

# A Model for Mastery: Learning and Development in the Digital Age

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Today's combination of knowledge content and the learning mediums available to access that content offers tremendous flexibility to learning professionals and their constituents. At the same time, that flexibility can overwhelm professionals trying to build and manage learning and development programs. Organizations that are able to harness this flexibility and deploy it to their workforce, however, can increase learning and improve employee engagement.

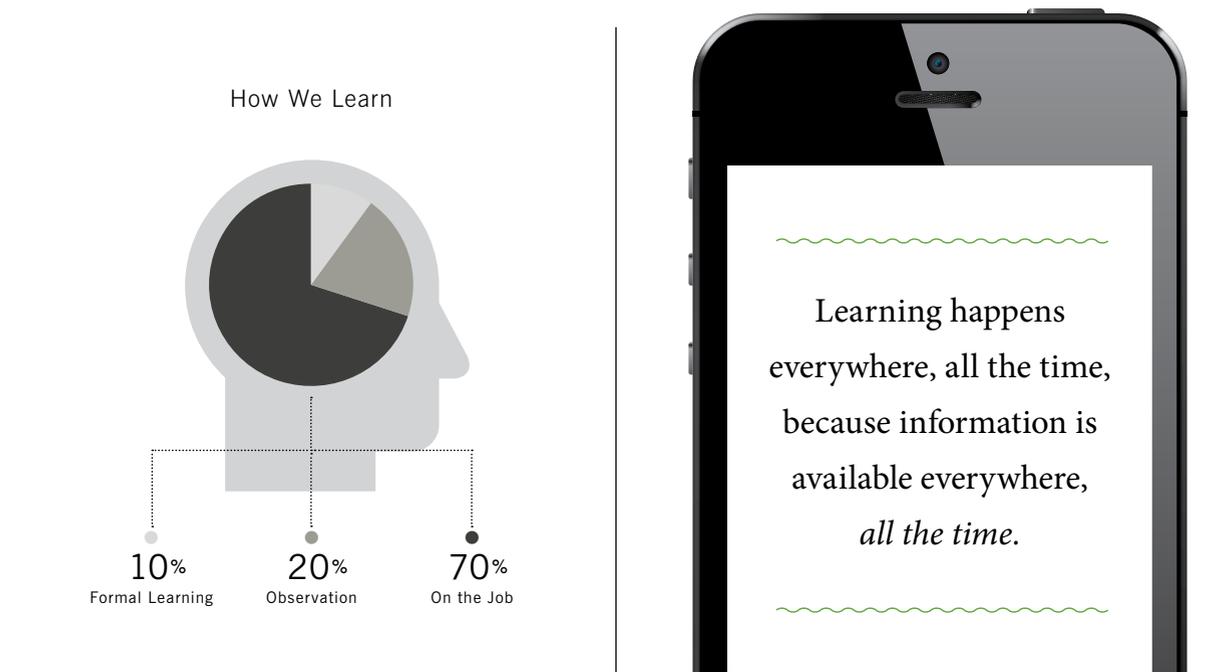
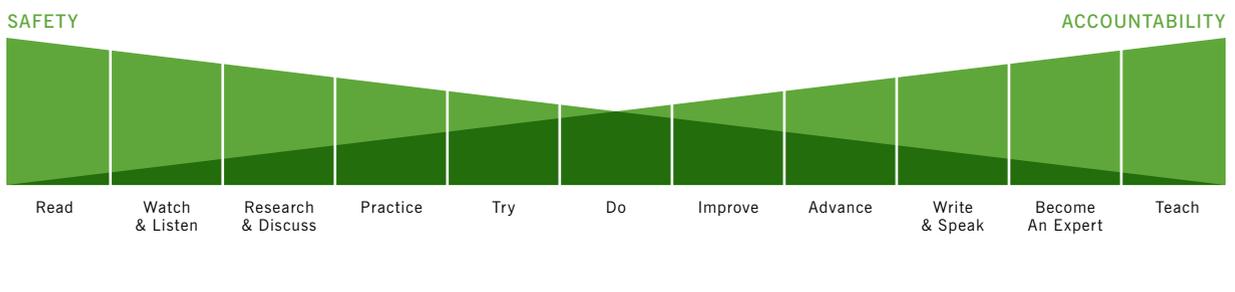


Figure 1: The Learning Continuum



Learning happens everywhere, all the time, because information is available everywhere, all the time. Conversation among colleagues around conference tables, and among friends at restaurants frequently involve interruptions to pick up a mobile phone to check facts and find new information pertinent to the conversation. Combine that availability with the countless ways we can share our own thoughts and creativity — from social networking to blogging to speaking and self-publishing — and you have the makings of a learning ecosystem the world has never before seen. Too often, however, organizations and the people who work in them tend to fall back on traditional learning channels, like classroom-style learning. After all, classroom-style learning is easy to track, familiar, and reasonably well-understood — if not always effective.

We have developed a framework organizations can use to help their people think through their progression towards mastery in a given domain. Figure 1 shows a continuum of learning, based on the activities people do while learning: from reading, listening, watching, and discussing, through doing, advancing the craft, and eventually giving back. Indeed, only the far left side of the continuum involves formal learning. Lombardo and Eichenger presented research in the 1970s demonstrating that only a very small part of learning, about 10 percent, comes from formal learning (e.g., classroom training and reading), while about 20 percent comes from observation and watching others perform the task. Meanwhile, the vast majority of learning — about 70 percent — comes from “on-the-job” experiences. Most of the activities found in the continuum are at least experiential, if not “on-the-job” activities.

LEARNING CONTINUUM	READ	WATCH & LISTEN	RESEARCH & DISCUSS	PRACTICE	TRY
DESCRIPTION	Books, articles, self-directed course	Podcast, instructor-led course, lecture, TED Talks	Q&A, book clubs, debate, industry association meetings	Role play	Apprentice, do under supervision, participate on an offering team, ride-along
WAYS TO REINFORCE	Provide a suggested reading list and/or access to reading material	Provide an inventory of courses, web sites with relevant content, and access to instructor-led courses	Provide a forum and infrastructure to define and update processes, tools, best practices, etc.	Structure sessions to practice what's been learned	Formalize a shadowing/buddy program, recognize performing your first few assignments in a new domain is part of the learning program

By considering the breadth of the activities in the framework, learning is not constrained by the development capacity or budget of the learning and development group. Google, for example, introduced “G2G” (Googler to Googler), an employee-to-employee learning program allowing individuals to shadow, practice, or otherwise learn from their colleagues. The program shifted the focus away from instructor-led training, reducing the bottleneck of formal training development, thereby keeping up with employee learning demands.

Organizations can open their employees’ eyes to the many ways they can take ownership of their own progression toward mastering their craft by communicating and deploying our framework to its workforce.

The methods on the left side of the continuum are relatively safe. You have little or no “skin in the game” when you’re reading a book, listening to a podcast, or learning from a video online. We start toward the left side of the continuum when we’re learning something new. We may not always start at the far left, as we’ve all had the experience of attempting “some-assembly-required” projects — without the manual. However, when we get stuck, we’ll usually slide back to something more basic to pick up what we couldn’t figure out by trial-and-error. As you move toward mastery, risk increases. You might make mistakes. You might even fail, but you’ll be learning. As you advance along the continuum, others begin to count on you to deliver, and employers begin to compensate you for what you are doing for them. Eventually, you may progress to advancing the domain you’re operating in, by inventing a new way of doing things, for example. That involves significant accountability and risk, but it also drives innovation and progress.

While you can use extrinsic motivation to require someone to attend a course or take a test, people have to be intrinsically motivated to progress through the entire continuum, from learning to mastery. Moving to the right side of the continuum requires a voluntary and a proactive kind of learning, which is critical to the growth and career development of engaged employees. The focus is less on immediate needs and more on building on experience for the future. Because intrinsic motivation for this kind of learning is so important, learning and development groups should focus on teaching people how to achieve mastery (i.e., by sharing this framework), then putting structures in place to help people advance along the continuum (see diagram above).

Taking a broad view of learning is difficult to track, manage, and measure, but this should not stop us from creating a culture that reinforces mastery. Leaders must watch for progress along the continuum and reinforce it when it happens. Incorporating the continuum into a self-assessment and the performance management process is a great way to reinforce, recognize, and drive progress. Leaders should ask questions like, “What have you done to move toward mastery? What’s slowing you down? What can we, as leaders, do to help you?”

Of course, it’s rare when someone moves all the way to true mastery in many domains. Specific jobs often require technical expertise, and employees can achieve that technical expertise once they’ve become competent at the “Do” and “Improve” stages of the model. Sometimes that’s enough. But mastery begins to take shape as employees move away from learning because their job requires it (extrinsic motivation) to learning for themselves (intrinsic motivation).

DO	IMPROVE	ADVANCE	WRITE & SPEAK	BECOME AN EXPERT	TEACH
Execute new learning on the job	Innovate on the process to perform work	Package knowledge to be shared with others	Blog, white paper, newsletter, journal	External publications, conference speaker, be interviewed by media	Mentor, build and deliver a training course
Acknowledge new capabilities, provide opportunities to take on new tasks	Encourage responsible risks and stretch goals, facilitate communities of practices, continuous improvement	Provide a forum and infrastructure to define and update processes, tools, best practices, etc.	Request publication in company newsletters, articles, opinion pieces, blogs	Encourage participation in conferences, societies, committees, nonprofit work	Structure a Career Developer Program, promote informal mentorships

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Eventually, they progress to “giving back” by teaching others. Many of us have experienced the benefits of learning from teaching. In the end, the far right side of the model, at true mastery, is a virtuous cycle: We give back, we refine our mastery based on feedback and challenges provided by those we’ve taught thereby further improving our mastery.

Organizations that provide a broad view of learning and development — incorporating the breadth of information and learning mediums while steering their workforce towards a mindset of mastery — can improve both how much people learn and their level of engagement. That’s good for everyone: customers, shareholders, suppliers, and employees.

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