FUNDAMENTALS OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
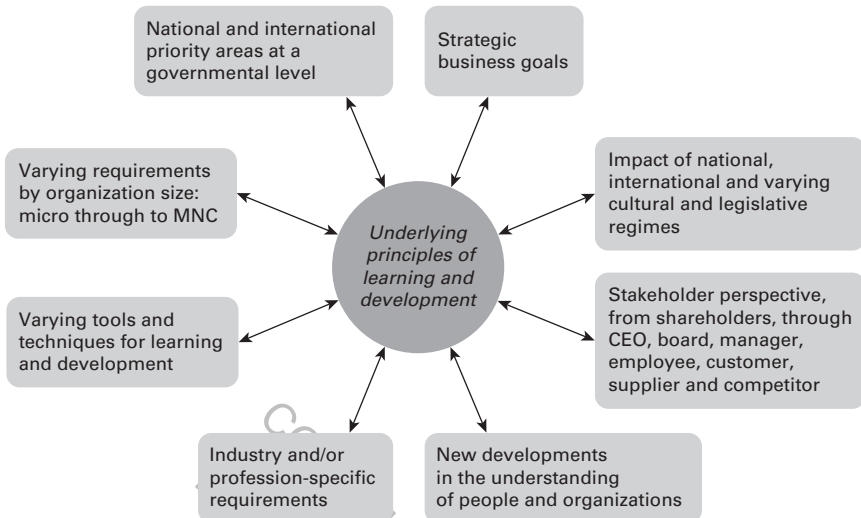
Defining learning and development

Introduction

In this book, I will address learning and development in the workplace. This considers the challenge that every organization faces of how to make best use of its people resource both to capitalize on any opportunities that it uncovers as well as to gain a competitive advantage through the capability of its people. Learning and development (L&D) is the process used by both owners and employees in a business/organization to endow it with all the people capabilities and resources required for its ongoing success. It primarily involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes by both groups and individuals. It consists of a range of tools and techniques, typically combined into a programme following an overarching goal and philosophy linked to strategic business goals. This is typically coordinated through an organization to support the achievement of overarching strategic goals, at organizational, team and individual levels. In this way, a learning and development strategy is built to serve the current and emerging needs of the organization to build sustainable success.

In this chapter I will develop this definition further to uncover some of the fundamental principles of learning and development. Later on in the book I will discuss how to design and deliver effective learning and development. I will take account of the various stakeholders involved and identify what makes an effective learning and development intervention as well as how to identify its effectiveness.

The definition of learning and development above indicates that the focus is primarily on the outcome of enhancing people and organizational capability. It may be inferred from this that it involves a smorgasbord of perspectives and approaches for and from varying individuals and groups. Like motherhood and apple pie it is typically considered 'a good thing'. However, closer analysis reveals that this multiple perspective and influence can limit its effectiveness. As anyone who has sought to deliver learning and development will attest, the conflicting requirements of each group,

FIGURE 1.1   Primary factors impacting on learning and development

National and international priority areas at a governmental level

Strategic business goals

Impact of national, international and varying cultural and legislative regimes

Varying requirements by organization size: micro through to MNC

Underlying principles of learning and development

Stakeholder perspective, from shareholders, through CEO, board, manager, employee, customer, supplier and competitor

Varying tools and techniques for learning and development

Industry and/or profession-specific requirements

New developments in the understanding of people and organizations

approach and perspective rapidly muddy the waters. It is therefore very important for an L&D practitioner to retain a clear focus on what they are aiming to achieve both within individual offerings as well as for the programme as a whole. They should also take care to respond to changes in their environment, including new technology, industry developments and any changes of leadership or ownership of the organization. These changes can often impact the specific capability profile of employees and so impact the L&D outcomes.

Figure 1.1 aims to represent some of the core factors impacting on successful delivery of learning and development. The book will expand upon this multiplicity of demands to enable the practitioner to identify a successful approach in their own context. With the rate of change being so rapid, these factors may morph into new issues quickly. Learning professionals need to be aware of the need to work at pace to provide learning opportunities when they are needed as waiting to build offerings can mean that the learning opportunity is missed.

I will also discuss the various constraints and influencing factors on the learning and development function itself. I will address a range of approaches to structuring the function, from embedding it within strategic business units, through to outsourcing it to external organizations, almost in its entirety. This review of the place and importance of the function is important in view

of its place in the organization and the impact it can have on elements such as employee engagement and organizational commitment. I discuss issues around responsibility for learning, the history of training and development and also how the outcomes of learning and development can impact on an organization's capabilities. The approach is not entirely uncritical and I will question the value that learning could add and seek to understand why it is not always leveraged to its fullest extent.

I will also view learning and development through the eyes of the organization. How does learning and development contribute to organizational capability and strategic development? In short, how does it help the organization gain and retain a competitive advantage?

Finally, I will touch on some of the new developments in this area and I will consider a case study that demonstrates both the benefits and complexities associated with learning and development.

What is 'learning and development'?

Learning and development is an internal function whose purpose is to build the capability of the organization. The CIPD notes that 'A learning and development (L&D) strategy is an organizational strategy that articulates the workforce capabilities, skills or competencies required, and how these can be developed, to ensure a sustainable, successful organization' (CIPD L&D strategy factsheet). L&D sits within the wider HR function and recognizes that we are all involved in a constant, ongoing process of learning and development. It happens consistently in our homes, during our leisure time and in our workplace as well. It is said that as humans we either change or die! Well, the process of learning and development is changing, adapting and growing to meet and overcome challenges and change. Every stage of life involves change and we could profit from reviewing how we have adapted to some of the major changes in our own lives. How did we predict the change? To what did we attribute it? One of the fathers of psychology, William James (1890), noted: 'Whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind.' That is, we do not perceive reality directly, rather we mediate it through our expectations and experiences. So, if we have benefited from a learning intervention such as coaching in the past we will approach it with a far more positive frame of mind than someone who undertook coaching reluctantly as part of a redundancy package.

This process of attribution impacts how I understand what is happening around us and how I engage with it. It also impacts the choices that I make, for example: What resources have I had access to and have I gathered to overcome the challenge? I probably had some prior experience that I could adapt to the new experience. Consider that the first day in your first job is not a million miles from the first day in your most recent job. You probably discussed it in advance with friends or a partner or other supporter and whilst you were travelling this change you probably reviewed what was happening and what it meant with those same people. Then, once the change had become established and predictable you could look forward to the next developments.

In our home life this may be focused on personal relationships, a move across the country or having children. In the workplace it may be a change of market conditions, a new manager, a new role within an organization or redundancy. Each of these are changes for an individual to predict, meet and deal with.

The same process applies to an organization; however, the added layer of complexity is that the number of attributions and perspectives is roughly equal to the number of employees. Therefore, there is a clear need for organizational management of the process of learning and development, focusing on the learning from each situation to draw out and share the learning points. This enables a more focused and coordinated response across the organization to the change.

Is this training, learning and development, organization development or human resource development?

This function has a number of different labels, which reflect the specific focus of those who historically developed the function. An early term was training. This remains a very important part of the development process. Tim Baker notes 'The fundamental difference between training and learning and development is that the latter takes a multi-dimensional approach to human resource development (HRD). Training, on the other hand, is one-dimensional and based essentially on what has been referred to as the "production-centred" approach' (*Training Journal,* 14.9.2014). Learning therefore involves many different approaches and opportunities for learning. It focuses on knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to consider the whole person. Training however focuses primarily on skills and building a shorter term productivity. In this book I will address training as part of L&D.

You will also see this area referred to as human resource development (HRD). O'Toole (2010) notes that while L&D typically 'generally has longer-term aims. Development activities harness existing roles and the process of observation and reflection on real world situations. Examples of

development activities can include buddying, coaching, mentoring, shadowing, action learning and immersion experiences' (p. 422), HRD 'ensures people have the competencies to meet their current and future job demands. HRD involves organized learning experiences provided by employers within a specified time with the aim of improving performance and of personal growth' (p. 424). Each of these approaches can also be aligned with organizational development (OD) which O'Toole notes has a 'focus on organizational change, building the capacity of teams, and on organizational communication channels and processes' (p. 423).

Each of these terms concerns different approaches to building the responsiveness and capability of the organization. They emerge from specific challenges and together provide the practitioner with a rich set of resources. While you are studying this area you will find each of them to be of value and in many ways to be very overlapping in the real world of building employee and organization capability.

The emphasis here is on the active learning on the part of the employee, with them taking responsibility for their learning in partnership with the employing organization. The organization may be one among a number of bodies who additionally collaborate with the employee, for example, professional bodies such as:

- Royal College of Nursing;
- Solicitors Regulation Authority;
- Institution of Mechanical Engineers.

It may also include voluntary organizations such as:

- Sea Cadets;
- Scouts;
- Rotary International.

The organization will ideally act as a resource guiding the individual employee as well as teams and various groups to develop in line with the organization's strategic aims. In this way the organizational capability can be built simultaneously with individual skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Why is learning and development valuable?

The pace of change in today's world is increasing and is becoming less predictable. What we knew as children is not what our children know now. Our expectations are dissimilar to their expectations. Who could have guessed

that generations following the baby boomers would experience reduced standards of living? Until very recently this was completely unimaginable. Yet, it is the reality that we are slowly starting to face. The vote for Brexit has also changed the whole playing field for our nation. The lack of clarity and confusion in the Brexit negotiations has caused angst for both individuals and organizations. This disconcerting fluidity in our environment is not entirely unrecognized; Alvin Toffler (1970) wrote about the rapidly increasing pace of change in his book, *Future Shock*. Whilst less-studied today, this book contains some important insights about how in this new 'information revolution', the levers for success revolve around adaptability and agility of thinking. Interviewed by *New Scientist* in 1994 he commented,

> I don't think you can understand today's changes without recognizing the revolutionary nature of these changes... I say we are going from a brute-force economy to a brain-force economy and it's clear that skills and knowledge are becoming the central resource for economic activity. If I had studied economics I would have been taught that the factors of production are land, labour and capital. 'Knowledge' doesn't appear. Today, knowledge not only must appear in that list, it dominates the others.

The Open University, in their 2017 'Trends in Learning' report, identified learning how to learn as one of the key trends. By this they mean the capacity to be adaptable and to 'learn, unlearn and re-learn'. This is suggested to be a key capability to allow for a responsive and agile workplace which responds effectively to change. The primary focus that they identify is on self-development of the full range of soft and hard skills as well as knowledge and even behavioural attributes such as resilience. This trend can be seen in job adverts such as that posted by a construction company in December 2017 which stated 'Having experience in the field will not be the reason you progress in this application. What we are looking for is what you are motivated by, what you care for, and your intent.'

I would add that knowledge should be complemented by skills, and the capacity to learn how to change pace and direction through being alert to events around us. This is the very essence of learning – to be alert, to adapt, adopt and attain:

- *Be alert* to the changing circumstances, know what is required of you now and what might be required in the future, both near and far.
- *Adapt* your expectations and goals to your current situation.
- *Adopt* the skills and attitudes required of you in your new situation.
- *Attain* the levels of performance required of you.

A critical approach to learning and development

I noted earlier that learning and development can be considered 'a good thing' in general. You will have seen from the definition that there is a very wide range of interventions, offerings and activities that can be considered 'learning and development'. Indeed, in some situations such an iterative approach is no bad thing! Particularly in rapidly changing market conditions, agility and the capacity to both adapt and respond rapidly to ambiguous and almost undecipherable market conditions are life-saving for the organization.

However, in more stable conditions the unstructured approach, which incorporates any and all activity, is more likely to damage the organization. This is because it tends to follow each manager's individual preferences and whims rather than building on a strategic intent to build capabilities and human resources. It can therefore leave the organization somewhat weakened with a spiky profile of excellence in certain areas with the attending weakness in other areas. Certainly, many years ago I experienced an organization-wide development activity that still leaves me wondering about its value or legitimacy. It was the early 90s, and working in the City of London, appearance was very important. As a result, employees across the whole organization were styled. Depending on your level you received anything from a couple of days' one-to-one clothes advice, to a group session. The one-to-one session involved bringing in a selection of clothes to discuss what colours and style suited, what image they projected and how to build a capsule wardrobe. This has all been useful advice for me personally and seeing senior engineers discussing how pale yellow and pink suited them is a fond memory that will stay with me! How it raised the capability of the organization, however, is something I have struggled to understand for some time. Indeed, in today's terms of highly stretched resources, such expenditure seems nothing short of profligate.

The example above demonstrates that it is essential as a human resources (HR) practitioner to adopt a very critical approach to learning and development at all levels. After all, you and your organization are the ones who are going to have to live with the results! A consultancy may be able to come in and give a very smooth pitch, but is their product really everything it purports to be, and, importantly, what is the core issue you are seeking to address?

In the wider HR community, it can be an unfortunate truth that we tend to depersonalize our clients, that is, we refer to 1.5 FTE... This is necessary

in many ways to allow for a disinterested and efficient approach to work that can help ensure objectivity and compliance with the various processes and systems we use. In the L&D world we refer to delegates or learners rather than people.

It can be instructive to think about the difference between two different types of assets that the organization has, let's say a toaster for the employee kitchen and a learner.

The toaster simply needs to be plugged in to work, the learner needs to be engaged and encouraged. The toaster costs a fixed amount per usage whereas the learner costs represented by salary can vary enormously.

Organizational development through human resource development

An organization is, in many ways, simply an agreement between a group of people to share in an endeavour or enterprise. In its simplest form these people arrange themselves in a hierarchy, gather resources, manipulate those resources to add value and barter with others for money. Seen from its simplest perspective the organization has a limited range of resources, the raw materials, the transformation process and the trading. The people involved are at the heart of each of these stages. So, it follows that in order to improve any of these stages, the people themselves must be developed, perhaps in knowledge, skill, attitude, understanding, capacity to work together, innovate. This approach is at the root of the human capital model that is taught and followed by many of those who make decisions concerning organizational development. Essentially, this focuses on developing knowledge and skill in order to meet current, emerging and future challenges ina competitive marketplace.

Whilst the organization itself may have a clear plan of what it has agreed to do and where it wants to go, there are many other organizations fighting for the same ground and they may be faster, cheaper and higher quality. Zavyalova, Kucherov and Tsybova (2018) investigated the approaches to HRD in Russian IT companies during the economic crisis. They suggested that in the IT sector in particular a sustainable competitive advantage is created through development of people and intellectual capability. They found that those companies that were most innovative and with the fastest response were also those that invested more in developing their people. They therefore recommend this as an approach to build organizational competitive advantage, even where resources are con-

strained such as during an economic downturn. To compete effectively our organization must match and supersede them in any one of these areas. A clear way to do this is to develop the human element of the mix to improve all other elements. However, there is competition among organizations for ownership of resources, including human resources. It is therefore in the best interest of an organization to engage with its human resources to develop both them and its own capabilities, in order to develop a sustainable stream of talent to maintain market position over the longer term. Rosemary Howard (2009) found a strong relationship between investment in training and development and company performance during the global financial meltdown. Her study focused on Australia where she found that reducing the allocation of resources for L&D also tends to reduce competitiveness for organizations across a range of sectors. Learning and development processes provide the skilled and able human resources that organizational development processes capitalize on for the long-term benefit of the organization.

Learning and development processes enable organizations to meet competitive challenges. There is a broad range of challenges that organizations may meet. However, there are two main categories to be considered; short, sharp, crisis-type situations and long-term, slow market shifts. Each of these requires different responses from those in charge of the organization to manage and navigate these challenges. Learning and development processes provide a way of developing those in the organization to be ready to meet these challenges. Maier (2015) in *The Ambidextrous Organization* discusses how L&D is central to enabling an organization to become ambidextrous, that is, to be effective both in running process as well as innovation and creativity. The primary techniques discussed are embedding awareness in programmes, developing thought leadership through a coalition of leaders, supporting exploration initiatives and orchestrating cross-organizational exploration efforts. L&D is able in this way to provide a unique contribution to enabling the organization to spot and capitalize on the need for competitive changes.

This approach can be seen in the example of organizations such as Google that use a range of strategies to develop intrapreneurs. These are individuals who have a spark of creativity and innovation and generate new product ideas. Different organizations adopt a range of approaches to either stifle or encourage these employees. Within Google, structural support is given by allowing employees to spend about a day a week working on projects of their own choosing. A good proportion of Google's innovative products come from this employee-led time. These interventions are at the cusp of learning and development and also knowledge management, and demonstrate how

organizations need to take an aligned approach to ensure the ongoing development of both individual and organization to reap the rewards of competitive advantage.

I will be developing these ideas in later chapters where I address a range of approaches and tools that organizations may use to enable a sustainable competitive advantage through learning and development.

Emerging developments

A final area that I will address in this book is the development of new areas within learning and development. A number of these come from psychology and involve an enhanced understanding of how people tick and the extent to which the brain is 'plastic'. This suggests that the brain is even more complex than originally thought and that through millions of specific connections the brain is capable of adapting to new information and situations. In essence, we build our own brain and it is possible for our capability to develop as we practise. This is mediated by our own experiences and understanding of ourselves. For example, the importance of mindsets in approaching a development opportunity. An individual employee may possess a range of attitudes towards themselves that have a clear effect on the success of learning and development. Consider, for example, an employee attending some form of IT training, such as an advanced Excel workshop, which contains some quite complex information. As Carol Dweck (2006) identified, if they see themself as someone who is quite bright and able to learn, then they are more likely to engage with the challenge of learning and use a range of strategies to overcome the difficulty. If, on the other hand they see themself as having a fixed limit of intelligence and understanding then they are likely to give up if it seems hard. They may then either repeatedly fail an end-of-course test, at considerable cost to both themself and employer. Alternatively, they may simply slip out of the course and rely on colleagues to support them, again at significant cost to all concerned.

Approaches involving a psychological perspective are enhanced by advances in our understanding of the brain, memory and perception thanks to advances in neuro-imaging. This allows us to actually see the brain at work and understand which parts of it seem to be involved in specific tasks, such as recall for faces or alternatively rehearsing complex tasks. Other related concepts developed from a psychological perspective include the idea of deep learning – taking time and repeated challenge to gain significant expertise in an area, for example as demonstrated by a medical

consultant. These are all aspects with the potential to add real value to the learning and development practitioner.

Other ongoing developments involve segmentation of employees, for example learning and development targeted specifically at high-potential employees or females. This approach involves bespoke tools and techniques provided to meet specific business requirements, such as ensuring an agile and yet consistent pipeline for succession in top roles. It is used regularly in some organizations and has yet to be appreciated in the majority.

I will also consider the growing importance of e-technology in the delivery of learning interventions. Taking a critical approach, I will consider the cost benefit of delivering learning at a distance and consider its use as part of blended learning approaches that involve the use of multiple means of delivering learning over sometimes quite protracted periods.

The relationship between employee engagement and learning and development practices is another area of growing interest. Employee engagement is essentially a management philosophy that aims to develop the psychological contract into ongoing personal buy-in from the employee, matched by a commitment to the employee on the part of the organization, which involves an alignment of the full range of people strategies.

CASE STUDY

Dominus Consulting is a regional accountancy firm that offers bespoke, high-quality solutions to large corporations. It is run on a partnership basis with 12 equity partners, 45 client-facing employees and a support staff of 31.

Whilst Dominus Consulting is able to offer the standard year-end and housekeeping accounting functions it has a strong preference for assisting with mergers and acquisitions. Within the organization those working on mergers and acquisitions (M&A) have a higher status and usually a higher salary. These roles are therefore highly prized, despite the long hours and unpredictability of the roles. However, the organization tends to find it difficult to hold onto employees in the M&A team with employees typically leaving within three to five years. Often, they are poached by competitors whilst a couple have started their own rival organizations.

The founding partner Thomas has long enjoyed the 'cut and thrust' of negotiations. He has an enviable reputation for being highly astute in negotiations and in those long-drawn-out final bargaining sessions where being

able to stay coherent and make sound decisions through the night is a valuable trait – his preference for five hours' sleep a night stands him in good stead. He remains a towering presence within the organization and is likely to step into any meeting on a whim.

The organization has been built on Thomas's capacity for quick thinking and building strong relationships with his clients, many of whom have stayed with him for nearly 20 years. Whilst competitors have swallowed up other accounting firms, Dominus has remained, thanks to Thomas's astute thinking.

However, two issues now face Dominus Consulting:

1   Thomas is 62 years old. He is keen to stay at the helm of the business that he built. However, a couple of recent negotiations have not been as advantageous to his client as usual and there is a rumour that Thomas is losing some of his 'edge'. These rumours have reached the marketing and HR directors; they are concerned about how to handle this for the long-term good of the organization.

2   Thomas is frustrated by the lack of quality applicants. He has followed the advice of his HR function in recruiting young accountancy graduates but is frustrated that none of them seem able to comprehend the ins and outs of negotiating – which to Thomas are like his daily paper, familiar and comfortable.

Dominus Consulting has an HR function, but no learning and development strategy. How would you advise Dominus Consulting? What do you think are the core issues that they should deal with and how would you go about persuading Thomas of the need for learning and development?

In conclusion

This introductory chapter has covered a great deal of ground. I have considered a definition of learning and development and discussed the wide range of practices and outcomes that are involved. I have also considered the factors that influence the practice of learning and development. The rest of this book will go on to discuss these in detail. Part One of the book is a more in-depth discussion of the various approaches to learning and development and how each of these measures up. The second half of the book is more practical and identifies ways in which you can undertake learning and development for a successful outcome. However, to be successful it is important that you read both parts of the book and carefully consider how to apply them to your own situation, simultaneously influencing stakeholders to

ensure that you are meeting the needs of the organization as well as to garner the backing that will help you to make a real difference in the business.

Discussion of Dominus Consulting

Dominus is no different from a large number of professional practices – it is built on the talents of one man and could either fail once he leaves the industry, or adapt to change and grow. The HR function has a number of issues to deal with:

1 *Onboarding and development of professional recruits*. There is a danger that they may be cardboard cut-outs of Thomas, self-selected because they admire him, but less capable and perhaps, over time, less what the market conditions require.

2 *Developing negotiation capabilities across the organization*. This is done through both training and coaching.

3 *Assessing the current situation*. Is Thomas starting to lose capability? Is it some 'negative speak' from a competitor or is the nature of negotiating changing? And what is the appropriate activity in each case?

4 *Strategizing for the future*. This includes the development of a successor to Thomas, or perhaps a range of potential successors.