

Learning and Development: Looking beyond the classroom

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Ever wonder why your traditional training programs aren't producing lasting changes and at best only lackluster results? They're likely only one-dimensional. In this article, I explore the three dimensions a learning and development program must have to produce sustainable behavioural changes in their participants.

Note: While this article focuses on the learning and development of non-substantive skills in a law firm setting, these principles apply to all adult learning scenarios and could also be considered for your substantive learning and development initiatives inside or outside a law firm.

Your firm's investment in learning and development should deliver tangible, measurable results. Initiatives should be based on and designed to meet the needs of the firm, as well as further the firm's strategic goals. It's not about doing things better, it's about doing better things. To gain results, training initiatives must require participants to form new habits in addition to learning new skills. New habits create new behaviours.

When producing sustainable behaviour change is your goal

For learning and development initiatives to produce sustainable behaviour change in their participants, the initiatives must include three elements:

1. Skill transfer opportunities
2. Applied learning opportunities
3. Sustained learning opportunities

Skill transfer opportunities

Commonly referred to as teaching, this is about the transfer of skills and knowledge from teacher to learner. In your case, it's the transfer from session facilitator (internal resources or outside suppliers) to lawyer. It produces understanding. You might even get feedback from

your lawyers like "Wow – I didn't realize I didn't know that". The most common expression of this in a law firm is the group, or classroom training session. You're likely very familiar with this kind of initiative. It can vary in length and format from a one- to two-hour lunch-n'-learn type seminar to a one- to two- or more day intensive workshop. You can expect lawyers participating in these initiatives to learn something new. You should not however, expect them to do something new.

While teaching/skill transfer does play a vital role in the learning process, it's still only one dimension. On its own, it just simply isn't enough time and doesn't address individual learning styles and needs to foster the development of new habits. On the flip side, group sessions are great for a quick energy boost and to introduce new concepts or information to a group of lawyers at the same time. They're also great for helping you to identify which lawyers are most likely to benefit from further training in a more applied setting. So, if your firm's learning and development initiatives include group training sessions, just be realistic about what they can produce. And then ask yourself if that's enough for your firm.

If behaviour change is your goal, training initiatives must require participants to form new habits in addition to learning new skills.



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Applied learning opportunities

The second element to be mindful of when designing or offering a learning and development initiative that fosters behaviour change is *practice*. Not just any practice though. Not the ‘role play’ kind of practice often attempted in group training sessions. You know those never work. Lawyers won’t open up in a group setting and they’re not likely to experiment and try something new in front of a room full of their colleagues.

So, how can you create the kind of environment ‘safe enough’ for lawyers to apply what they learned in a group setting? By offering individualized, one-to-one support. You might recognize this as coaching. It’s in this setting where individual needs are addressed and met, where breakthroughs in experiences happen, where real-life, just-in-time learning takes place and where results are immediate and tangible. Learning is applied using an experiential approach, where every aspect of a lawyer’s habitual daily routine can become a “teachable moment.” It works like this: Lawyers do something different, produce desirable and measurable results from doing it, so they repeat their actions and new habits are formed.

Coaching can also be the gift that keeps on giving: It also offers support and accountability through objective, non-judgmental, strategic advice from an independent business advisor (this can be internal, if you have the resources, or outsourced to a qualified advisor).

So, if your firm’s learning and development initiatives include applied learning opportunities like the ones described here, congratulations – you’re ahead of most of your competition. Celebrate the individual results you and your lawyers produce from these initiatives. Then, ask yourself if a collection of individual results is enough for your firm.

Sustained learning opportunities

This is about taking your learning and development initiatives to a whole new level. It’s about creating the conditions within your firm that support your lawyers with their new skills and behaviours so they don’t become alienated when they complete their training and revert back to old ways of doing things. It often

involves defining the role of the ‘graduate’ so your firm can build a community among participants that endures long after their initial participation in the learning initiative.

It’s about understanding how your firm can encourage the new behaviour using your own resources (if the initial training was provided by an outside supplier). And it’s about understanding how the development of new policies can reward the new behaviour to produce results for your firm that are far greater than the sum of the collection of individual results.

It’s one ‘thing’ to make education available to your lawyers; it’s another ‘thing’ to offer supportive options for them to apply what they learn; and it’s yet another ‘thing’ to ensure the environment in your firm endorses and supports what you just asked your lawyers to do. What’s the right ‘thing’ for your firm?

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