

Using Adult Learning Theory for New-Hire Training

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Abstract

To test if adult learning theory can inform a training program for newly-hired employees in industry, a training program was set up using Knowles' concepts of andragogy. Evaluation results from before and after the new training program indicate that the perceptions of those in the new training program changed in a positive direction. This indicates that the concept of andragogy does translate to the workplace.

Introduction

There is too often a difference between theory and practice. This is especially true in corporate America where practice must have a positive impact on the bottom line, and there is little room to experiment with theory that may or may not work in certain contexts. One such context is corporate new-hire training for those newly hired (new hire), and one such theory is adult learning. At the foundation of adult learning theory, Malcolm Knowles' assumptions of the adult learner hold true for the self-directed person solving everyday life problems. However, it was not known if Knowles' assumptions of the adult learner would translate into effective new-hire training at the corporate level. Based on the belief that andragogy would transfer to the context of new-hire training in the business world, the trainer at one company used Knowles' assumptions of the adult learner, along with various other adult learning theories, as a guide to develop a new-hire training process with the following results.

Problem

The problem at this company was that the evaluations indicated the

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training was inadequate and did not properly prepare new-hires to perform effectively on the job. To alleviate this problem the new-hire trainer was asked to create a new comprehensive training process that matched the complexity of the job and that provided the skills required for a new hires to do their job effectively. To determine the effectiveness of the new training process, evaluations from before the new training were compared to those after the new training model was implemented.

Context

The context in which this project took place was the new-hire customer service department in a large electric utility. Overall, the company employees around 20,000 employees and about 600 are telephone customer service representatives spread out over 6 states in the United States. In the customer service centers where the telephone representatives work, the training department trains approximately 200 new-hire employees each year.

Andragogy

Knowles' (1980) andragogical model was originally based on four assumptions of adult learners and how they develop:

- Concept of learner--Their self-concept moves from one of being a dependant person to one who is self-directed.
- Role of learners' experience--As individuals grow, they accumulate a reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning.
- Readiness to learn--Learners see education as a process for developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life.
- Orientation to learning--As real life problems occur some learning situations require immediate attention. (pp. 43-44)

Knowles (1998) later added two additional andragogical assumptions.

- Motivation--Adults tend to be more motivated to learn things that help them solve problems in their lives or results in internal rewards.
- Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking learning it. Knowing why an adult needs to learn something is the key to giving them a sense of volition about their learning. (p. 149)

Using Concepts of Andragogy

Concept of Learner: Some adults have a high need to be self-directed, but for the sake of consistency, the new-hire material has to ensure everything is covered. Time was allowed each day for the trainee to focus on whatever they felt they needed most. Based on individual need, the trainee had the autonomy to self-direct this additional learning experience.

Role of Learner's Experience: Since not all new-hires have job specific experience and in order to ensure everyone has experiences to draw on, time was set aside for the new-hires to observe the job, and even to perform the job while sitting side-by-side with experienced employees. This "mentor" program was essential because it gave the trainees valuable experiences to use throughout the training program. The trainer often had trainees reflect upon these experiences.

Readiness to Learn: It is hard to know whether learners in the context of new-hire training are learning to achieve their full potential in life or learning the bare minimum just to get by. However, it is likely many trainees see new-hire training as part of the process for developing competence to achieve their full potential. This assumption was the underlying philosophy that permeated the entire training process initiative.

Orientation to Learning: In new-hire training, the trainee's "problem" is that they know nothing about the new job. The goal of the trainer is to work with the trainees to help them immediately solve the problem of knowing nothing to becoming fully functional, productive employees.

Motivation: On the first day of training the desired behaviors and characteristics of a successful employee are communicated. Throughout the training program, these behaviors and characteristics are modeled through words and actions from everyone involved in the training. Additionally, the trainees continuously receive feedback in the form of positive reinforcement or correction. All of these things are designed to motivate the trainee. Whether or not this motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic is based on the individuals' perception, values, and work ethic. The individual will decide whether or not the motivation is intrinsic, extrinsic, or most likely, a combination of both (Schein, 1980).

Adults Need to Know Why: Learning objectives were communicated before each section of the new-hire training manual. The objectives not only explained what was to be learned but also why it is important to learn that subject. Thoroughly explaining the objectives and desired outcomes address "why they are learning something."

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Evaluation Results

Answer	Pre	Post	Change
Strongly Agree	14%	27%	+48%
Agree	57%	63%	+10%
Neutral	18%	10%	-44%
Disagree	9%	0%	-100%
Strongly Disagree	2%	0%	-100%

Results

As Table 1 indicates, there was substantial improvement on the evaluation question “My initial training provided the skills required to do my job effectively.” None of the respondents either strongly disagree or disagree with the statement after the new training model was implemented compared to 11% under the old training model. Ninety percent of the respondents either strongly agree or agree with the statement for the new training compared to 71% for the old.

Conclusion

Based on the evaluation results, the new-hires’ perception of training changed in a positive direction. In this case, theory and practice did go hand-in-hand. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that Knowles’ concept of andragogy and his notion of the adult learner does translate to the workplace to increase the effectiveness of new-hire training.

References

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