

One style doesn't fit all

The different ways
people learn and
why it matters

“ Learning. There’s a right way and there’s a right way ”

Ok, let’s say you’ve just got a new phone; one with all the latest bells and whistles. How do you go about learning to use it?

Do you:

- Read the instruction manual from cover to cover and absorb every new feature so that you can understand what a difference it will make to your phone’s communications potential?
- Read the quick start guide at the beginning of the instruction manual and work the rest out later?
- Base your understanding on your last phone – after all, they can’t be that different can they?
- Watch other people on the bus with the same phone. Work it out from observation?
- Ask your teenage children to show you how it works?
- Put it in a drawer and use your landline?

The fact is that all the above methods (apart from the last one!) will mean you can use your new phone. The point is we have a preferred way of learning. It’s not that we can’t read the quick start guide or pick up the phone and use it – it’s just that we generally prefer one method over another.

We call these preferences ‘learning styles’. We all have a preferred learning style and some of us are more balanced in our learning preferences than others. This booklet explores what that means to us in terms of our own learning and how we work with others.

One style doesn't fit all

When you're working with other people the more you understand about the way they learn things (their learning styles) the more you'll be able to help.

To try and motivate someone by saying, 'go and read this book', when they don't learn that way, is going to be as frustrating for them as it is for you. Especially when you find out later that they can't do what you expected the book to teach them. However, if you recognize that they need to watch you do something to learn how to do it, then you will organize your time differently to achieve your objectives.

As a leader in a group you need to be aware of your own style too, because it has implications for the impact you make on the team. Without acknowledging your own style you may encourage your team to focus on issues from a certain perspective and miss the opportunities that result from different approaches. A team has a collective learning style all of its own. For example, if you have a group of sales managers who all share a preference for action, they are less likely to stop and think about the underlying framework and rationale for their actions (with a tendency for headless chicken syndrome!). As their leader, your job is to guide this group and help them to understand the strengths and potential weaknesses or blind spots associated with their learning styles.

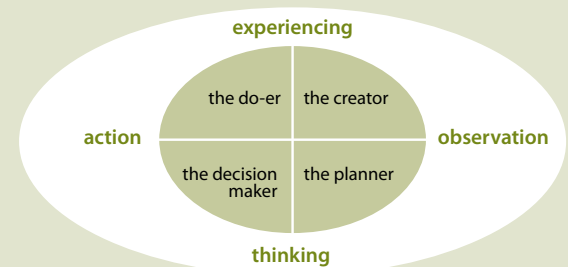
Hay Group can help you look at your own learning style and those of your team so you're better able to tune into the needs of others, to the aims of the group and to the optimal way of using your collective time, resources and capabilities.

The North, South, East and West of learning

We all learn differently, learn in different ways according to different circumstances. To discover which methods suit different people best, David Kolb, Ph.D. began developing the Learning Style Inventory in 1971.

Kolb's work has been influential in studies on learning styles around the world. Kolb's extensive research highlights four phases within the learning process:

- Experiencing:** learning from specific experiences, being sensitive to feelings and people
- Observation:** observing before making judgments, viewing issues from different perspectives, looking for the meaning of things
- Thinking:** logically analyzing ideas, planning systematically, acting on an intellectual basis
- Action:** learning through 'hands on' activities, dealing with people and events through action



The Learning Cycle. Where do you start?

From the combinations of observation, experience, thinking and action, Kolb developed what he called a 'cycle of learning' to explain how these phases describe the way we learn.

We all have preferences for some phases over others. We may stay too long in one, or skip another entirely.

For instance, you are faced with a new problem but you don't tend to focus on planning. You might jump straight to action to solve the problem. It's undoubtedly a positive approach, but unless you've asked yourself what's going on first, then you'll be lucky to choose exactly the right way of dealing with the problem.

“ combinations of
observations, experience,
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and action ”

Learning isn't just labels (but here are a few anyway)

The creator

(diverging style)

The planner

(assimilating style)

The decision maker

(converging style)

The do-er

(accommodating style)

Because we can't cram years of research and learning theory into one booklet we've simplified things a bit by sketching out some descriptions of the kinds of strengths and weaknesses you can find in each quadrant of the learning cycle.

We're not suggesting that anyone conforms totally to these types but we're sure you'll recognize some of the qualities and how they affect the way you learn or communicate.

The 'Creator' (Diverging style)

Your strengths are taking in information through concrete experience and processing it through your powers of observation. Your imaginative ability enables you to generate many alternative ideas. You love brainstorming. You're interested in people and are very feeling-oriented.

Where you get stuck

If you rely on these skills too much you can become overwhelmed by alternatives and indecisiveness. Try not to prioritize urgent challenges above important challenges, or treat mere symptoms as challenges.

The 'Planner' (Assimilating style)

You have an ability to take in new information abstractly and process disparate observations into an integrated rational explanation. You're good at inductive reasoning and the creation of models and theories. You're a systematic planner, a goal setter.

Where you get stuck

Beware of a tendency to create 'castles in the air'. Your style can often have a slender grip on the practical implications. Avoid premature discussion of solutions and make sure the critical facts are known.

The 'Decision maker' (Converging style)

You are able to take in new information in the abstract and process it into a concrete solution. You use hypothetical deductive reasoning to arrive at a single best solution to a question or problem. Your great strength is your ability to solve problems and make decisions.

Where you get stuck

Don't be too hasty though; your style can lead to a premature definition of the problem. Avoid focusing prematurely or creating unproductive conflict and competition.

The 'Do-er' (Accommodating style)

You are able to take in new information concretely and transform it actively. You have the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Your strengths are doing things, carrying out plans and tasks and getting involved in new experiences. You're more likely to want to learn and work with others, and you are comfortable learning through practical experience.

Where you get stuck

You can be seen as 'pushy' and impatient. You can spend a lot of time making trivial improvements or taking the wrong action. Try to win commitment from the rest of the team before taking action. And avoid unnecessary conflict and competition.

“ understanding your learning styles
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What have you learnt so far?

Hopefully by understanding more about the way you and your team learn, you can start to position the contribution of others around the phases of the learning cycle where they can add most value.

For example, if you're looking at future strategies for growth, people with 'creator' preferences can be immensely helpful in generating lots of ideas about how you can achieve this growth.

The more you understand about the learning styles of others, the more you can target your efforts towards their key concerns. For example, someone with 'planning' preferences pays a lot of attention to the detailed facts of a situation. So when you approach them to approve that critical business case, knowing all the relevant facts and being able to recite them backwards is a great start.

Understanding your learning styles will also help to explain why you work so well with some people, and yet others frustrate you! For example, someone who has a 'planning' style likes organizing information, building conceptual models and analyzing quantitative data. They work really well with a 'decision-maker' who receives the analysis and theories and builds on them, making decisions, setting goals, creating new ways of thinking and experimenting with new ideas.

Putting what you learn into practice

Now you understand something about the various styles of learning, how do they apply to the way that you lead and manage other people?

Take this example:

We were working with the board of a technical organization. We were seeing some strange behavior in the boardroom, that seemed to exclude one person in particular. We invited the board members to complete the Kolb Learning Style Inventory. Of the ten people in the boardroom, nine were people more interested in creating models, and setting goals than practical implementation. Only one was focused on the practical issues around implementation and would say, 'but what shall we do?' Unsurprisingly, he tended to be singing a different song during discussions.

When they recognized this not only did the nine people who consistently asked the question 'why?' realize why they found it so difficult to move through to the decision making, they also understood that they should pay much more attention to the person who was saying, 'what shall we do about it'. It altered their perception that he was just being awkward when cutting across the fascinating conversations they were having that were leading nowhere.

Can people develop their learning styles?

The first step is to recognize what their own style is, and understand its strengths and weaknesses. It may be that their style is entirely in keeping with the role they have.

Or it may be that you could help them develop strengths in other areas that make them a more valuable contributor to their team.

As well as completing the LSI, you can help people develop their learning styles by:

- Placing them in learning and work situations with people whose learning strengths are different from their own.
- Improving the fit between their learning style and the kind of learning experience they face.
- Practicing skills in areas that are the opposite of their present strengths.

How Hay Group can help you learn more

Hay Group have a range of Learning Styles tools that can be used by anyone to identify learning preferences and help them be more effective at their job and to get more out of life generally.

If you would like to find out more about our learning resources contact us today.

“get more out of life
generally”

Hay Group is a global consulting firm that works with leaders to transform strategy into reality. We develop talent, organize people to be more effective and motivate them to perform at their best. Our focus is on making change happen and helping people and organizations realize their potential.

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