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Training Technique -4

Experiential Learning
&

How to run Group Exercise

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Administrative Training Institute

Government of West Bengal

FC Block, Sector – III, Salt Lake

Kolkata – 700106

www.atiwb.gov.in

Group Exercise

INTRODUCTION

Training activities are influenced to a quite marked extent by the entry behaviour of participants (The things they already know and can do and the attitudes they adopt). This is especially true when the learning group consists of mature, experienced, adults.

Each participant will bring his or her own mixture of status, knowledge, skills, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, motivation, good and bad experiences, and so on, to the learning event. What is missing is an experience common to all members of the group, around which they can learn.

A group exercise can establish the common ground around which trainees can learn. Instead of basing their thinking on an abstract theory', trainees can start from their experience in an exercise and build up to a principle or a theory.

WHAT IS A GROUP EXERCISE?

A group of officials on a course is given the task of counting the number of pebbles in a square metre of beach; or to build a tall tower using only A4 sheets of paper and a stapler; or to invent a new game using a pack of playing cards. These are all examples of possible group exercises used in training mature and experienced officials. The purpose in the mind of the trainer might be to develop good group working relationships.

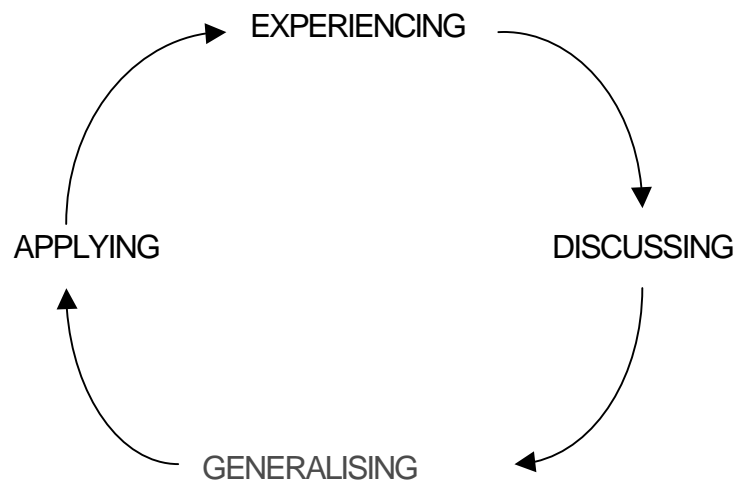
Clearly the approach is a very different one from starting with a lecture about the views of a distinguished theorist. The major differences are that:

- a) The trainees are given something active to do, and
- b) That their learning is developed from their experience in performing that activity.

GROUP EXERCISES AND LEARNING

Group exercises provide an opportunity for each member of the group to be involved in doing something and to learn from what he or she does. Trainees have an opportunity to try different ways of doing things without the risk involved if they tried the same things in a real working environment. The impact of this experience and the realism of the simulated situation can change behaviour and should help the process of transferring and applying what they have learnt to their work situations.

We can represent the process in this way:



Experiencing

This process starts with experiencing something in the group exercise. The trainee becomes involved in the group activity - for example doing, saying or observing something. This involvement becomes the basis of the whole process.

Discussing

The trainee discusses with other members of the group his or her reactions to and observations on the activity that they have also experienced or observed. We discuss what occurred in the exercise and group members assess its significance.

Generalising

The group members need to do more than just discuss their specific experience in the exercise. They need to go on to develop general principles derived from the experience to their own work situation.

Applying

Finally the group members should plan how they can apply the general principles to the situations they face at work.

SOME SUBJECT AREAS FOR GROUP EXERCISES

Group exercises are generally used for studying and developing interpersonal skills. The skills involved include the following:

Leadership

Communications

Motivation

Negotiation

Problem-solving

Decision-making
Working in groups
Team building
Contributing to
Meetings

SELECTING AND USING A GROUP EXERCISE

Some do's and don'ts are suggested below to help in making group exercises as effective as possible.

As the trainer, you should:

- * Make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with the subject matter. Flexibility is needed to adapt the discussion of the material to what actually happens in the exercise, while making sure that the main points it was intended to bring out are covered.
- * Make sure that the exercise is appropriate to the objectives of the learning unit and to the abilities and attitudes of the trainees.
- * Consider whether there is a need to adapt, restructure, rewrite or modify a generally suitable exercise, so that it fits the objectives or the needs of the particular group.
- * Make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with the procedure for conducting the exercise.
- * Consider the various possible outcomes and relate these to the subsequent discussion of what has been learnt.
- * Plan the discussion. We must allow time for a thorough analysis of what happened in the exercise and its implications. Remember that this is more important than the exercise itself. The exercise is only the means of producing the material to be analysed and discussed. It will have limited value unless the issues arising from it are fully explored with the group.

As the trainer you should not:

- * Use group exercises merely
 - to fill in time
 - to provide variety
 - to 'see what happens'
 - because you like using them
- * Use an exercise in the same way for all groups and irrespective of the objectives of

the training.

* Structure the discussion in a pre-determined way, irrespective of what happened during the exercise.

CONDUCTING THE GROUP EXERCISE

You should consider the following points:

Relate to Objectives

You should remember throughout the exercise what the objectives are **in** using it, and stick to them.

Plan and Prepare Thoroughly

Make sure that all the administrative details of the exercise are arranged beforehand.

Consider also a variety of possible outcomes of the exercise. How can you relate these to the purpose of the exercise and of the learning unit as a whole? All the points you wish to discuss may not emerge from a particular run-through of the exercise: you may need to discuss other possible outcomes. What lines will the discussion follow afterwards, to cover the learning points?

Plan for Contingencies

The exercise may take more or less time than anticipated or have a different outcome.

Having alternative material or activities available and ready to be presented is prudent, e.g. for groups that are more/less advanced than the average.

Check where we can make changes to the timetable if that should be necessary.

Check Knowledge

As the use of group exercises becomes more common, it is possible that some trainees may already know or have done the exercise. Usually this does not matter, but with some exercises the impact can be ruined if someone in the group already knows how to solve the problem or analyse the situation.

Brief Participants

Explain the procedure and make sure that all participants understand their roles in the exercise before starting. This may involve:

- Stating the objectives clearly and concisely
- In some cases giving an overview of the subject matter first
- Describing the procedure for the exercise
- Explaining the trainer's role during the exercise
- Explaining why this method of training is being used.

In briefing the group, keep the desired outcomes in mind. However, we should not

overload the participants with instructions. Where possible, giving instruction in small amounts at appropriate stages of the exercise is better. Check that the briefing is understood.

Watch Observers

If the exercise involves some participants acting as observers rather than being directly involved in the task, make sure that they do not interfere with the process.

Keep Within Broad Guidelines

Exercises involve participants in performing a task in their own way; this is a major reason for using them. However, keeping the exercise within broad guidelines is necessary so that it achieves its objective; otherwise it may deteriorate into a "fun" activity from which the participants learn nothing.

Collect Information

You should observe the process and make notes, even if we have appointed observers, so that comments afterwards can be related to what happened in the exercise. You can then add to the observers' comments if they have failed to observe some important points.

We should ask that the observers and participants comment on and discuss what happened before you make any comments. They will have comments to make and need to be given the opportunity. Also, you will need to concentrate on leading the discussion away from the specific outcomes of the exercise and on to general principles.

Discuss Issues

Participants should not be left to draw their own conclusions. The exercise should be the source of topics for discussion rather than the context of learning by itself.

Discussion of the issues should normally involve three stages:

1. Describe the experience

Get the group to discuss such questions as:

What happened?

What was said/ done?

What did participants think/feel?

What problems emerged?

What courses of action were tried?

To what extent were aims of the group achieved?

2. Analyse the experience

Get the group to discuss such questions as:

Why did things happen?

Why did problems arise?

Why did the actions taken fail/succeed?

What were the consequences of what was said or done?

3. Develop general concepts

Get the group to relate their experience in the exercise to the work they do. Get them to consider such questions as:

Do people say/do things in this way at work?

What are the consequences?

Can success/failure in the exercise be related to success/failure in work situations?

Can the group develop a plan of action or general principles for improved performance at work?

In short, the discussion should start with consideration of the details of what happened and should move on to consider the underlying principles that apply to work situations. Throughout the discussion, the participants should discuss what happened - the behaviour that they observed - not speculate on the underlying motives or personal attributes.

REVIEW THE EXERCISE

After the session has been completed, the trainer should review the exercise. Consider:

- Did it achieve the objective?
- Does it need to be modified, revised or improved?
- Was the exercise run in the most effective way?
- Were the outcomes discussed adequately?

ADVANTAGES OF GROUP EXERCISES

We can summarise the advantages of using group exercises in training as follows:

- They provide for trainee-centred learning
- They provide a common experience, shared by all members of the learning group
- Exercises can be designed/selected/modified to fit the objective of a learning unit and as a major contributor to a learning event
- All participants can be actively involved and their attention and motivation are therefore more easily maintained
- They minimise the effects of different entry behaviours
- The trainer acts as a coach/mentor. Freed from the role of a direct instructor, he or she can supervise, observe, question and provide feedback

- Exercises enable complex interpersonal skills to be practised
- They can be used to modify attitudes and to develop knowledge and skills.

DISADVANTAGES OF GROUP EXERCISES

The main disadvantages of group exercises are that:

- They require careful preparation and planning to be effective
- The outcome varies from one group to another and is difficult to predict
- What individuals learn depends on their own level of involvement, their ability to relate what happens in the exercise to their existing knowledge, skills and attitudes and their ability to relate very specific experience to general principles
- The success of group exercises is very dependent on the attitudes and expectations of trainees. They may expect the trainer to "teach" them (i.e. to be the sole source of information and advice). Therefore, they may regard an exercise as light relief or fun, rather than as a serious method for helping them to learn.

Experiential Learning

As individual human beings we experience our lives at three levels of existence. In simple terms they can be described by the phrase ‘we think, we feel, we do.’

The relationship between the levels

All the three levels are inter-related and interactive. This means that what we think is influenced by and in turn influences what we feel and do, the same is true of each level in relation to the other two. For example what we do is influenced by and in turn influences what we think and what we feel. In the language of psychology these three levels are termed the cognitive domain, the affective domain and the action domain.

It is also true that we experience our existence at all three levels simultaneously and therefore cannot really disassociate one level from another. For instance, as you read these words you are doing, i.e. you are experiencing the action domain. This is because perception is an active process, physiologically and psychologically, which needs to be engaged in order to read. Reading is also a thinking process and therefore you are engaged in the cognitive domain. Finally, what you are reading and your thoughts concerning it have relationships with your existing beliefs about and attitudes towards the subject. Therefore your feelings are involved and you are also in the affective domain.

You are unlikely to be conscious of your experience of the affective domain in reading these words unless they explicitly contradict or actively re-affirm your current beliefs and related attitudes. Similarly, you will not be conscious of the action domain in consciously attempting to focus your eyes. At a conscious level you are only aware of the cognitive domain i.e. your thinking process. This does not mean that your experience of reading these words is confined to that level. Human existence is experienced at all three levels.

The three levels and learning

If that last statement is accepted, it follows that learning is experienced at all three levels. Since cognition, affection and action occur simultaneously learning both influences and is influenced by all three domains. What you learn from this monograph will be the result of the interaction between the three domains as you read it. Any theory of learning therefore has to be able to explain the process in terms of the three levels of existence, and it has to be applicable in promoting learning through utilizing the cognitive, affective and action domains.

These two points underpin important theories of learning.

It will be clear from the figure 16 that System Beta engages an individual learner in all three levels of existence. The process described involves the cognitive, affective and action domains.

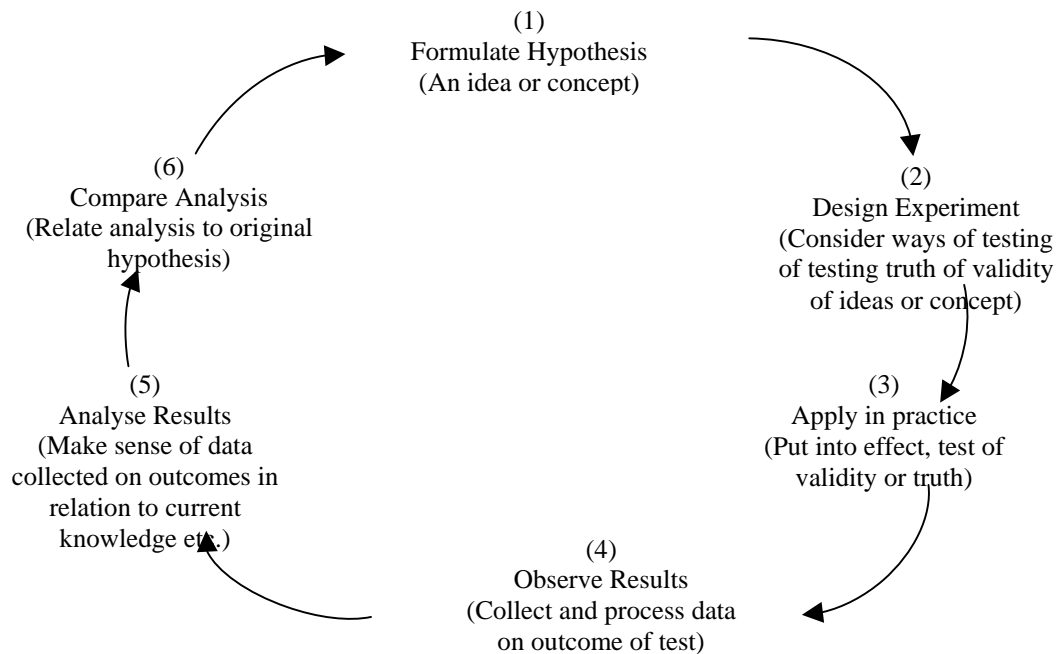


Fig. 1

Two critical features

A critical feature of the process is the starting point of the hypothesis. The idea or concept in this stage is formulated by and belongs to the individuals. This means two possibilities in practice. The first is that it may be an original and unique idea that is formulated by the individual. The second is that the idea or concept is presented to the individual by someone else through, for example, a lecture, a book or a conversation. According to the model, however, the individual in both cases will need to complete all stages of the cycle in order for the learning to occur. In the latter case doing so will also probably have the effect of producing an individual interpretation of the concept, therefore each individuals learning remains unique. It also follows that in the case of a presented concept through, for example, a lecture, learning does not happen unless and until all stages of the process are completed. This point is obviously significant in the design of learning opportunities within training and development.

A second significant feature of the model is that because the process is cyclical the

starting point does not have to be formulation of the hypothesis. Individuals can and do enter the cycle at different points in relation to separate pieces of learning. The stages in figure 1 are labelled with numbers in sequence for convenience rather than to represent reality. For instance, it is common for new ideas or concepts to suggest themselves in stages three, four and five.

The theory known as 'experiential learning' was developed by the American psychologist David Kolb and his co-workers in the mid-1970s (Kolb et al, 1984). Since then it has become one of the most well known and widely applied theories in training and development, especially in term of managing organization change and in related adult learning. The theory is very similar to System Beta.

Rationale of experiential learning

The rationale of experiential learning is quite simple. It is that learning approximates the process of problem solving, and that therefore teaching or training which is designed to encourage, support and enable learning should be based on a problem solving approach. This basic idea is worth exploring in a little more detail.

Traditional teaching methods are based on ideas which have particular associations. These associations include:

- The presence of and key role for a teacher or trainer
- A particular and specific place for learning to occur such as a classroom or training centre
- A focus on knowledge, ideas and concepts
- The use of learning materials such as textbooks and handouts.

Such associations produce particular meanings that are attached to the learning process.

These include the meaning that:

- An individuals learning is the responsibility of some other person, e.g. the teacher
- That learning is a separate and discrete activity that occurs at particular time in a specific place
- That learning is essentially a passive process
- That learning is concerned with acquiring or understanding abstract information, ideas and concepts.

It can be argued with great justification that most individual's experience of formal learning leads to these associations and produces these meanings.

An alternative is to view learning as similar to problem solving. In this case the associations

are that:

- Problems are very specific
- They belong to the individual and are their responsibility to solve
- That they require experimentation as part of the process of reaching a solution.

These associations produce a different set of meanings:

- Problems solving is a active process
- It is concerned with practical application and results
- The focus is real and concrete
- Problem solving is a continuous and natural part of living.

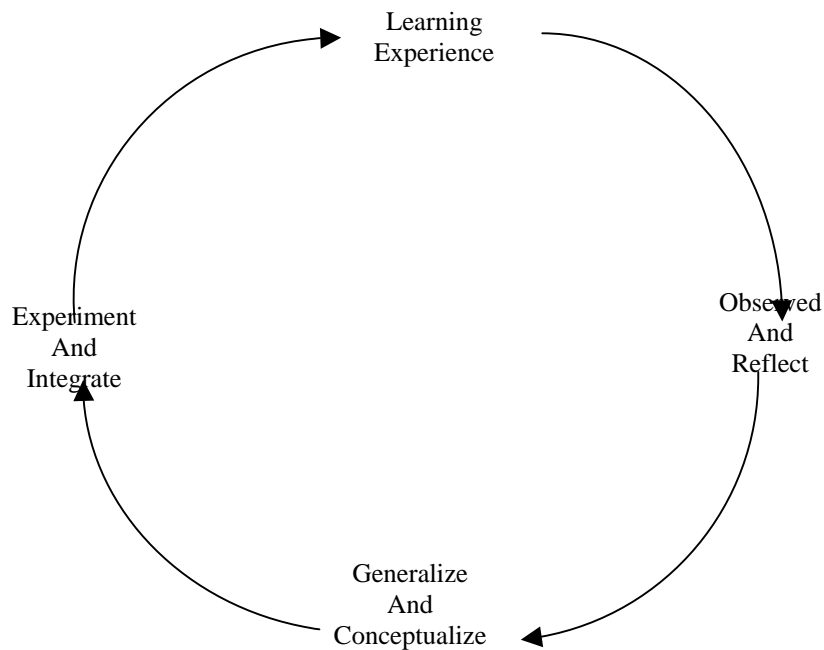
What this means in practice is that most individuals actually learn passivity and dependence in relation to learning through their experience of traditional methods. It also means that traditional methods do not actually reflect the reality of learning since they do not adopt a problem solving approach. Using problem solving as a basis for explaining the learning process leads to the theory of experiential learning.

It has been found, however, that learning that results in increased self-awareness, changed behaviour, and the acquisition of new skills must actively engage the individual in the learning process. In particular, adults have been found to learn more effectively by doing or experiencing.

Adult learning specialist David Kolb has described this learning process as a four – phase cycle in which the learner; (1) does something concrete or has a specific experience which provides a basis for (2) the learners’ observation and reflection on the experience and their own response to it. These observations are then (3) assimilated into a conceptual framework or related to other concepts in the learners past experience and knowledge from which implications for action can be derived; and (4) tested and applied in different situations.

The adult learner assimilated useful information into their personal ‘experience bank’ against which future learning events will be compared and to which new concepts will be related. Unless what is learned can be applied to actual work or life situations the learning will not be effective or long lasting.

People responsible for designing, learning events should keep these phases in mind as they develop ways to help the learner understand and be able to use the new knowledge and/ or skill.



Conclusion

In India even today, particularly in the Government Organisation, training is not considered to be so important for improving performance. Primary reason for such a situation is that in many cases, training is not directly linked with the perceived need of the organisation owing to absence of TNA. Systematic Approach is not followed in organising the training. Most of the cases, training is supply driven. Another major weakness is the indiscriminate use of lecture method. On the other hand, on-job training is now being neglected. However, due to strong intervention of the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India during the recent past the situation is improving. Direction has been changed. Training is becoming more and more trainee centred than the trainer-centred. Organisations are now sensitised and showing considerable interest on Systematic Approach to Training. Training institutes are trying hard to make training demand driven. If this process continues, there will be a virtual cycle and training will be used more systematically in improving performance. As a result, training will be considered as an important activity for the continuous improvement in the functioning of the organisation.