

EAGLES FLIGHT™
Performance Made Human

The Nature of True Experiential Learning

AN EAGLES FLIGHT FIELD GUIDE



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True Experiential Learning

On the job learning.

Learning from experience.

Experience is a great teacher.

“70/20/10.”

(70% learning on the job, 20% learning from others, and 10% in the classroom).

Experiential activities
(“trust falls”, ropes courses, etc.)

Simulations.

Experiential Learning, either in a classroom, workshop, or training session; whether virtually or digitally.

These are all often seen as “experiential learning.”

Not so. Each is different, and carries their own benefits and challenges.

True experiential learning is more than an engaging activity. It is a deliberate approach to helping people understand why a behavior matters, practice it in a realistic environment, and apply what they have learned back on the job. When designed well, it creates the conviction, capability, and confidence needed to improve performance where it matters most.

Well-designed experiential learning experiences are intentionally created to produce predictable learning outcomes. They place participants in realistic situations where everyday behaviors become visible, creating opportunities to examine assumptions, challenge habits, and practice more effective ways of working.

Although the experiences themselves are often brief and appear to be games, they are carefully designed metaphors for the realities people face at work. Whether the setting is a space rescue, museum heist, archaeological expedition, or stained-glass studio, the experience reveals patterns of behavior that participants immediately recognize from their own workplace.



The experience is followed by a structured debrief that helps participants connect what happened during the activity with the realities of their work. Rather than simply discussing what occurred, participants examine why it happened, what behaviors produced the outcome, and how different choices would have changed the result.. These learnings can be around team effectiveness, communication, leadership skills, silo elimination, or any one of several other areas of interest.

Because the learning occurs in a safe environment (the experience) around a challenging but engaging activity (the mission to be completed in the game) with a focused outcome (teamwork, or change management or coaching skills, etc.) the participant sees the value of personally changing their behavior. They learn how to behave differently in practical terms during the debrief that follows, and recognize the impact those changes will have back on the job. The experience they just completed is now seen to be a powerful and sophisticated metaphor for their real world.

THIS APPROACH BUILDS TWO THINGS INTO THE PARTICIPANTS:

- *Personal conviction of the value of changing behavior*
- *The actual practical things to do differently to improve on the job performance*



Lasting behavior change begins when people discover for themselves what needs to change, why it matters, and how they can perform differently.

Which leads to the question of why this level of intense focus on personal improvement is so crucial in the first place. Why build conviction around the need to change, and why provide the practical tools to do so?

Organizations are constantly seeking to find and hire the right talent, then, in the more advanced companies, constantly working to enhance the effectiveness of those people. They are keen to see talent accept increasing responsibility, and very keen to see top talent stay. This is true for all employees at every level as it relates to key functions, and for those in leadership positions.

How best to do this?

Improving performance requires more than a single learning event.

Organizations create lasting results by combining effective leadership, capable teams, practical skill development, meaningful coaching, and opportunities for people to practice new behaviors in environments that reflect the realities of their work.

When these things are in place the organizations create stronger performance, greater consistency, healthier cultures, and better business results. This advantage can be seen in focus on the customer, on safety, on constant improvement and innovation, and in a compelling future where each feels they belong and can personally make all the difference.

To arrive at this state an organization must be committed to several forms of personal development, and preferably ones that place a high priority on experiential learning. This brings me back to my opening statements, and the need to understand the nature and strengths and weaknesses of each:

- *On the job learning*
- *Learning from experience*
- *Experience is a great teacher*
- *70/20/10*
- *Experiential activities*
- *Simulations*
- *Experiential learning*



Strength and weaknesses:

ON THE JOB LEARNING

This is too often “learning by trial and error.” Instead, it can be enhanced using a buddy or partner approach, where those new to a position have a colleague assigned to them from whom they can learn. Additionally, a strong leader who is skilled at coaching and communication can accelerate learning; and a robust training package, usually the responsibility of the corporate Training Group, can make a dramatic difference.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

This approach can be highly valuable, but it also carries significant risk when the cost of learning through experience is high. In a high risk environment (e.g., on deep sea oil rigs) learning the importance of safety procedures should not see “learning by experience” as another way of saying “learning the hard way.” Yet often that’s what is meant by this approach. Instead, if this approach is to be used, it usually requires introduction of a mentorship or apprenticeship program.

EXPERIENCE IS A GREAT TEACHER

This is a powerful approach to learning, especially in a controlled environment. For example, assigning high potentials to challenging projects as part of their growth allows them to gain valuable experience in a contained environment, and the learning (by experience) they get will serve them in good stead when they’re given greater responsibility. Encouraging learning to occur from mistakes accelerates innovation, improves personal confidence and builds stronger performance. The only concern is to ensure that the size of the mandate given is not so large as to be devastating if failure does occur.

“70/20/10”

This has merit, but is often far less effective than hoped for. It presumes that the individual whose learning is dependant on this approach has a leader who is an extremely effective teacher and coach, with an aptitude for being the primary source of each individual’s learning. It further assumes that the (usually) comprehensive training elements will be consistently prioritized as envisioned, and implemented by employees whose regular work load is already typically heavy and all consuming. To ensure success with this approach a very significant amount of oversight, follow up, and administration by the Training and Development Group is usually required; or a very intense and consistent focus brought to bear by several members at the Executive level of the organization. (usually more effective than as individuals), but tend not to target specific behaviors which need to improve, nor show expressly what must change. They tend to be seen as interesting in the moment, but not with long term sustained impact.

EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

These are often engaging or fun, but often create awareness but rarely produce sustained behavior change on their own. They have their place to raise awareness of some principles (e.g., working in teams is more effective than as individuals), but tend not to target specific behaviors which need to improve, nor show expressly what must change. They tend to be seen as interesting in the moment, but not with long term sustained impact.

SIMULATIONS

A true simulation is an exact replica of a work situation used to teach the participant a required and previously prescribed procedure. For example, a training center may replicate the aisles of a supermarket to teach sales reps how to properly set up their product on the shelves, consistent with the facings purchased; or an airline company may require pilots to spend time in their flight simulator to become familiar with a new piece of software being installed on the planes. Simulations such as these are intended to exactly mimic the real world, and so enable mastery of a particular skill, usually through feedback or repetition. Their use is limited when the required competence lies in the area of acquiring the skills and principles necessary to confront a variety of (often unforeseen) circumstances, such as delivering enviable customer service, encouraging empowerment, or enhancing the performance of a high performing team.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

True experiential learning helps people experience the consequences of their decisions before those consequences exist in the real world. Participants discover for themselves which behaviors improve performance, then connect those discoveries directly to the situations they face every day through a structured debrief.

This form of experiential learning has the added benefit that it is relatively short in terms of time required, so can be delivered either as a stand alone learning event, or incorporated into a learning curriculum, a culture transformation, a safety initiative, a focus on innovation or customer centricity.



Experiential learning is one part of a broader behavior change system. By itself, an engaging experience can create awareness. Combined with leadership reinforcement, practical application, coaching, and accountability, it becomes a powerful way to translate learning into consistent performance.

Some typical questions and answers re: Experiential Learning

Q: *Are virtual experiences available and are they as good as in class experiences?*

Eagles Flight is a word leader in experiential learning, and can deliver the same impact and results both virtually and in class.

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Q: *How long is an experiential learning event?*

They range from 1 - 3.5 hours depending on the degree of learning required from the debrief.

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Q: *Why does experiential learning usually create such a memorable experience?*

We all tend to more easily remember stories, and the theme of the experience acts like a story, or movie, in the minds of the participants, so has better recall than typical presentations or other learning approaches.

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Q: *How can an experience build conviction?*

Conviction usually flows from understanding. As participants learn to “win in the game” they just played, and then see how that game is really just a mirror of their real world, they understand how to “win at work” by applying the principles they just learned. Since the experience, the learning and the understanding are personally discovered (rather than “taught,”) conviction to change is developed.

Q: *How can a 1-3 hour experience make that much of an impact?*

Firstly, a great experience only concentrates on a few key principles, so the learning is focussed; secondly, the metaphor of the experience allows time to be compressed. Back on the job a similar focus on only a few principles would normally occur over several days, be inevitably overlaid with numerous other priorities, and so lack the intensity of learning that can occur in a focused experience.

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Q: *Why is experiential learning increasing in popularity as a learning vehicle*

Organizations increasingly recognize that lasting performance depends on behavior, not information alone. Experiential learning creates opportunities for people to practice better decisions in realistic conditions, making it easier to apply those behaviors when the stakes are real.



EAGLES FLIGHT™

Since 1988, Eagles Flight has partnered with organizations around the world to strengthen leadership, improve execution, build stronger cultures, and help people perform at their best when the outcome matters. Our approach combines behavioral science, experiential learning, practical application, and reinforcement to create behavior change that lasts.

If you're exploring how to build stronger leaders, create more consistent execution, strengthen risk performance, or help organizational change stick, we'd welcome the opportunity to continue the conversation.

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