learners can apply their new knowledge in a work project, but there are other ways. They can share it with others in the form of a discussion, presentation, or even a social media post. Teaching

RESOURCES

Di Stefano, G., F. Gino, G. Pisano, and B. Staats. 2016. *Making Experience Count: The Role of Reflection in Individual Learning*. Working Paper 14-093. Harvard Business School.

Flame Centre. 2021. “When the Change Is the Constant, How Do We Learn How to Learn Better?” February 26. flamecentre.com/post/when-change-is-the-constant-how-do-we-learn-how-to-learn-better.

Merriam, S., and L.L. Bierema. 2014. *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

compels people to organize and verbalize their knowledge. Incorporate at least one application idea into the plan—the sooner the application, the more enduring the learning.

Timely and frequent feedback speeds up learning, yet my research suggests that learners seeking feedback is rarely a consistent learning practice. Structure into the plan a mechanism that details who, when, and how learners can get feedback. Feedback can be about the outcome or the learner’s behaviors. The feedback learners receive becomes the next input, and along with other inputs, continues the next spiral of learning. Use the accelerated learning process as a guide and allow for flexibility and deviation as long as the cycle continues.

Results

Learners who actively engage with multiple inputs for learning, reflect intentionally, apply the knowledge consistently and actively, and receive feedback report their effectiveness in learning new skills. My research suggests that they also are happier and more engaged at work.

The accelerated learning process also can fast-track the upskilling efforts and eventually contribute to individuals’ career success. By teaching people to improve their learning process, you promote learning agility—an essential skill to thrive in the future of work.

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Apply: Create an avenue for learners to share or apply their new knowledge, which helps organize thoughts and test new behaviors.



Feedback: Ensure learners have access to credible feedback sources that can provide insights to the learning.



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