Learning Strategies for Creating a Continuous Learning Environment

INTRODUCTION

A key component of the Leadership and Knowledge Management system is a continuous learning system that uses a wide variety of methods, including classroom training; distance learning; mentoring; experiential learning; and participation in conferences, workshops, and seminars.

This tool contains information on a number of learning strategies for creating a continuous learning environment, including individual learning strategies and organizational learning strategies.

Associated Web sites, where applicable, are at the end of this section.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

Individual learning is the ability of individuals to pursue self-development. It requires individuals take personal responsibility for their own learning and development through a process of assessment, reflection, and action. Individual learning helps the employee continually update skills and remain marketable in the workplace.

Individual learning strategies encompass the following:

- Individual development plan
- Special projects and assignments
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Job aids
- Manager as teacher
- Learning groups (teams)
- Self-directed learning
- Classroom learning
- Distance learning
- Online learning
- Informational interviews
- Discussion forum.

Learning Strategies for Creating a Continuous Learning Environment (continued)

Individual Development Plan

An Individual Development Plan (IDP) is a formal document that identifies an individual's learning and development goals. The manager and the individual jointly develop the IDP. This plan contains training, education, and development activities (formal and informal) to acquire the competencies needed to meet IDP goals.

IDPs are used to:

- Identify and assess future development needs in required competency areas

- Provide structured learning experiences linked to organizational needs, goals, and job requirements

- Establish an agreed-upon set of learning objectives and development activities as part of a formal career development program.

Special Projects and Assignments

Special projects and assignments are temporary duties performed by the employee on a full-time or part-time basis.

Special projects and assignments are used to:

- Enhance an employee's knowledge or skills in a particular area

- Complete tasks or assignments when a mix of people with expertise in different areas is needed

- Prepare an employee for career advancement or develop specific knowledge or skills

- Broaden an employee's knowledge of other functions and departments in the organization

- Motivate and challenge an employee who has been on a job for a long time.

Two common types of special assignments are **shadowing** and **rotational** assignments.

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**Special Projects
and Assignments**
(continued)

A **shadowing assignment** is an assignment during which the employee observes another person in his/her daily routine for a period of time. These assignments give the employee a sense of the duties and responsibilities of the job and how the person handles the work and situations that arise.

A **rotational assignment** is a detail or transfer to another position or work unit to broaden the employee's knowledge of different operations and working environments.

Coaching

Coaching is observing an employee at work and providing feedback and facilitative problem solving to enhance performance or correct deficiencies. Coaching supports an employee as he/she learns new tasks.

Coaching is used to:

- Support an employee who is assuming new job duties
- Develop or provide new skills through on-the-job training
- Introduce new procedures or technologies
- Enhance performance and correct deficiencies
- Prepare employees for career development
- Develop members of a work team.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a formal or informal relationship between senior and junior employees for the purpose of supporting learning and development. The mentor provides ongoing support, advice, and career direction to an employee. A mentor holds a higher position and is usually outside the employee's chain of supervision.

Mentoring is used to:

- Continue the development of talented and skilled staff members

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Mentoring
(continued)

- Groom individuals who show high potential for management or leadership responsibilities

- Retrain and prepare an individual for a new job or function

- Assimilate new individuals into the organization by educating them about the norms, culture, and politics of the organization.

Job Aids

Job aids are tools that give step-by-step guidance for completing a task (e.g., checklists, decision aids, procedure and policy manuals, work samples, flowcharts). Job aids can be paper-based or can be electronic performance support tools.

Job aids are used to:

- Help employees transfer skills learned in the classroom to the job

- Give employees quick access to just-in-time information or procedures

- Serve as reminders for how to follow procedures or processes, especially when they are used infrequently.

Manager as Teacher

Manager as teacher means managers view themselves as facilitators of learning. The manager sees each interaction with an employee as a learning opportunity. Managers are aware they serve as powerful role models for employee learning.

Manager as teacher helps to:

- Demonstrate desired performance, behavior, and skills to employees

- Set tone, pace, work habits, and behavior.

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Learning Groups (Teams)

Learning groups (teams) are formed when employees meet to focus on their own learning and development in a particular interest area such as information technology, public speaking, or career paths.

Learning groups are used to:

- Provide a mechanism for obtaining knowledge and skills when there is no formal training available in a particular area

- Provide a means of learning when the environment or technology is changing so rapidly that there is no time to develop a formal training program

- Reinforce learning through the ongoing peer support provided by regular learning team meetings.

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning refers to development activities an individual can pursue on his/her own, allowing employees to focus on developing specific areas according to their own needs and schedules. Self-directed learning encompasses any training source where the learner has control over the pace—for example, reading pertinent books, articles, and professional journals or magazines; listening to books and courses on tape or CD; taking online courses; and watching instructional or informational videotapes or DVDs.

Self-directed learning can help:

- Introduce employees to a new and unfamiliar topic area

- Broaden employees' knowledge of relevant issues, trends, challenges, and solutions

- Bring information and basic knowledge to employees who have significant time or travel constraints.

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Classroom Learning   **Classroom learning** is work-related training held in a traditional classroom setting either onsite or offsite. Training can be provided by agency staff, contractors, universities, professional associations, and recognized vendors or providers.

Classroom learning is used to:

- Communicate highly complex and changing information

- Involve learners in a highly interactive experience with the instructor and fellow learners

- Allow participants to practice and receive feedback on critical skills through role-playing, experiential activities, and simulations (e.g., communication and interpersonal skills, coaching and counseling skills)

- Create a tailored instructional experience (i.e., instructors can adapt the presentation to the needs of the audience)

- Share real-life experiences, problems, and ideas.

Distance Learning   **Distance learning** is similar to classroom learning in that a participant interacts with a facilitator/trainer at a pre-assigned time and date, but in distance learning the facilitator and participant are in different locations. It includes instructor-led video or Web-based courses. Courses are typically offered by universities and professional vendors.

Distance learning is used to:

- Deliver training to the employee's location

- Allow people to learn and participate without being in the same place

- Reach large audiences while reducing travel costs.

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Online Learning

Online learning covers using the Internet to research work-related topics, take self-paced courses, access real-time presentations by keynote conference speakers, and access reading materials.

Like distance learning, online learning is used to:

- Deliver training to the employee's location
- Allow people to learn and participate without being in the same place
- Reach large audiences while reducing travel costs.

Informational Interviews

Informational interviews are meetings held with key people to gain information—as well as their perspectives and advice—on particular areas of interest.

Informational interviews can be used to:

- Familiarize employees with other areas of work in the organization
- Understand key stakeholders' perspectives, needs, and interests
- Bring employees up to speed in new areas.

Discussion Forum

A **discussion forum** is a group that meets on a regular basis to share ideas, information, and solutions to work-related issues. It provides an opportunity for the employee to build his/her network. Forums can be face-to-face or online.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING STRATEGIES	**Organizational learning** occurs when the entire organization addresses and solves problems, builds repositories of lessons learned, and creates cores competencies that represent the collective learning of employees, past and present. Organizational learning not only contributes to resolving organizational issues, but promotes individual development of knowledge and skills.

Organizational strategies include:

- Action learning

- Cross-functional teams

- Work-outs

- Parallel learning structures

- Groupware. |
| **Action Learning** | **Action learning** is a process for bringing together a group of people with varied levels of skills and experience to analyze an actual work problem and develop an action plan. The group continues to meet as actions are implemented, learning from the implementation and making mid-course corrections. Action learning is a form of learning by doing.

Action learning can be used to:

- Address problems and issues that are complex and not easily resolved

- Find solutions to underlying root causes of problems

- Determine a new strategic direction or maximize new opportunities. |

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Cross-Functional Teams

A **cross-functional team** is composed of people with varied levels of skills and experience who are brought together to accomplish a task. These teams may use action learning as a process to solve problems. Cross-functional team members come from different organizational units and may have permanent or ad hoc standing.

Cross-functional teams can be used to:

- Solve a problem that impacts multiple parts of the organization
- Improve a work process that crosses organizational lines
- Coordinate ongoing processes or activities that cross organizational boundaries
- Accomplish tasks that require a breadth and depth of knowledge, skills, and experience.

Work-Outs

Work-outs are meetings of employees representing all levels and functions of the organization or unit, except management, to identify ways the organization can work together more efficiently and effectively. Work-outs can last from 1 to several days.

Work-outs are effective when the organization needs to:

- Accomplish rapid and far-reaching organizational change
- Develop creative and practical approaches to resolving work issues
- Examine and redesign work processes and practices
- Gain commitment to change from all stakeholders.

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Parallel Learning Structures

Parallel learning structures refer to groups who represent various levels and functions working to open new channels of communication outside and parallel to the normal hierarchical structure. Parallel learning structures promote innovation and change in large bureaucratic organizations while retaining the advantage of bureaucratic design.

Parallel learning structures are useful when the organization needs to:

- Develop and implement organization-wide innovations
- Foster innovation and creativity within a bureaucratic system
- Capture the organization's collective expertise
- Support the exchange of knowledge and expertise among performers.

Groupware

Groupware is technology used to facilitate a group's communication, problem-solving, and decision-making processes.

Groupware can:

- Facilitate communication by making it faster and cleaner
- Bring together multiple perspectives and expertise
- Facilitate and accelerate group problem solving and decision making
- Encourage collective learning
- Bring together geographically dispersed team members or stakeholders whose input is needed for decision making and/or problem solving

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Groupware
(continued)

- Allow participants to be in the same room and simultaneously input information: participants provide ideas, comments, and decisions at individual networked workstations. A projected computer screen displays the anonymous input of all participants. Information can be weighed, prioritized, and voted on.

For information on formal mentoring for women in the Federal workforce, visit:

http://www.opm.gov/employ/women/career.htm

For an online description (June 2004) of the SES Federal Candidate Development Program, go to:

http://www.opm.gov/ses/fedcdp/OPM_agency.pdf

To access Graduate School, USDA, course listings, programs, and partnerships, visit:

http://www.grad.usda.gov/