

**We are beginning to learn more about why, how and under what conditions adults learn, and these findings will be of substantial assistance to managers and their educators.**

# Managing As Learning

BY ROBERT A.  
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The world of management has been examined through a number of prisms — motivation, leadership, systems analysis. In this article I will use the prism of adult learning as a potentially productive way of identifying the motives and behaviors of effective managers. To say managing requires constant learning may appear as a first order elaboration of the obvious in the modern corporate world of information explosion and change. However, we are beginning to learn more about why, how and under what conditions adults learn and these findings, I think, could be of substantial assistance to managers and their educators.

The fields of management and education have developed along parallel tracks with each responsible for the training and education of different constituencies. Management professors train managers while education professors train teachers and rarely do the twain meet.

Educators usually appear on the short end of the status stick — recall the old saw, “those who can, do, those who can’t, teach and those who can’t do either teach teachers.” Often doing (managing) and learning (education) tend to be regarded as disparate phenomena. Based on the results of different

studies of effective managers and learners, it is my thesis this dichotomy may be somewhat artificial as there are shared skills and knowledge in the arenas of managing and learning.

In an illustrative review of studies on effective managers and adult learners, I shall attempt to describe how learning — the process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills — is a distinguishing characteristic of the most effective managers and suggest steps that can be taken to enhance managers’ abilities in learning how to learn.

## An Issue of Image

Until recently, learning has been regarded as the exclusive domain of education in the service of preparing children to assume the roles and responsibilities of adulthood. Upon reaching adulthood, usually defined chronologically as attaining the age of 18 or 21, doing replaces learning as the adult’s primary role. Learning assumes an ancillary role as a means of pursuing personal interests, upgrading job skills or preparing for a promotion or new career.

In addition, many managers’ images of education and learning are informed by memories of seemingly endless lectures, exams, pop quizzes, alphabetical seating rows of uncomfortable chairs and a general level of dependency en-

gendered by the relatively strict and esoteric climate of instruction controlled and directed by the teacher. Is it any wonder that participatory management, delegation and quality circles are not readily embraced by many managers?

This is not to suggest that formal education ceases altogether with employment. Quite the contrary as many managers attend classes and workshops sponsored by the organization’s department of training, human resource development, organization development. Managers frequently attend short courses put on by universities and consulting firms. Managers also attend special interest courses sponsored by the local adult-education association to pursue hobbies, sports, investing and home repair, to name a few.

Regardless of the type of formal education experienced by managers, there tends to remain a separatism — some might say schism — between learning and doing. Learning takes place in one setting — some form of organized class — while managing and doing takes place on the job. In instances of company sponsored learning, there is hopefully some connection between the two as can be seen by the usual practice of managers’ justifying their choice of learning on the grounds of it contributing to their performance. It has been well

documented that what is learned away from the job is useful on the job only to the extent that the organization's climate and disposition of the manager's manager enables the manager to apply what has been learned. While this would seem to be self-evident, many managers attend many learning programs and many companies invite professors to their plants with the linkages between learning and doing often guided more by hope and faith in the educators than by systematic planning. This strikes me as unfortunate if for no other reason than the amount of money involved.

All employers, both public and private according to one estimate, spend \$30 billion annually for direct and indirect costs associated with training.<sup>1</sup> A greater return on the educational investment might be realized if managers were more aware of the dynamics of adult learning in order to bridge the schism with a blend of the knowledge and skills necessary for effective doing and learning.

### Beyond the Classroom

The adult as a learner has been a much neglected specie of educational researchers. Most have devoted their considerable talents to vast and comprehensive studies of children from infancy to post adolescence including those with learning disabilities and other handicaps.

Adults, as any manager knows, are not children. Though like children, adults do experience successive developmental changes, or passages, as the works of Erickson, Sheehy, Gould and Levinson have shown, up to and including the time of death. If the child's task is to become prepared for adulthood, the adult's task is to master the continuing challenges of maturing such as marriage, first job, family, job changes, promotions, divorce, personal enrichment, retirement, financial management, etc.

In all of these challenges, it is beginning to appear that adults are actively engaged in various learning projects dispelling the myth that adults are not effective learners. Consider these findings of

Allen Tough, an educational researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

In a series of studies in the U.S. and overseas, Tough has unearthed some striking similarities about the motivation, frequency and styles of adults, representing a broad spectrum of social class and occupation, who engage themselves in learning episodes. A learning episode is a highly deliberate attempt to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skill which can be simple or complex, deeply personal or almost trivial for the purposes of problem-solving, obtaining academic credit or changing in some other way. To qualify as a learning episode, the learner must have a goal or purpose that is fairly clear and definite and plan to retain the knowledge and skill for at least 48 hours.<sup>2</sup>

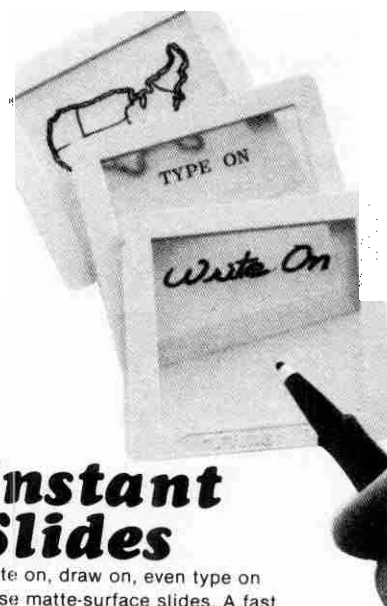
In a study of professors, politicians, lower white collar men, factory workers, lower white collar women, teachers and mothers, Tough discovered the number of annual learning episodes ranged from 12.0 (professors) to 5.5 (factory workers). Total annual hours devoted to learning episodes ranged from 1,745 (professors) to 273 (mothers).

In a study of 12 successful IBM salesmen it was found they spent an average of 1,113 hours a year at 13 learning episodes approximately two-thirds of which were job-related. In a study of individuals noted for extraordinary growth and achievement, it was found they spent 2,000 hours a year at learning and completed 15 or 20 projects. Members of this group were found to set clear action goals, choose appropriate knowledge and skill targets, plan their episodes fairly easily and learn without undue effort or frustration.<sup>3</sup>

The most frequent motivation for learning is one of near term anticipated use-application of the learning for specific tasks such as preparing for an occupation and then keeping up, specific tasks and problems on the job, home and personal responsibilities, improving some broad area of compe-

tence, interest or leisure, curiosity about a certain subject. Curiosity and puzzlement were the least common motivators and only about five percent of the learning episodes were undertaken for reasons of academic credit.<sup>4</sup>

Adults, it was found, overwhelmingly prefer to plan their own learning projects — to adopt a self-directed stance toward learning. Seventy-three percent of the projects were conceived and planned by the learner leaving the remaining 27 percent distributed among projects planned in groups — classes, workshops, institutes; planned by one other person — tutor, mentor, friend; and by non-human resources such as books and instructional manuals. Reasons for preferring self-directed learning included a desire to set one's own pace, establish one's own structure, keep open the option to change and revise strategy and lack of time and/or money for a class. Adults' preference for self-directed learning is reflected in their choices for where they



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learn in their home, on the job, outdoors, discussion groups, classrooms, library and public events, in that order.<sup>5</sup>

While preferring self-directed, home based learning, the adult learner, according to Tough, is far from an isolated hermit as the typical adult reported receiving help from an average of 10.6 persons for each episode. Acknowledging a need to learn something, clarifying issues, establishing objectives and identifying and obtaining resources were the planning steps reported by successful learners.

Tough's results, while far from conclusive given the pioneering nature of the work, strike me significant for a number of reasons. It would appear learning is a natural process for adults confronted with a task as many possess the motivation, skill and persistence to learn. The preference of a majority of adults studied for self-planned projects, conducted within a time frame, strategy and location of their own choosing

adds additional credence to the growing obsolescence of relying on instructor controlled, classroom bound approaches to teaching and learning in collegiate and organizational settings.

Perhaps we really can't teach old dogs new tricks because the "old dogs" have graduated from the old teaching methods. Educators, as Tough points out, have long focused on the small percentage of adult learning episodes which are professionally guided. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the vast majority of learning adults have continued apace with their successful learning.

While Tough's subjects reported most of their learning episodes occurred in non-classroom settings, other adult educators have discovered similar motivations for learning within the classroom. Notable among them is Malcolm Knowles, who for many years directed an adult learning curriculum within the School of Education at Boston University. From that experience he has developed the concept of Andragogy — meaning the art of helping men, as opposed to boys, learn — which he differentiates from Pedagogy — the art of helping children learn. Andragogy, according to Knowles, is a set of assumptions which he has found helpful in working with adults.

Knowles presents the thesis that adults have a need to be self-directing whose life experiences, rather than being seen only as a base upon which to add knowledge and skills, themselves represent an important resource for learning. Adults pursue learning for practical results which will increase their role competencies as managers, employees, parents, spouses and that it is the requirements of an adult's role(s) which determines the extent to which an adult has successfully mastered a particular course or subject matter.

The role of the educator becomes one of supporting, rather than planning and directing, the natural energies and talents for learning possessed by so many adults. Interestingly enough,

Knowles' andragogical assumptions have received a wide range of mixed reviews from the community of college and university professors.<sup>6</sup>

### Managing and Learning


A review of several recent studies of effective managers leads me to the conclusion that a distinguishing characteristic is a knack for learning which may well have been developed without the assistance of formal training in learning. Recent inquiries into what effective managers do and why suggests some useful parallels.

The image of a manager as a reflective systematic planner, organizer and controller of other people is being replaced with the image of an effective manager as a more parapitetic, multifaceted intuitive, action-oriented problem-solver who can call on a wide range of behaviors and people as conditions and situations change. These findings may have some import for managers and their educators.

Mintzberg, in a study of what managers actually do, found their activities to be characterized by an unrelenting work pace marked by noticeable brevity, variety and discontinuity. Of the activities engaged in by five chief executives only 10 percent lasted more than an hour. A study of U.S. foremen found an average of 583 activities per eight to four shift.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, some of these could be characterized as learning episodes suggesting Tough's acknowledged arbitrary limit of 48 hours as a criteria for a learning episode could be revised downward. Skinner and Sasser report that, "those (managers) who consistently accomplish a lot are notably inconsistent in their manner of attacking problems and that consistency causes managers to fail."<sup>8</sup>

If, as these studies would tend to indicate, there is no one best model for managerial behavior, are there any commonalities among effective managers? It would appear there are and to find them we need to turn our attention to managers themselves — their motives and behaviors.

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### Motives

What drives the effective manager? Most are relatively unconcerned for themselves with the creature comforts of life (perhaps because they have accrued many of them) as well as with being liked. McClelland reports the effective manager is motivated by power — the need to influence others in the pursuit of organizational objectives. Those managers placing a high premium on being liked as well as those with high needs for personal achievement, fare less

well in motivating their subordinates (McClelland's definition of an effective manager).

While the effective manager may not seek amenities and extensive fellowship, he/she is astutely aware of these and other needs on the part of subordinates and can respond to them.<sup>9</sup> Similar findings are reported by Hall who found low achieving managers attempting to motivate subordinates through the use of creature comforts only. High achieving managers, on the other hand, like those

in McClelland's study, are aware of and can respond to a range of needs among subordinates while themselves being motivated by what Maslow calls ego-esteem and self-actualization needs.<sup>10</sup>

### Behaviors

What consistencies are there in the inconsistencies of attacking problems? One is thirst for information. High achieving managers in Hall's study were distinguished by their active pursuit of information and a willingness to share information.<sup>10</sup> Mintzberg found the processing of information to be a key part of a manager's job as 40 percent of chief executives' contact time on activities was spent exclusively on the transmission of information. A characteristic of success among managers, according to Skinner and Sasser, was the acquisition of in-depth knowledge at a critical level of detail providing both the facts and confidence for decisions.

Another consistency is the ability to seek and use help from other people. While personal achievement may be possible in the absence of significant inputs from a variety of people, it would appear effective management requires the use of extensive expert information. Andrew Carnegie once attributed his success to the fact he hired people who knew more than he did. Seeking advice and help was a distinguishing trait of effective managers in Skinner and Sasser's study. McClelland found effective managers to demonstrate greater maturity — being less egotistical and more willing to seek advice from experts.

The type of advice sought is often hard, tidbits of information as opposed to models and guidelines, from an extremely wide range of people — clients, suppliers, associates, directors, peers, subordinates, consultants, which the manager uses to piece together in his head an understanding of a current situation on which to make a decision.

If there is a theory of seeking advice, it would seem to be the "horse's mouth" theory. Hence, the manager and the adult learner seek information from a variety of

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sources in search of knowledge and skills germane to a particular task. It may also be the effective manager goes about it in much the same self-directed way as do most adult learners. In describing the information seeking behavior of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower, Mintzberg relates, "To help himself he must reach out as widely as he can for every scrap of fact, opinion, gossip bearing on his interests and relationships as president. He must become his own director of his own central intelligence."<sup>11</sup>

A third major consistency seems to be the effective manager's ability to change his/her behavior according to the demands of the situation. Low accomplishees develop a set approach while those who get things done know when to delegate, seek consensus, make a decision, wait, when to cut through red tape and when not to. The effective manager has a finely honed sense of timing and a wide repertoire of action alternatives at

the ready.

Finally, lest it appear the effective manager is a walking, well oiled computer processing information without regard to people, the effective manager, in these studies, is people oriented. While it may seem incongruous for a manager to be motivated by power and be people oriented, McClelland notes the motive to influence others is tempered by the constraints of organizational objectives. The authoritarian, dogmatic manager was less effective than the authoritative manager whose behavior was sprinkled with large doses of coaching, counseling. McClelland, Hall, Skinner and Sasser all emphasize the importance of people skills. Without people skills, managers would not get the bulk and quality of information nor be aware of different motives among subordinates. One of the most effective ways to "get the boss" in a world where information is king is simply to withhold or conveniently modify the facts — a characteristic of many unmotivated subordinates.

#### The Rational and the Visceral

Information is not limited to facts and figures. Managers are confronted with the necessity to anticipate the reactions of others, appreciate the depth of feeling which may be associated with a particular suggestion and accurately assess the mood of people central to his/her activities. Hence, it would seem a large measure of intuition and knowledge of oneself would be important managerial competencies. The previously mentioned studies noted the effective manager knows him/herself very well, is aware of personal blind-spots and manage themselves with an in-depth understanding of their internal pressures and needs.

Those in Tough's studies noted for extraordinary growth and achievement were found to also understand and accept their own characteristics, be satisfied with their parent self and have confidence in their real selves.<sup>12</sup> With this level of confidence, one can more easily engage the faculties of the right brain — that half of the brain responsible for intuition — which Mintzberg has suggested is

conducive to managerial functioning particularly at the level of policy making.

It has, until recently, been fashionable to extoll the virtues of left-brain-*ie*, rational-thinking as the key to management and problem solving with the intuitive best left to the pursuits of artists and women. In the words of Pythagoras, the father of geometry, "There is a good principle which has created order, light and man and a bad principle which has created chaos, darkness and women."<sup>13</sup>

It would seem times have changed and that chaos, or at least fast paced change, is accepted by effective managers as a fact of life to be dealt with creatively.

#### Portrait of an Effective Manager

The image that comes to my mind is that of a detective, intimately immersed in an unfolding drama, within a network of hundreds, in which the manager, as principle investigator, collects, sorts, shifts a dazzling array of information and clues, motivates his/her assistants while all the time making many timely minor and major decisions in a style befitting the situation and demands of the moment and aided considerably by the ability to learn.

The highly deliberate efforts to gain and retain information in the service of a particular task, a desire to plan one's own learning to leave room for change and flexibility, the interest in practical results to increase one's role competency (another word for which could be potency or power), extensive use of advice from others, acceptance of self and comfort with the intuitive as well as the rational would seem to be characteristics shared by adult learners and managers. In point of fact, many of them are no doubt the same people being studied by researchers with somewhat different orientations.

Add to this Tough's findings that the job site is the adult's second preferred place for learning and it occurs to me it could be profitable to speculate on ways in which learning how to learn could enhance managerial performance.

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### *Learning How to Learn: A Process of Unlearning:*

Interestingly enough, Tough's studies were conducted with adult learners in non-organizational settings and discerned patterns of effective learning rarely found in academia. This leads me to the observation that adults' natural talents for learning are constrained by the traditions, culture and expectations of educational institutions. Tapping into these talents will no doubt require some re-definition of appropriate learning objectives and methods.

Managers, no doubt, face the same kind of dilemma as organizations have their own set of internal politics, philosophy and expectations for what it takes to get ahead. Yet, many effective managers are able to exercise enough self-control to be different — to adopt whatever strategy seems appropriate even if it means stirring up the pot and not always accepting the "school solution."

Organizational demands for coordinated behavior to achieve common purposes do require some agreement on appropriate behaviors. Unearthing these agreements is the initial survival task of new managers and students who investigate their respective organizations through orientation programs, informal discussions with senior members and reflections on their evaluations — grades or performance appraisals. As the neophyte becomes acculturated, behaviors often tend to follow prescribed patterns leading to a certain amount of consistency, which is not a hallmark of effective managing though it may well be efficient.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once characterized consistency as, "the hobgoblin of small minds," though it is doubtful that Emerson was ever a manager. It strikes me that the combination of organizational culture and peoples' need for some order and consistency in their life often work to reinforce consistency even at the expense of solving problems.

How managers learn may well be influenced by the criteria on which they are rewarded — re-

sults or conformity with expectations, e.g. completing assignments on time, getting along well with others. To the extent evaluation is results oriented, a manager has much greater latitude in determining how those results are achieved. A useful, results oriented approach to learning is that of Andragogy, which begins and ends with performance objectives and encourages the use of self-directed learning.

#### **Setting Objectives**

While this is an obvious first step, it is one that both Tough and Skinner and Sasser found to be the area of most difficulty to adult learners and managers. Knowles talks about objective setting in terms of assessing where one is and where one wants to go in order to establish a standard against which results can be assessed. For instance, a sales manager may set as a standard increasing his/her sales by 10 percent, reducing costs by 15 percent or whatever.

Knowles then suggests giving full rein to one's imagination in determining resources such as interviews with most successful salespersons, books, talking with customers, product manufacturers, brainstorming ideas in a staff meeting. The essential idea is to withhold solutions until many avenues have been thoroughly explored which can ask people to "hang loose" a little longer than they may be accustomed to doing. The problem solving procedure continues with the standard notion of implementing one or more ideas and evaluating the results with the evaluation being done in reference to the initial objective. Frequently, evaluation takes the form of slightly avoiding the objective by considering such questions as "did we pick the best idea?" If the objective is clear, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating and it may take more than one cycle of problem solving for the pudding to get down easily.

The climate in which the problem solving occurs can be an important factor in the quality of the final solution. For learning projects in universities, Knowles stresses the importance of com-

fortable surroundings and an air of informality and mutuality between instructor and student. The instructor acts as a consultant to students as they pursue their learning objectives which have been mutually agreed upon and which serve as the basis for evaluation.

A learning contract, indicating objectives, resources, completion date, format for evaluation, can be used. This enables the student to take a self-directed approach to learning within mutually agreed upon objectives and time frames. The instructor is thereby relieved from such duties as taking attendance, extensive lecturing, writing and grading exams as the responsibility for learning becomes a shared one. The instructor often receives a more varied and rich assortment of student products, which he/she can use in other classes, articles, consulting activities, than in classes in which the instructor assumes full responsibility for the learning.

Reluctance to use learning contracts is often fueled by such

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things as established expectations for an instructor's behavior (both by the instructor and the students), discomfort with giving up control and concern about the possibility that students will simply do the minimum to get by making a mockery of their degree. Another way to look at the learning contract is that the source of performance standards is simply shifted from the instructor to the contract with both instructor and student actively negotiating them. It has often been said that the job of management is lonely and the instructor's job is routine. Both can be true to the extent each feels the entire weight of the enterprise's success on their shoulders alone and which can considerably constrain the instructor-manager's focus to the maintenance of the garden while the house crumbles.

However, if instructors and managers accept the possibility that adults, with some direction and investment in the results, meaning there has to be something in it for them, can take a major share of the responsibility for getting the job done, less time can be spent on supervising and more time can be spent on other activities of import to the survival and growth of the institution.

### Managers and Learners

In this article I have attempted to draw some tentative parallels between the behaviors of adult learners and effective managers and both, it seems to me, could be classified as skilled detectives in pursuit of practical solutions to immediate concerns.

If we accept the fact that adults prefer to learn in a self-directed manner, the challenge to management is to devise ways to tap into what amounts to a vast pool of energy. Some suggestions on how this might be accomplished could include:

#### 1. Results Oriented Objectives

While several studies have shown managers are not reflective, systematic planners, it might be useful for managers to spend some time in articulating outcome objectives for themselves and their staffs at the beginning of a major project. Learning or performance

contracts could be used as a planning tool in which people map out how they are going to attack their part of the problem.

Once this is accomplished, people could pursue their responsibilities at their own pace within the parameters of agreed upon objectives and time frames. Employees taking more responsibility for getting things done could free the manager to address issues and problems in the environment with the knowledge all is going well at the office. This may be of some help to the managers in Mintzberg's study who were supervising as many as 50 projects at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

#### 2. Consulting Instead of Supervising

Managers who were most effective in McClelland's study did appear to have defined their role as a consultant using a lot of coaching and counseling. This style of management would seem to fit well with the concept of a learning contract and provide employees with assistance in the area of planning which Tough found to be the most difficult for adult learners.

#### 3. Managers Training Managers

Those managers who have mastered the knack of effective learning within their organization would be ideally suited to train other managers as they alone know the nuances of their particular organization. How managers go about their constant task of learning could be a useful addition to the training new managers receive in the products, services, procedures of the organization.

### A Word of Caution

Self-directed learning, or doing, though it may fit with adults' preferred style of learning and effective managers' behavior, can be expected to encounter some resistance with those not accustomed to it in an organizational setting. As students in a university tend to look to the instructor for what to do, so do many in organizations look to the manager for what to do. This is a tradition which may require some time and patience to modify.

Also, self-directed learning may not be appropriate for all seasons.

Previous discoveries about aspects of behavior in organizations such as Theory X and Y, Systems 4, Integrative Leadership have had a tendency to fall victim to uncritical acceptance. This can have the effect of merely summarily replacing one set of expectations with another.

A major advantage of a learning contract is that it provides the manager with a structure for planning and implementation while at the same time allowing for diversity and flexibility (inconsistency, if you will) in how things are done. A learning contract would enable employees to choose where they work and have some choice over selection of whatever resources they might need to get their task accomplished.

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