

Learning by experimenting

Four building blocks that help to start your own experiment

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1 For five years, Kessels & Smit, *The Learning Company* designs and facilitates a leadership program for a retail organization. The program is strongly embedded in the workplace and enables participants to experience, reflect and experiment. Recently, Kessels & Smit conducted impact research to learn more about the impact participants were able to make in their work, during and after the leadership program. The results show that the impact is high. Participants are more transparent in their communication, take feelings into account, and manage to make use of talent and expertise of themselves and others in ways that creates worthwhile results for the organization. In researching the impact of the program we uncovered four key elements relevant to implementing experiments in daily practice. This paper presents these buildings blocks that enable the design of experiments in the workplace in order to continuously improve and innovate. As starting to do something small in a different way on a regular working day is the key to long-term change and development.



During our research we found four building blocks that make experimenting in the workplace worthwhile.

Background: Growth to a next leadership level

When wanting to reach new ambitions, it is needed to experiment with new ways of thinking and acting. Because when participants keep thinking and acting as they always did, they will probably not attain new results. Therefore, the aim of the leadership program is twofold: firstly, participants are challenged and enabled to reflect on their own thinking and acting as well as encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. Secondly, participants are supported to experiment with new ways thinking and acting in a ways that will help them in making a next career step. Most of these activities are strongly embedded in the workplace as we believe that there needs to be a strong connection between learning and the workplace to yield sustainable results.

The research: How did we investigate the impact of the leadership program?

The method used for the research into the leadership program was the success case method, originating from Brinkerhoff (2006). The underlying belief of the success case method is that we can learn a lot from those people who managed to use the learning program to demonstrate different behaviour at work that led to worthwhile results. The SCM combines quantitative and qualitative research with the power of individual stories. This makes it possible to establish a link between the learning intervention and the realized impact in everyday work. The method also helps to investigate the factors of the program and the work environment that contribute to growth and the factors that hinder growth of the participants.

The impact research that we conducted consisted of three components:

- Construction of an impact map. This is a visual representation that relates the abilities that are central in the leadership program and the work behaviour of the participants, to the operational and strategic organization goals.
- An online questionnaire that was distributed among the 28 participants that started the leadership program in 2013 or 2014.
- Eight in-depth interviews with participants. Three consecutive interviews with three of the participants' managers and buddies.

Main Finding: Four building blocks that help to get started with experimentation

The impact of the leadership program is high. In total, 88% of the 28 participants were able to realize worthwhile results during and after the leadership program. This means that these participants did not only learned something new, they applied this in their day-to-day work and this new way of working led to worthwhile results for the organization. These results were also supported by the managers and buddies of the participants. Most of the participants mentioned that experimenting with new and different ways of working helped them to realize these results during the program. This seems logical as we know that experimentation is a key element to learning. During our research we found four building blocks that make experimenting in the workplace worthwhile.

Encouraging the process of experimenting by a 'buddy'

In the beginning of the leadership program, participants invite a close colleague to support them in their leadership journey. These 'critical friends' are called 'buddies'. In order to challenge participants in their work, we invite these buddies to organize small experiments for their participants that are in line with their learning objective. These experiments help participants see where they can make difference and what alternative outcomes are if they just take one step differently. Additionally, buddies are also asked to carve a few moments in the daily work schedule of their participant. These time slots create the opportunity for additional practice and reflection with the aim of helping to sustain the new behaviour. Examples of this are a coffee date with the buddy in which the buddy challenges the participant to reflect on their final assignment or an SMS scenario in which the participant engages to receive feedback on his or her progress.

1. LEAVE THE COMFORT ZONE



Participants who were successful in experimenting in their work mentioned the importance of moving beyond their comfort zone. Leaving the comfort zone was seen as a first step that enabled participants to make

room for practicing with new ways of working and thinking. Nevertheless, stepping out of the comfort zone can cause feelings of uncertainty. Especially, since the actions often consist of actions and behaviour that are new, or difficult. However, getting into the mindset of trying, or 'seeing what happens', as one of the participants called it, is known to be a key element of learning. Because when consciously step out of your comfort zone and tackle challenges in new ways this will feel more relaxed and familiar over time. This is when the comfort zone expands and new sustainable ways of working are implemented in daily work routines. Such an expansion was seen as very valuable by participants. They found that it facilitated their growth.

Example

One of the participants had difficulties with sharing his view when he was not completely confident that others would value his perspective. During the program he experimented with several real-life experiments in the workplace on sharing his opinion. This helped him to be better able to share his view and to feel confident about it. As a result he has become more visible in the organization. Besides that he is more often approached by others to share his opinion on matters worthwhile.

Three types of experiments used in the leadership program:

- 1. Doing something small differently.** By doing small things differently, new routines will be gained. This can be done by things as simple as making a change in the everyday morning routine of participants. For instance by taking a different route to the office; by not taking phone calls in the car if they usually do; or by starting the day with a moment of quietness. For more ideas see: <http://www.kessels-smit.com/nl/20-ways>
- 2. Experiments in a role-play setting.** Participants choose a situation that they have experienced and will experience more frequently in which they want to act differently. For instance a conversation with their team in which they want to engage them for a specific idea. They will experiment with this situation in a roleplay setting with the support of facilitators. During the experiment time-out are used to recap what happened and what could have been done differently. After this time-out participants can try a new approach. This leads to short learning cycles in which experimentation is followed by a concrete experience, and by reflection.
- 3. Real-life experiments in the workplace designed by peers.** Based on the situation the participant wants to become better at, one of their peers chooses a real work situation, neither fake nor re-enacted, and shapes this as an experiment. The participant will be informed of this experiment at the start when the peer tells: this is your experiment, others know it too, go try it. During this experiment there can be time-outs to reflect on how it is going. After the experiment there is a reflective conversation.

2. FIND THE FIRST SMALL STEP



The second building block consists of tips that can help to design an experiment in the day-to-day work environment. For the participants it helped to look for situations which were close to their working routine

yet differed and challenging enough to be a personal learning experience. These situations were often already encountered by participants and therefore provided the perfect opportunity for an experiment with a different approach.

Example:

One of the participants described that he had the tendency to carry out tasks he could also delegate. As a result his workload was very high. During the leadership program he was challenged by his buddy to do things differently. He started with a small experiment in which he made an overview of his tasks. Based on this overview he asked himself the question whether he could delegate this task to one of his team member or whether he should do it himself. This helped him to take the next step in delegating more tasks to his team. Subsequently, he also experimented with different ways in which he could support his team members in completing these tasks.

Like the example above portrays, learning objectives are almost never completely realized in one attempt. Small successes are a great motivator to keep going. Furthermore, steps that are too large create the danger of being so far removed from the comfort zone that it triggers strong negative emotions which inhibit learning. Therefore, small steps are often more effective and feasible in experimenting in a professional environment.

Helpful questions to aid in designing a small experiment are:

- What is the first situation you encounter you might want to change?
- What is the least you could do it to make the situation different?

3. FIND A FAN!



Having a fan or buddy during the process can help to maintain the new things learned and act as a motivator to keep going. Participants mentioned that having a buddy who regularly checked up on them helped

them significantly. As one of the participants puts it: 'it intensifies your learning experience. Of course you can tell a colleague but having a buddy makes is much easier. It really helps to have someone who asks you how it is going, supports you to continue and goes the extra mile for you'. Furthermore, the research showed that it is important that the buddy is someone with whom you have good relationship and who finds it important to offer support in the growth process. Their role is not only to cheer on, they can also be engaged in a more active role in which they help and sharpen the participants' thinking during the process.

4. SCHEDULE TIME FOR REFLECTION



Reflecting upon the outcome of experiment is essential to make sure learning takes place. In the interviews we found that it was both helpful and valuable for participants to reflect on their actions during and after

the experiments. The experiments in the role-play setting are a good example of reflecting during the experiments. According to the participants these kinds of experiments helped them to integrate new behaviour and thought-patterns into practice. One of the participants describes her experiment in the role-play setting as follows: “During the sessions I practice with a specific situation that I found challenging. For me this was not only persuading people by arguments but inviting others to collaborate towards the same goal. I started the conversation and I immediately struggled with. However, I was able to turn the feedback I received into something I could use. This is when it really clicked for me. It was the metaphorical light-bulb moment.”

A moment of reflection after an experience helps to give meaning to the experiment and creates room to think about the next move. However, our research also showed that it can be challenging to find this time in the busyness of day-to-day work. Often this requires finding ways to schedule set moments for reflection during the week. However, that does not mean it has to be a ‘big’ occasion; it is also possible to schedule some time for reflection directly after an experiment, or to just schedule ten minutes every day for reflection. For instance, one of the participants received a reflective question or a quote that prompted reflection from his buddy every day during one week. The buddy took pleasure in finding questions and quotes suitable for the participant and the participants really appreciated the invitation for reflection.

Do you want to learn about this research or impact research? Please contact: Kirste den Hollander (kdenhollander@kessels-smit.com) or Suzanne Verdonschot (sverdonschot@kessels-smit.com).

