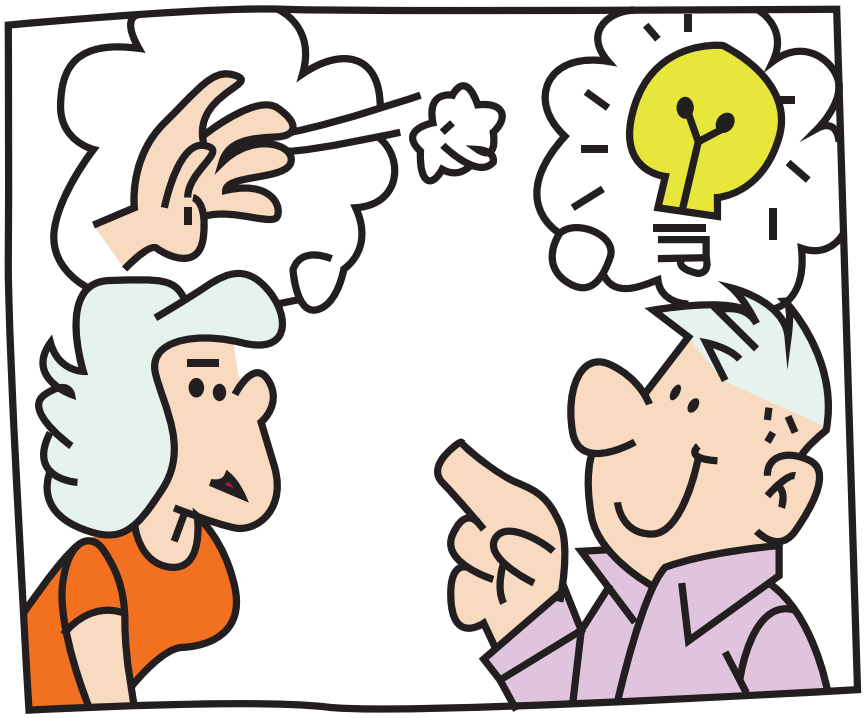
Workflow Learning

"I'M NOT SURE I TRUST YOUR SOLUTION"

The Role of Interactional Expertise and Context of Limitations in Workflow Learning



Vignettes Learning

A revealing question

John Seely Brown, organizational learning guru, shared an interesting story:

> *We had a serious problem with one of our printing equipment. We called all the experts, engineers, designers and production people to discuss what was causing the problem. After hours of discussions we could not find an explanation. This was bewildering to us.*
>
> *One evening I was late in the office and was checking the equipment. Peter, a maintenance person who collects trash and wipes clean the office equipment was working. Peter asked me, "What's up with this equipment?" I explained the problem and that we could not find a solution. Then Peter asked me "Have your tried changing the steps in refilling the cartridge and running a test? "Really?" I exclaimed. I tried it and it worked!*

Sometimes, the solution is right under our noses. All the traditional experts couldn't figure this out, but Peter, who was not an expert, had the answer all along. In this story, Peter is an "Interactional Expert" (practical expertise). There are many "Peters" in our workplaces, if we are willing to acknowledge them and listen to them.

Moving from SME to You and Me

De-emphasizing the role of the SME (Subject Matter Expert) and nurturing a culture of "Interactional Experts" (practical expertise) among workers shifts the attention from the SME as the sole source of "correct" answers. The new model is that everyone's experiences can be utilized to extract nuggets of practical expertise.

Knowledge and solutions can also come from the workers, not just SMEs and other experts. This new model improves the self-confidence of workers. Whatever they contribute has some value in the conversations.

In Workflow Learning, experience sharing is where we gain valuable knowledge from Interactional Experts (practical expertise). With this shift in our learning and application model, we are seeing the roles of the SMEs and L&D are morphing into coaches, mentors, and curators of content to support workers in the Workflow Diagnostic Process.

Ray Jimenez, Ph.D.
Workflow Learning Author

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Building Trust: A Context of Limitations

For Workflow Learning to be truly effective, we need to give the workers the ability to share practical experiences. This sets up the dynamics for the answers and solutions to be tested and trusted.

We have a methodology for testing and trusting answers and solutions. This takes place when workers present their contributions within three constraints:

Workers can be trusted to find the answers when they present their contributions with the accompanying constraints. These are the dimensions to this.

- The worker's goal is finding an answer to fix, solve or improve something.
- Their answers, whatever the source, will always reside within a context of limitations, blind spots, and unknowns. These unknowns make answers not fully reliable without the statements of the context and / or limits.
- The statements of unknowns and limits make an answer reliable because it has the built-in aspects that must be further investigated or accepted as conditions and therefore, must be considered in using or applying the answer.

Example 1 might sound like:

"The answer is the procedure I found in YouTube. This is what procedure says: Step 1, 2, 3 etc."

Example 2 might sound like:

"The answer is the procedure I found in YouTube. However, after checking other sources there are some constraints. It works in this condition only. The people who push this are vendors. It was not clear it applies in our problem. Or, it could apply in our problem, if we also do this modification."

Which has greater credibility? Example 2 has greater credibility because it has the appropriate context of limitations. It demonstrates critical thinking and analysis. It therefore stands up as being a more reliable answer given the constraints. Reliability leads to trust amongst co-workers.

This is how experience sharing and interactional expertise grows and thrives within Workflow Learning. Without the appropriate contextualization, answers remain suspect.

" Reliability leads to trust amongst co-workers. "

Surface Source and Deep Source Knowledge

Good contributions include more than just the Surface Source knowledge but also includes Deep Source knowledge. What we mean by this is with Example 1 above, there is just the superficial or Surface Source of information. No critical analysis has taken place, yet. With Example 2, the context of limitations moves the workers towards a deeper understanding. The conversations are more robust. This doesn't always need to take place, however. It is dependent on the subject being discussed and the interest level of the workers in the conversation.

Surface Source
General: Usually casual, common, overview, quickly available

Deep Source
Opposing views: Contrasting and divergent points, limitations, strengths

Reliability: Fact, research, history, stories, results, impacts on outcomes

Reputation: Author, expertise (in-house or external) source

Follow-ups: For further study, review, research, testing

In Summary

Knowledge and solutions not only come from SMEs, but also from the people doing the work – the Interactional Experts. We gain valuable knowledge from our Interactional Experts (Practical Experts).

Learning in the Workflow relies on trusting workers to share practical experiences. However, there are conditions for this to take place. Answers and solutions from workers require us to consider the context of limitations. The limitations contribute to verification and set the proper dialogue for trusted solutions.

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