

The Psychology Behind Learning

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Learning doesn't always need to be cut and dried. Consider using competitiveness to rouse human motivators and enhance development.

The stage is set, the scenario has been created and the actors assume their characters. There's no script, so the actors will improvise to create a simulation. But this isn't a performance from Second City or some other comedy troupe. This is the backdrop of one of the more atypical learning activities at nonprofit health care system Banner Health.

It's one example of how learning leaders can leverage some of the psychological benefits inherent in certain types of learning — ones that can engage learners by tapping into innate human motivators.

In the aforementioned example, Banner Health incorporated improv into its physician leadership development program. The organization uses the technique in two different learning modules: the first to teach verbal and non-verbal communication and the other to teach customer service, according to Michael Abrams, senior director, talent optimization, talent and organizational effectiveness at Banner Health. The actors — employees with an acting background who are recruited internally for the simulation — portray a scenario in front of 30 or so learners.

One scenario simulates a project meeting, with a goal to get the participants to discuss an initiative, make a decision and agree to an action. All the while, the actors incorporate typical behaviors that character-



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ize the interplay between physicians and nurses, and physicians and administrators or project managers.

During the first run-through, learners are asked to observe physical and verbal behaviors that need to change, followed by discussion about why certain behaviors aren't appropriate. When the actors replay the scene, the learners are in control and pull the strings to alter the scene as they see fit. If they see a bad behavior, they are instructed to yell "Stop!" and direct the actors how to replace it with a more appropriate one.

"We rewind a few seconds, then the characters start over again with the new behavior integrated. When they replay the scenario the second time, it's different than the first time because now these good behaviors have triggered different reactions from the other characters," Abrams said.

This exercise engages learners because it's a live

simulation instead of a video. “You have an immediate physical connection with the people doing this — it’s an attention grabber because we’re right there in front of your face,” Abrams said.

“[The learners] get to instantly say ‘I saw something, raised my hand, I demonstrated that I know this,’” he said. “The feeling of identifying something their peers didn’t see or identifying more things than

in human nature, Pontefract said, because the winners can donate Telus’ money to a charity of their choice as a reward.

“There’s psychology behind this — for people to motivate their own speed skating team, to inspire that team, there’s a bit of competition — that’s always healthy in an organization,” he said. “And you’re checking against others on a leaderboard; when you’re

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their peers did — there’s a bit of a competitive factor to this; there’s a desire to be right, a desire to be seen as understanding the content.”

Such factors inherent in the simulation — such as competitiveness or recognition when a learner experiences “aha” moments — spur engagement, Abrams said.

Drive Learning Through Gamification

Similarly, Canadian telecommunications company Telus leverages gamification — or what’s referred to internally as interactive learning — to “drive an intrinsic level of inspiration and motivation,” according to Dan Pontefract, senior director, learning and collaboration at Telus.

For example, the company created a game where participants coach a speed skating team how to win gold at the Olympics. It is based on the Telus leadership philosophy, and the framework encompasses the attributes, behaviors and philosophy of how to lead at Telus.

The eight-week game contains motivational components, such as leaderboards, which stimulate participants’ competitive nature.

“At the end of each week you have not only [an] overarching leaderboard but leaders for the week,” Pontefract said. “You can win on certain things like people who won the most races, but also [those who] demonstrated some of those Telus philosophy leadership attributes the best.”

It also satisfies the philanthropic desires inherent

winning, you’re able to congratulate yourself by donating money to a charity; you can feel good about accomplishing something by giving back to the community.”

Gamification is also a method to teach leadership qualities in a somewhat nontraditional way.

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Making the learning process a somewhat seamless experience with one’s everyday life can be powerful, according to Gabe Zichermann, author of *The Gamification Revolution* and CEO of Gamification.co and Dopamine Inc. He said it would be a mistake to think about gamified learning as a single-point solution — like one product or project — that solves a specific learning challenge that an employee has to stop working to take or do before returning to work. “Instead it’s about making that experience kind of seamless with the notion of working in a way so they do it all the time. The more they do it, the more progress they [make], the better they feel about it, the more they do it and so on and so forth.”

An example of this is an app called Plantville, designed by Siemens. It’s an online business process simulation game in which the user operates a plant or a factory. Zichermann said many players who are attracted to this game run plants and factories for a living.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY HELPS DRIVE LEARNING AT UNILEVER

Many can relate to the sense of inertia and subsequent lack of application that can set in following a learning program. Nick Pope, global learning director at multinational consumer goods company Unilever, said the company looks to social psychology as one way to combat this.

“We’ve all been there — it’s the end of the program, you’ve completed your action planning template, ready to go back into the workplace. Monday morning arrives, there’s some sort of business-critical issue, and all that good learning vaporizes away,” Pope said.

One element Unilever has introduced into its learning is based on the work of Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* and president of Influence at Work, an organizational and personal performance company. One of the principles he discusses is commitment and consistency, which helps to keep learners accountable long after a program ends.

“When you make a public decision, you feel pressure internally and externally to be consistent with that, so throughout our program we build in regular and deliberate points where the participants have to create voluntary, active and public commitments which they share,” Pope said. “As a result of doing that regularly, evidence would suggest they’re much more likely to follow through.”

— Deanna Hartley

“It’s a fun way to explore the limits and boundaries of your job, so employees are doing it after hours on their own time and weekends because they actually want to learn, want to play,” he said.

Learning and the Brain

There is neuroscientific evidence that suggests certain types of learning or learning delivery can trigger increased engagement.

For instance, the brain gets pleasure from making predictions and receiving feedback — elements that tend to be inherent in video games and gamified systems, according to Judy Willis, a neurologist, classroom teacher and author who speaks often about the neuroscience of learning. She said every time a user makes a prediction and responds to the game — which either causes him or her to make progress or fall behind — the brain releases a burst of dopamine.

“Dopamine is one of the two kinds of neurotransmitters in the brain — the one associated with extensive pleasure and motivation, perseverance, increased retention and deep satisfaction,” Willis said. This essentially makes the user want to keep going from one level to another.

Achieving a challenge causes an even bigger burst of dopamine to be released, and Willis said this is not a superficial pleasure; it’s intrinsic motivation. “And that’s when [the user is] recognized and goes to the next level of the game,” she said. “If the game or simulation isn’t designed for the next level to be harder work, then without even knowing what they’re doing or why, the player or student in class will say, ‘This is boring’ or to themselves, ‘I’m not playing anymore.’”

The brain tends to seek out activities that will trigger the release of dopamine. Still, Willis said findings aren’t necessarily cause-and-effect and can’t blindly be

applied across the board.

“Neuroscience is only able to make suggestions as to what happens in the lab and how that might affect learning,” she said. “Correlations are useful, but

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they’re not ironclad, and they’re not one-size-fits-all.”

While there is no magic formula to keep learners alert and engaged during learning interventions, it would behoove learning leaders to consider leveraging components of learning that can rouse human motivators for greater impact. **CLO**