

Learning Better from Work: Three Stances that Make a Difference

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Abstract: Research suggests that work-relevant learning occurs largely on the job. However, in many situations workers do not learn nearly as much as they might. The "three stances" model helps to explain why. When someone undertakes a task, the person may adopt a completion, performance, or development stance, reflecting a range of organizational and personal influences. The completion stance prioritizes speed and good-enough performance, with little learning. The performance stance invests in high-quality results this time around, with learning generally a strong side effect but not a deliberate agenda. The development stance reaches for high-quality results this time around, with the additional goal of improving later performance. Unfortunately, workers often opt for stances that generate less learning, due to organizational culture, personal attitudes, and the character of the tasks themselves. The stances model suggests ways to counter this tendency and enhance learning from work.

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A shift of balance toward learning from doing

On-the-job learning is coming into its own. There is a notable shift of balance away from pullout programs and classroom instruction towards informal training practices such as just-in-time guidance. At least two motives are apparent: the time taken away from work by formal sessions and the challenge of transferring learning from formal sessions into everyday practice. Accordingly, learning models are incorporating more attention to informal learning practices (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Marsick, 2011) so that employees learn from doing.

Here's an illustration from a corporate trainer at a large healthcare company. "I was running a class on how to properly structure annual goals. In this company, we distinguish between performance and learning goals. Each time when we got to the learning goals piece, employees – at all levels – would lament the lack of resources to attend, or send staff to training programs. I would let them go on for a while before I asked 'How did you learn to do your job?' No one, not once in dozens of sessions, answered that she learned her job in a training class. This changed the conversation and the goals."

However, with this shifting balance comes a new challenge: getting the most out of learning from doing.

The challenge of learning from doing

Learning at work mainly concerns learning from doing. As people tackle the many large and small tasks they face – designing a new product, leading a meeting, giving a presentation, conducting a lab experiment, planning a mission – people commonly learn a great deal from the doing they do. Project-based learning programs such as action learning (Revans, 1982), action research (Lewin, 1946; Perlow, 2012), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) demonstrate that organizations recognize and attempt to harness the power of learning through the action of work.

Though the doing may take intense thought and effort, the learning does not necessarily occur on a conscious level. This incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001) occurs through the everyday practices and routines of workplaces processes and interactions. It usually doesn't look at all like learning in the formal sense. Indeed, the learners themselves often do not see themselves as learning. But it's there. Research suggests that learning from doing constitutes approximately 70% of work-relevant learning (Aring & Brand, 1998).

Learning from doing contrasts with direct training and pullout programs. Instead, people are learning through engagement with the many activities that make up the course of the workday. Of course, even without direct training, there may be interactions important to supporting that learning on a more conscious level. Learning from doing can be purposeful, including learning from the person next to you, informal mentoring, and group reflection as part of the flow of work. The After Action Reviews conducted after military missions are an example of an interaction designed to support the learning that occurs in the action of the field.

Knowledge work is, by its very nature, learning intensive. Unfortunately, in many settings we don't see as much learning from doing as we would like. *Why?* Why does learning from doing often fall short? And relatedly: *How* can we learn to do better? If we can understand the causes of more or less learning from doing, maybe we can find ways to fuel the process.

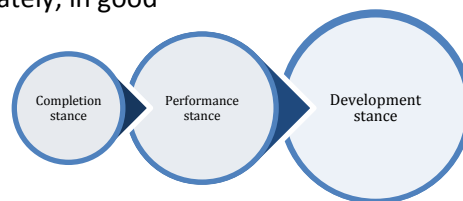
Three stances toward doing

When we undertake a task – say, planning a product rollout, crafting a policy, making a sales call, or simply cleaning our desk – there are choices about how much to invest in the task, choices that reflect our commitments as well as the task and organizational setting. Here is a model of three distinctly different mindsets commonly adopted toward a task:

Completion Stance – Get the task done adequately, in good order but with modest investment. Get past it!

Performance Stance – Get the task done really well. Do what you need to do to ensure a quality outcome.

Development Stance – Get the task done really well *and* use it as a springboard to doing such things even better in the future.



Of course, these stances are not completely separate. They lie along a continuum. Each stance focuses on a different temporal orientation toward the task.

Same task, different learning

These stances help to explain why people doing the "same task" in a superficial sense can learn much less or much more.

The completion stance typically yields very little learning. The doer approaches the task looking for smooth sailing rather than seeking out challenge, with "good enough" results. Of course, there may be a bit of learning here and there, what might be called *accidental learning*. In contrast, the performance stance can yield considerable learning. Engaging an activity in a way that seeks out and surmounts challenges generates learning as a strong side effect (Dweck 1986). This might be called *incidental learning* (Marsick & Watkins, 2001) rather than merely accidental learning. Incidental learning can be quite substantial, even though people do not necessarily think of themselves as

trying to learn. Finally, the development stance involves investing specifically in long-term improvement as a goal. It reaches beyond incidental learning to produce *intentional learning*.

As we advance from the completion to the performance to the development stance, we generally get more and deeper learning – from accidental to incidental to intentional. However, it's important to acknowledge that sometimes a performance stance or a development stance does not produce the learning we'd like to see. There may be strong barriers to learning from the opportunities provided by these stances. If the desired performance is well beyond the person's current skill set, lack of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) or appropriate supports (Ellinger, 2005) may prevent current and future learning. The desired development may also involve "unlearning" deeply held assumptions (Argyris, 1977) or standard routines (March & Simon, 1958; Edmondson et al., 2001). It may be that a performance or development stance is frustrating and demotivating rather than productive. The performance or development desired for the moment (there might be other levels later) needs to be within reasonable reach. To recall Russian Psychologist Lev Vygotsky's famous notion, it needs to be within the *zone of proximal development* for the learner.

Aligning stances with needs

All three stances are parts of our adaptive toolkit. Any of them can be productive, depending on the situation. The completion stance can serve routine tasks that are not particularly challenging. Consider a household task like taking out the trash. For the most part, "good enough" is good enough. Probably one could do it a little faster or a little more strategically, but the gains are marginal. One would rather just get it done.

In many situations, organizations tend toward the completion stance. Project timelines are continually accelerated and getting things done ahead of time is lauded. Worst here are workplaces that are constantly in crisis mode, directing all efforts towards putting out fires rather than finding ways to avoid the next one from igniting.

A completion stance prioritizes speed, which may or may not serve the long-term interest of the company, the team, or the employee. An apt example of this comes from an interaction between a Director of a PR firm, who calls the agency's Vice President of Learning and Development and asks her to deliver the "Tools for Team Effectiveness" workshop, saying "I heard it was a great workshop!" In a completion stance, the VP responds by saying: "Great! Happy to do so! What date were you thinking of and how many participants will there be?"

The performance stance best addresses challenging tasks we only do now and again. Consider buying a house for example: We want to do this as well as we can. However, it does not make a lot of sense to try to make ourselves into expert house buyers. The performance stance represents a balance between speed and quality that is important for efficient operation. There may still be many learning opportunities inherent in performing a task well, but the learning is likely more broadly applied. An example may be filling in for a colleague due to an unexpected absence. You are there to gather

information to be transferred back to your colleague and you want to perform that task well. It would *not* be a good use of time to try to achieve her level of expertise for this one-time replacement. However, you may learn things from other colleagues and insights about the way they are handling the project that could inform your own work. The learning in these situations is not on the agenda; rather, it is a byproduct of the task.

In the example of the PR agency, if the VP of Learning and Development were to adopt a performance stance, she might respond to the request by saying something like: “Thanks so much for calling and for the compliment on the workshop. It has indeed been very well received. Please tell me about the need leading you to ask for the workshop? Who is involved, and what outcomes are you hoping for? We find that this workshop works better when direct reports aren’t involved. We’ll work with you to figure out if this is the best workshop, or one of our other workshops that might help better.”

Finally, the development stance serves well for challenging tasks we need to do often, and where getting better is particularly important. Consider meetings for example. In many work settings, people spend considerable time in meetings. It makes good sense to invest in making those meetings efficient, productive, reasonably engaging, and positively toned.

On an individual level, tackling a project a little beyond one’s current level of skill provides multiple opportunities for developing strategies helpful in future work. In a performance stance, one approaches the task actively thinking of it as a learning occasion, keeping track of how to do it better next time.

Back to our running example, if the VP of Learning and Development were to approach the call with a Development Stance, she might respond by saying something like, “Thanks so much for calling and for the compliment on the workshop. It has indeed been very well received. Please tell me what the need is that is causing you to ask for the workshop? Is it teamwork per se that you need or could there be other related factors such as leadership issues, business pressures, etc.? Your fellow office director John asked for the Tools workshop, but when we dug into it we realized he was really asking for a leadership development workshop with follow up. So let’s use a wide band of identifying the factors at play and come to the solution second. Make sense?”



Learning to learn from doing

Organizations can establish formal mechanisms that support the adoption of the most appropriate stance, advancing the skill sets of their employees and improving overall organizational performance. For example, faced with the changing nature of war when troops went into Afghanistan and Iraq, the US Army needed to figure out how to prepare their soldiers to execute missions in a different way. Before starting a mission, you have a plan; but, once the battle starts, you have to adjust. In a war environment, the enemy gets to vote – they may not do what you thought they would do, and you have to make quick analytical decisions to determine your countermove. Unlike traditional business environments, in the army, you cannot easily prepare for the specific situation.

In response, the army began to use simulations that help their officers perform well not just during the simulation but during actual missions. With each simulation, the army sends out an “observer controller” who at the end of every day will provide the After Action Review to the officers, stressing what they did well and what they did not. The simulations collect information so that every decision that officers took is analyzed with actual data that shows them where all the “actors” were at the time they made the decisions. These simulations, along with the support of observer coaches, encourage the officers to adopt a development stance that enhances the success of the missions they will lead in the future.

From a learning standpoint, the development stance is ideal. So why don't we always employ it? Because it involves a greater investment on our part that may not pay off until sometime in the future. We only have so much time and energy. We have to be selective. The same holds true to a lesser degree for the performance stance. We can't try to do everything especially well every time. For many slices of life that are not so important, it is perfectly reasonable to settle for the completion stance.

Why learning from doing often falls short

Back to one of the key questions: *Why does learning from doing often fall short?* (This generally includes our own learning as well as that of others.) The three stances provide a way of looking at this. A number of influences from organizational culture to individual proclivity can bias the doer toward a completion stance, with negligible learning, rather than a performance stance, even though the performance stance might be more productive. Likewise, a number of influences can bias the doer toward a performance stance, even though a development stance might be more productive.

Let's look at three sources of influence – *person, context, and task*. Of course, in reality these factors overlap somewhat. For instance, what's a challenging task depends on the prior skill of the person doing it. Nonetheless, person, context, and task provide a useful scheme for organizing the factors.

Some personal factors

- Fear of failure. A development stance generally involves trying something a little different, sometimes a lot different. Depending on the circumstances, short-term failure may be the consequence. A person who is more cautious may not take the developmental stance because it is too risky.
- Not caring about the job, high quality not mattering that much at least to oneself, just wanting to get by.
- Preoccupation with immediate performance because of especially challenging circumstances. Trying for a development stance just seems like "too much."
- Preoccupation with product or outcome, neglecting the process. For instance, group decision-making situations where everyone focuses on the outcome but the process is chaotic because they are neglecting how they are interacting with one another.
- Lack of skills of learning from doing, for instance skills of diagnostic reflection; the person cannot effectively adopt a development stance.
- Relatedly, lack of skills for risk management – judging when it's smart to try an experiment and when not so much or what kind of an experiment limits risk.
- Need for closure – research by Arie Kruglanski and others argue that people vary in their felt need to reach closure on situations, to get them settled soon ("seizing") and keep them settled ("freezing"). High need for closure works against a sustained development stance. (Note: The same research shows that felt need for closure on a particular occasion is strongly influenced not just by personality but by context – hence the importance of the contextual factors in the next section!)
- The learning opportunity may be a blind spot, caused for instance by issues of personal vision or identity, as with the notion from Chris Argyris (Argyris, 1977) of double loop versus single loop learning or from Robert Kegan (Kegan, 1994) of competing commitments. A performance stance leads the person simply to "try harder" in the same old way. Indeed, the person may not discern any fundamental problem recommending change. In such circumstances, an effective development stance is difficult to adopt, especially solo, because it requires looking inside the blind spot.

Some contextual factors

- A culture of "okay is good enough," a culture committed to the completion stance. Historically, in some union situations some workers have deliberately fostered such a culture. In highly competitive contract work favoring lowest bidders, unreasonably lean budgets can force such a culture – "Just get it done!"
- Relatedly, constant time pressure and press for outcomes favors the performance stance and sometimes even the completion stance over the development stance – again, "Just get it done!" "Learn on your own time!"
- Incentive systems that, in the name of productivity, foreground extrinsic rewards for short-term performance, undermining intrinsic motivation to engage deeply and improve.
- Lack of mentors or "buddies" or even just other more experienced workers nearby, with their process visible, to watch and learn from.
- Reluctance of busy workers to capture their practical experience in portable forms – memos, lists of tips, etc.
- Reluctance of workers in a competitive environment to share craft or spend time mentoring.
- Lack of sources of informative feedback during the work process itself, from the look of the task itself, peers, superiors, etc.
- A culture that discourages peer feedback as intrusive, butting in, dissing.
- Lack of skills in giving peer feedback gracefully.
- Relatedly, a persistent pattern of deficit-oriented feedback from authority figures, typically after, rather than during, tasks. This undermines intrinsic motivation and proactivity, favoring a compliant performance stance shaded further by the desire to "look good" superficially.

Some task factors

- Some tasks are mostly dull with rare critical moments, such as sentry duty, security checking, or quality checking. With such tasks, it's hard to maintain a performance stance, never mind a development stance. The human capacity to adapt quickly to routine undermines continual learning. (To counter this, false alarms are sometimes inserted from time to time to keep people alert and disrupt the routine.)
- Relatedly, the general literature on tasks draws a broad distinction between well-structured versus ill-structured tasks. Paradoxically, well-structured tasks can offer fewer obvious learning opportunities, because they are so standardized – but maybe the standardization needs reconsideration! In contrast, ill-structured tasks with their ambiguity of process and goals can afford more immediate learning opportunities. If the challenges are embraced!
- Improvement may call for a structural shift and unlearning, as noted earlier under personal factors. Such opportunities are hard to discover. The person may stay stuck in a performance stance, trying hard but with limited results, and not seeing even the possibility of doing fundamentally better.
- How to do the task well may not be very transparent. While you can try hard to do your best in the moment (performance stance), it's difficult to achieve insights toward long-term improvement on your own (development stance). Expert coaching and mentoring help facilitate development. For instance, it can be very challenging to see and diagnose your own problems of data analysis in a lab experiment without an experienced lab head reviewing the data. Likewise, in many kinds of workplace interpersonal interactions, it's hard to see and diagnose your own actions without some sort of coaching or 360 degree feedback.

These three factors of person, task and context can nudge a person into a completion or performance stance that underinvests in learning; or sometimes into a development stance for which a person is not ready or lacks support. However, artful management of these factors might foster individual and organizational improvement, a matter to which we now turn.

Using the stances to foster specific improvements

Sometimes in organizational situations there is a particular improvement target. For example, perhaps the aim is to improve managerial decision-making or meeting practices. Of course, one might include some pullout training in the process. However, the question here is how to improve learning from doing, with or without training. The following steps provide a rough guideline:

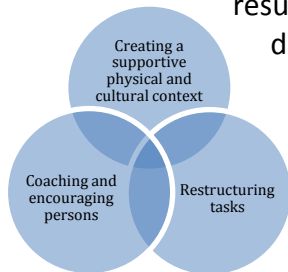
1. Analyze at least speculatively what's keeping people in completion or performance stances rather than a development stance. Look at the triangle of *task*, *person*, and *context*.
2. The results typically suggest ways to intervene. For instance, sometimes *tasks* can be restructured to make them more transparent. Sometimes risk can be lowered for the *person* by adjusting the *context*, emphasizing small-scale trials of decisions say.
3. Notice that there can be ambiguities in localizing difficulties to task, person, or context. For instance, is the person afraid of failure or does the context make failure too costly? Often the answer may be both.
4. Acknowledging such ambiguities, the initial analysis of the problem can be hedged and provisional. After all, any new learning intervention should be considered a kind of prototype in the spirit of quick prototyping. The likely result is (a) some progress on the problem, along with (b) learning more about it toward trying again better.

In other words, learning-from-doing interventions themselves should be approached by the organizers with a development stance rather than expectations of getting it right the first time. This means fully acknowledging that there will be hits and misses and giving the room and support for getting better over time.

Using the stances to foster a learning synergistic organization

Commonly, there is no one specific learning target. Instead, we are seeking general improvement on broad fronts. Indeed, the natural learning targets may be rather different person to person. The idea is to encourage workers to adopt performance and especially development stances more often overall. That is, the idea is to create an organizational structure and culture that is more *learning synergistic* overall. (It's worth noting that sometimes in such circumstances people adopt performance or development stances toward tasks where a completion stance would be okay, simply because this makes the tasks more interesting and boosts their sense of competence. Such extra investment and the proactive mindset it reflects and reinforces are most welcome.)

A design-based approach can guide how to put the structures in place to support a development culture. Consider the contextual and task factors listed earlier, and how they interact with the various personal factors. This interaction is the key to lasting results. There is strong evidence that neither bottom-up nor top-



down approaches work consistently in the absence of the other. Organizational structures signal the changes that management is willing to invest in, while individual attention leverages personal motivation and energy to inform and sustain those changes.

Most generally, the organization might communicate honestly in multiple ways that a development stance is okay and indeed encouraged. And back this up with its reward systems, and by leaders modeling the desired behavior. Social support systems might be put into place or improved – for example, mentoring or buddy systems or simply work-side-by-side systems that provide support, patterns of feedback that are less authority-centered and deficit oriented, work patterns that allow for quick trials of new ideas to lower risk, and so on.

Formalized processes can support the development stance. The organization might institutionalize streamlined versions of practices like after-action reviews or pre-mortems for certain situations. Mid-course checks or "mid-mortems" can also be useful. For a framework that arches across an entire activity, IBM has used a process called PARR (Prepare, Act, Review, Reflect) to encourage the development stance. In some settings and for more rapid rounds of work, full-scale after-action reviews and similar strategies may seem like overkill and receive little attention.

However, workers might learn some simple quick strategies in support of a development stance. For instance, there are a number of quick focusing strategies that might help to extract nuggets from recent experience such as asking, "What's the most important thing I did/learned today? How could I do it better next time?" Taking a few moments to answer the prompt, "I used to think.../now I think..." is a simple strategy to help people pause and identify what they've learned, how their perspective may have changed, and hold onto new insights.

- Individual { •Think about your own practice – how do you determine which stance to take and when?
- Leadership { •What would it look like for a leader to encourage a development stance?
- Organizational { •What might need to be put in place to support more attention to a development stance in your organization?

However, a warning: In no way does equipping workers with strategies substitute for *contextual* and *task* changes supportive of a development stance. When the structure and culture of an organization are antagonistic to a development stance, teaching

strategies to workers won't help much – understandably, most workers won't use them or, if required, will just go through the motions.

Finally, a point made earlier for addressing specific learning challenges also applies to cultivating a generally learning synergistic organization: First versions of any initiative should be viewed as (a) generating some progress, and (b) revealing more about the challenges toward trying again better. In other words, leaders in building a learning synergistic organization should adopt a development stance for the entire initiative itself. Such complex endeavors rarely completely "click" the first time and always themselves offer more to learn.

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