



The Interconnectedness of Formal and Informal Training

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Introduction

High Liner Foods Incorporated was founded in 1899 and currently employs over 700 people in Canada and the United States. It is Canada's leading frozen processed seafood brand. Lunenburg, Nova Scotia is the corporate head office and home of the High Liner processing plant. The Lunenburg plant is located in a rural setting with approximately 48 salaried and 290 unionized hourly workers. Most of the union workers have been working at the plant for between 16 and 30 years while many others have little seniority and are not full time.

High Liner received funding from the Nova Scotia Department of Education's Workplace Education Initiative for an Essential Skills communication program, and offered it to front line workers who were frustrated by uncertainty, lay offs and poor communication. Nine workers completed the program and requested a second communication program. I facilitated this advanced communication program (Communicating with Emotional Intelligence) designed from the needs assessment to address objectives like respectful communication, self-awareness, assertiveness, conflict management

and giving and receiving feedback. The workers were excited to start the program and anxious to learn more communication skills. These same workers and adult education instructors shared their thoughts, experiences and observations about learning to uncover an interplay between informal and formal training. The data also revealed that there is an association between organizational support for learning and employee participation in both formal and informal workplace learning.

The interplay between informal and formal training

Formal training can be a path to informal learning and informal learning can be a path to formal training. Each type of training creates new sparks which ignite into a rich and fulfilling learning experience. These ways of learning and knowing rebound off each other when interest, confidence and support come together.

Formal training is often a catalyst to personal interest in a topic, which inspires the desire for self-directed and informal learning and it can help to build the confidence in one's ability to



be a successful learner. For example, after the communication program, several workers asked for outside resources on communicating with emotional intelligence such as on-line sites, books and other programs that would further their understanding of the subject. Conversely, informal learning can lead to an interest in formal training. Learning something new often generates interest and inspires confidence in further learning. One worker put it this way, “I’m now reflecting on my skills and abilities and job options and thinking about taking a different life path”, while another employee said, “learning is a humbling experience, the more you learn, the more you realize you need to learn.”

Formal training and informal learning are also interconnected when skills, knowledge and attitudes are shared with co-workers in the workplace and with family and friends outside the workplace. This is exemplified in this case study as workers shared what they were learning in the classroom with co-workers and friends. One worker prepared a new response to a difficult conversation she was going to have with a co-worker. When the worker changed her response, her co-worker in turn changed her reply and the communication was effective. Another worker was able to express herself more assertively to a family member and gained more confidence in communication skills. Other workers at the plant asked questions about the classroom learning and how it was helping in their different roles of worker, family member and citizen. This curiosity created interest in the program.

Why participate in training?

Many factors effect a worker’s decision to participate in a learning opportunity such as their own values and beliefs about learning, whether they have family or a social network of support and their previous lived experience which influences their confidence, interest, and fear. As one worker put it, “I am more comfortable with learning now”. And another worker aptly said, “there is a lot to think about, sometimes I don’t deal with things, but now I think about things more before I react, I’m trying to use it at home.”

The decision to participate in formal training is influenced by the perception of a need, a benefit and an opportunity to use the new learning. In other words, workers will participate in training if they think that a change in skills, knowledge or attitude is warranted or it will help solve a problem. The problems at this workplace centered on respectful and assertive communication among the front line workers. Workers also need to have assurance that they will have an opportunity to use the new learning to make a difference in their work life and home life.

These employees either self identified the gap in skills, knowledge or attitude before participating in a program or they were encouraged to attend training by supervisors. Participation should be voluntary, but as one instructor put it, “some workers are told to attend training.” Workers have an expectation that formal training will make their jobs easier. For example, one worker described how she was able to



express her ideas around an easier way to rotate workers on the production line to accommodate breaks without losing time. She would have expressed herself in an aggressive way before the program, but because of the communication program she was able to be more assertive. In addition, some workers also expect that training will lead to increased income.

Instructors noted that workplace programs should be designed to support the needs of both the organization and the workers, but sometimes they are out of alignment. This problem can often be identified through the individual needs assessment, or through up front consultation. As well, the curriculum should also be adapted to accommodate different learning styles and the skill levels of all participants.

Benefits of formal training

Instructors agree that formal training improves the nine essential skills and has many tacit benefits, such as an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence, assertiveness and problem solving skills. Other benefits contribute to a less stressful environment, more harmonious relationships, and improved communication by invested workers. These are skills that are transferable to one's personal life. One worker described the benefits this way, "good communication skills give you a real advantage in life."

Workers in this program called "Communicating with Emotional Intelligence

in the Workplace" reported practicing their new classroom skills with co-workers in the workplace and with family and friends at home. Each week workers would share stories of successes and trials. One worker reported back to the class after trying a new approach with her teenager on an old subject. She remarked that using "I" language and describing her feelings kept her focused on the issues and her daughter's response was more positive and a good start to better communication. The workers gained confidence in their new skills and were eager to learn more. Some of the benefits reported by employees focused on worker relationships. For example, employees felt that interactions with others improved and that they were thinking more before reacting. They were also more conscious of the feelings of self and others which resulted in more positive interactions and less conflict.

Other benefits included feeling more assertive and more confident to challenge or question decisions made in the workplace by others. Positive interactions helped to build trust and sharing among co-workers and this trust was considered an essential ingredient in successful learning. If workers have a successful learning experience, they will often share their learning with co-workers and friends. Workers reported that when they feel valued, they are more productive and that reflects the company's bottom line. One worker explained, "acknowledgement, a thank you or any show of appreciation is all that's needed, and for some people it's the self satisfaction of doing a good job that makes them feel good."



Organizational support for learning

Formal training is often driven by the organization and triggered by changes in technology or a need to upgrade essential skills to keep up with the global economy. To establish a learning environment, both the organization and the workers must support learning and there must be a perceived need and a perceived benefit.

The same holds true for informal learning. This is also driven by the worker, and should be supported by the organization. Workers feel a sense of autonomy when they have power over their own learning and it is encouraged by the organization. As one worker explained “informal learning is free and is more powerful than formal training because it is self-directed.” In this study, workers reported that the organization’s support for learning is often acknowledged in the workers’ efforts to participate in learning.

The organization’s support and stance on learning is mirrored by its workers. When the organization shows support for learning, it filters down through the hierarchy of the organization and is role modeled by supervisors, coaches and the front line. The result of this becomes an attitude of encouragement and trust. As one instructor said,

“The organization has the opportunity to set a supportive learning climate, however, the expression of support must go beyond posting its mission statements or corporate philosophies and demonstrate activities that lead

workers to think and feel supported, because what you think informs how you feel and how you feel informs how you behave.”

Workers and instructors noted several ways that organizations can support a learning environment that includes both formal and informal training. One key way was the acknowledgment of the new skills, knowledge or attitudes by providing an opportunity to practice the new learning. Instructors suggested that the organization could initiate developmental activities like special projects designed to help practice new skills. An example might be practicing leadership skills in a coaching role for a period of time or heading a team on a special project. Another way to show support is for supervisors and coaches to be nurturing and not critical when workers are practicing the new skills, knowledge and attitudes. One worker described it this way, “I rate intelligence by what one does after they screw up.”

Workers also recognized that they were responsible for supporting a learning environment. They needed to remain committed to learning new skills, being open to changing the way things are done at work and having confidence that the new learning will improve the current situation. For example, one worker was able to use his new communication skills to express his feelings with another co-worker who was using negative comments about his lack of seniority, and lack of work hours. He was able to assert himself and ask his co-worker to refrain from making those kinds of comments instead of harboring resentment.



Informal learning behaviors and workplace tasks

Workers in this case study learned informally at the worksite in so many different ways such as by observing others, role-modeling behaviors, asking questions, discussion, trial and error, through reflection and using intuition. A case in point was when one worker had a hunch that the software problem he was working on was really the cause of an underlying communication problem within the departments. The software problem had already been fixed by the IT department, but this simple piece of information had not been communicated to other departments. Evidence of new learning can also be seen in behavior when one tries something new, or tries a new approach to the same work problem. A few workers in the communication program used their new skills to address negative communication with co-workers with varying degrees of success.

Informal learning behaviors were observable when workers were discussing issues, asking questions, storytelling and sharing resources. Other informal learning included workers using the Internet for research, observing others, modeling behavior, mentoring others, and seeking outside resources to learn more about a topic. Some of these same behaviors were also seen in the formal classroom when workers discussed their communication problems with each other and helped each other plan for and role-play a new approach to communication. An interest in a topic can trigger informal learning by seeking information beyond the classroom setting, as several workers did when they asked for communication

resources at the end of the program. Evidence of such learning was seen in a positive change in attitude and self-confidence, or when challenging workplace policies, regulation, or decisions that were seen as unfair. As one worker mentioned he now had more confidence to discuss what he thought was an unfair decision on shift scheduling with a supervisor.

Workers identified many ways that they learned work tasks informally. For example, one worker asked a more experienced co-worker for his technical ‘know-how’ and advice for operating machinery that he was unfamiliar with, while another worker joined a pension investment committee to learn more about his pension fund. This same employee also looked up safety research on-line as a way of preparing before a safety meeting. A second example was when a worker studied specifications so as to understand how a new product would be processed before the product started on the production line. And another worker reported adapting her communication style to suit the different personality and management styles of her co-workers while a different employee used trial and error to solve software formatting problems.

Instructors suggested that employers could recognize informal learning by being aware of the different types of activities and giving credit for the learning through a semi-annual evaluation. Employees should track informal learning by documenting examples in their work life and by being aware of what they are looking for. The following are examples of informal learning paths as documented by three workers.



Vignette 1

After observing a butter melting process on the production line, a worker had an idea that there was a better way to perform this work task. Together with another open-minded co-worker they problem solved a safer, faster way to melt the butter. By collaborating with a co-worker who also had an interest in a solution, they found a new way of performing an old task. This same worker joined a committee to help solve a software problem with lotus notes. It seemed that the reports were losing text when printed at different workstations. By trail and error, observing others, and asking a lot of questions by phone, by e-mail and in personal conversations, the worker was able to get to the root of the problem and uncovered that the software problem had already been addressed, but the information had not been communicated to all departments.

Vignette 2

Another worker consulted with friends, books and the internet and asked questions to informally learn how to paint her home, organize a large group meal, and learn the business side of cleaning. Through asking a lot of questions she learned about how much to charge, what types of cleaners and equipment to use and how to use her time efficiently. In another informal learning activity at work, the same employee consulted with her team on the stick line to problem solve how to pack a level box of fish. The fish wouldn't fit in the box with the lid closed, so working together and using their collective imagination, they tried a few ideas until they were able to pack a level box of fish.

Vignette 3

Another worker informally learned how to change a code on the Loma Scale which is a product coding system. This worker usually relied on others to change the code for her. But wanting to learn for herself, she asked a more knowledgeable co-worker to coach her through the procedures. This worker also informally learned the meaning of phrases in the union book by asking her coach and co-workers. In another activity, this worker learned how to conduct an end of line quality check for a new product that was being launched. This was an audit process and she had to learn what to look for to better prepare herself to do a good job. In this case, she posed questions to the quality technician and he helped her figure it out. It made her job easier and more interesting to understand how and why the check was done.

Attitudes towards lifelong learning

Workers had specific responses to the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory, which measured the three factors of imagination, dependency and growth and their polar alternative approaches to learning. On the factor of imagination and creativity, a high score in this item group indicates that an adult likes challenges and appreciates the struggle when learning. It also indicates confidence and interest in learning. A low score on the items indicates a preference for clear-cut information with little or no struggle which makes learning easy. It also indicates fear and doubt in one's ability to



learn. Workers' responses ranged from 4 to 9 with the mean of 6.7. On one end of the continuum, one low score indicated a strong dislike for the struggle while learning. However, the mean score indicated that this group takes some challenges, but does not fully embrace the struggle in learning. For example, in the beginning of the communication program, this group was excited about learning more communication skills but were still apprehensive about how this new learning would effect changes in the workplace.

On the factor of dependency and fragility, a high score in this item group indicates that an adult does not like to try new things, has little confidence, little motivation and a lot of fear and doubt. A low score in this question group indicates one who is high in self-confidence, motivated, interested, willing to try new things and comfortable making mistakes as part of the learning path. Workers' responses ranged from 4 to 9 with a mean of 7.0. On one end of the continuum one low score indicated a strong dislike to feeling confused and uncertain while learning. However, the mean score indicated that this group has some fear in learning and lacked confidence. These workers expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to make a difference in the workplace with their new skills and a few were concerned that they would be made fun of or put down if they tried to communicate differently.

On the factor of growth orientation and challenge, a high score in this item group indicates that an adult likes challenges, has confidence in learning, especially when they are interested in the learning and perseveres after making mistakes. A low score indicates low

self-confidence and a fear to try new things. Workers' responses ranged from 6 to 11 with a mean of 7.8. On one end of the continuum one high score indicated that interest played a significant role in the learning path. However, the mean score indicated that this group is more receptive to the challenge of learning especially when the subject is of interest. Based on my observations, interest was evident in this group as they were engaged in the learning and eagerly participated in homework, group work and self-evaluations. As well, everyone was on time with very few absences and each member of class planned out a potluck lunch.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the interconnectedness between formal and informal learning as one sparks the other. There are many internal and external trigger events that cause a worker to undertake learning. Internal factors include the previous experiences with learning, current values and beliefs about learning and a support network that can shape a learning exchange. External factors also included the need to upgrade essential skills for work, the need to use new technology, and other life changing events that cause the need to seek out a learning opportunity. Perceived needs, the opportunity to practice new skills and organizational support lead a learner to participate in training of both a formal and informal nature. In this case study, the employees and the instructors pointed out that interest, confidence and support are common themes along the learning path at the workplace.