

InKonstellation

Fostering Informal Learning

How a systemic constructivist mindset amplifies the impact of transformational leadership on informal employee learning

Nina Juschka

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Executive Summary

Workplace learning includes both formal, classroom-based training and informal learning (e.g. learning on the job or through social interaction). In fact, the latter accounts for up to 90% of employee learning at work. Research has focused on the role of leadership in facilitating informal learning, with the superior explanatory power of transformational leadership. In this paper, I want to argue that adopting a systemic constructivist mindset (which we as systemic coaches are supposed to use) facilitates leaders' transformational leadership, thereby fostering employee engagement in informal learning activities. Among other positive impacts, this association will foster a culture of continuous learning in the workplace.

In doing so, I encourage leaders to become familiar with the systemic constructivist school. Strategies are outlined on how leaders can begin to embrace and internalize constructivism and systems thinking in their day-to-day work routines. In this regard, I contribute to the open discourse on transformational leadership and workplace learning research and advocate for the substantial power that a systemic constructivist mindset can have in the context of becoming a learning organisation.

Introduction

„Would you consider workplace learning as important?“ – when you ask this question to leaders and managers everyone will probably reply “Yes, I do.”. However, if you would ask them “And how do you support your employees in engaging in learning activities?“ responses will likely sound a bit different. From “Well I would like to provide them with time ...” to “If we had the budget ...” to “We have other things to do.”. This comes down to a very common misconception, that learning is this mysterious event that happens “over there”, outside of the work context. Something is explained and loaded into our brain. Done. This is where the problem lies.

I would like to highlight the common misconceptions to workplace learning and provide guidance for managers on how to overcome even these. Thus, I want to make the black box of learning at the workplace a bit more transparent and use the insights we gathered in the fields of psychology and the systemic constructivist school to do so. Why in the context of coaching, you ask? Because I was simply blown away by what it actually means to become a systemic coach - starting with the most fundamental of all: The mindset of a coach. The blank slate you need to become in order to be truly present to your coachee - to really listen and approach objectivity. It is a skill that aspiring coaches need to master and learn, and one that would benefit most leaders and managers in their quest to support learning in the workplace.

To explore this issue, I will first outline what is actually meant by workplace learning. I will then discuss the added value that the systemic constructivist perspective can bring to our understanding of workplace learning. I will then outline how leaders can facilitate workplace learning, and I will argue why a systemic constructivist mindset will benefit leaders and managers who seek to be true learning companions to their employees. Let’s dive into it.

What is workplace learning?

Workplace learning

In general, workplace learning can be defined as the “process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet current and future work requirements” (Jacobs & Park, 2009, p. 134). When considering the topic of workplace learning, people frequently associate learning with formal education, separating learning from working (i.e. dissociated activities). However, research actually indicates that *both often occurs*

simultaneously (Eraut, 2004; Jacobs & Park, 2009). Here research introduces the distinction between formal and informal learning (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Ellinger, 2005).

Table 1. The attributes of formal and informal learning (Sclater, 2016)

Formal learning	Informal learning
Compulsory	Voluntary
Planned and structured	Organic and evolving
Assessed	Non-assessed
Fixed, limited time-frame	Open-ended engagement
Techer-led and -centered	Learner-led and -centered
Occurs in the classroom	Occurs whilst working
Mainly individual	Mainly social

In their conceptualization of informal learning, Noe, Clarke, and Klein (2014) suggest that it “is learner initiated, occurs on as-needed basis, is motivated by intent to develop, involves action and reflection, and does not occur in a formal classroom setting” (p. 327). Research increasingly shows that informal learning represents a superior way to acquire and develop skills and competencies to meet today’s work demands (Skule, 2004) and that over 70 percent of workplace learning are of informal nature (Noe, Tews, & Marand, 2013). Recent research by Kyndt adds to these findings, postulating that only ten per cent of workplace learning is formal in nature, and that the remaining 90 per cent is informal in nature, divided into approximately 45 per cent learning from experience and practice and 45 per cent social learning (Swinburne Edge, 2023). Indeed, it has been shown that there is a large gap between the knowledge required in the workplace and the knowledge acquired through formal education (Tynjälä, 2008).

What insights does the systemic constructivist perspective add here?

Let me shortly define what constructivism and systems thinking encompasses before drawing connections to informal learning. Constructivism proposes that people actively create their own sense of what is real, making knowledge a constant endeavour of (re)construction with no claim to absolute truth. Interaction within social groups and co-creation enable a shared social representation of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1969; Kriz, 2010). Systems theory describes the enduring interrelationships between different domains of life in decision-making processes. Systems thinking involves a holistic approach that considers as many different factors as possible to avoid interpreting issues from a single perspective (Kriz, 2010). To understand why especially informal learning is interrelated with the systemic constructive perspective, I would love to illustrate the process of informal learning modelled by Marsick and Watkins (2001): Informal learning can be seen as a circular sequence of meaning-making steps initiated by a trigger, either

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an internal or external stimulus in one's (business) context that signals dissatisfaction with existing thought patterns or circumstances (i.e. the way things are). The trigger initiates the interpretation of the experience, followed by the exploration of alternative solutions and learning strategies, the implementation of the proposed solutions, the evaluation of the consequences, the reflection on the lessons learned, and finally the re-evaluation of the business context by questioning previous assumptions. This allows me to draw the following connections between informal learning and the systemic constructive perspective:

Active knowledge construction. The active role of an individual in constructing their own knowledge and meaning in interaction with his/ her environment is put forward by constructivism and systems thinking. This process is consistent with informal learning, where an individual does engage in a continuous process of meaning making, action selection, reflection and re-framing.

Social interaction and shared knowledge. Constructivism highlights the importance of social interaction and the shared creation of knowledge. Systems thinking per definition highlights individual's wider social context (i.e. their interconnectedness and interrelationships). In line with these ideas, informal learning is no individualistic process happening in a vacuum, but is of strong social nature: Examples include learning from others, such as peers, which involves interaction and seeking feedback (Noe et al., 2013).

Holistic approach to knowledge. Constructivism and systems thinking open up mental models and broaden the cognitive focus from a single truth or system to many potential thought patterns and (sub)systems to consider. Both holistic approaches encourage multiple realities and perspectives. Similarly, informal learning offers employees the opportunity to think creatively and critically about different solutions, to try them out, to reflect and (re)evaluate their current mental model. In all cases, narrow, one-dimensional perspectives are avoided so that individuals can develop a broader understanding of the issue at hand.

Link to Leadership

How leadership impacts workplace learning

Leadership is “a process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). This process description captures the interactive nature of leadership between leaders and employees (Northouse, 2016) - an interaction that is unparalleled in the workplace. In line with this, scholars suggest that leaders are in a prime position

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to influence the learning of their employees (Hannah & Lester, 2009; Vera & Crossan, 2004) in the workplace (e.g. Bass, 2000; Hannah & Lester, 2009; Singer, Moore, Meterko, & Williams, 2012; Vera & Crossan, 2004). The importance of supervisors in creating contextual conditions for informal learning of employees has been repeatedly been backed up by research (Ellinger, 2005; Macneil, 2001; Skule, 2004). I am pleased to have conducted my own research (Juschka, 2020) and to be able to report the superior explanatory power of transformational leadership over other leadership styles in explaining employee engagement in informal learning behaviors. This is consistent with research showing its massive influence on workplace learning in general (e.g. Choudhary, Akhtar, & Zaheer, 2013; García-Morales, Imran, Ilyas, & Aslam, 2016; Lloréns-Montes, & Verdú-Jover, 2008). Transformational leaders communicate a clear and positive vision of the future, respond to their employees' individuality and encourage their development. They are not afraid to give encouragement and recognition, are seen to foster trust, involvement and cooperation within teams, and inspire out-of-the-box thinking (i.e. encouraging people to think about problems in new ways and questioning existing assumptions). They are clear about their own values, do what they say and are deeply charismatic (Carless, Wearing, & Mann, 2000).

Once again, I would like to draw out some of the similarities that I have found in my thinking about transformational leadership and the systemic constructivist perspective. For clarity, I have tabulated my findings based on Carless and colleagues' (2000) definition of transformational leadership:

Table 2. Comparison transformational leadership and systemic constructivist perspective.

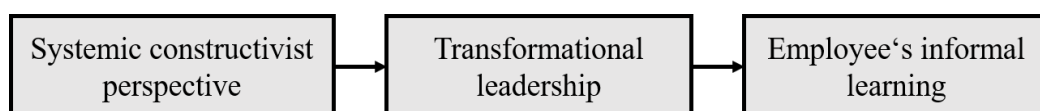
Behavioral dimension	Transformational Leadership (Carless et al., 2000)	Connection to Constructivism	Connection to Systems Thinking
Shared vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a clear, positive image of the future organization • Communicating a vision by means of e.g. frequent statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared vision provides a framework for collective meaning-making • Aligning diverse perspectives toward a common goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared vision can unite individuals within a system
Employee development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnosing employees' abilities and needs • Treating employees as individuals • Advising and encouraging development • Delegating responsibilities and tasks • Challenging employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong acknowledgment of individual experiences • Respect for a unique and personal path of development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging employees to broaden system understanding • Opening access to new systems through developmental endeavors • Newly learned actions trigger complex chain reactions in (between) systems

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Employee support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing positive feedback • Recognizing achievements • Expressing confidence in employees' abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value on the social context in which realities are constructed • Feedback that shapes employee's self-awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support promotes synergy and harmonious function within and between systems
Employee empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving employees in problem-solving and decision-making • Encouraging autonomy • Supporting employee decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling and supporting employees to construct their own sense of reality whilst enduring the uncertainty of many possible interpretations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging employees to critically think beyond their closest systems
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using innovative strategies • Taking risks and questioning existing assumptions • Encouraging lateral thinking • Accepting mistakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting the construction of new knowledge and solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging fluidity of systems creates need of innovation to adapt to changes
Role modelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing self-confidence • Acting congruent with one's values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By following the example of others employees can broaden their frame of reference and create their own sense of reality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role modelling as strong influence on employee's behavior and the systems culture
Charisma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being deeply respected and perceived as trustworthy • Demonstrating competence • Being inspirational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral input that employees can use to broaden their perspective and build their own value framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaping employee values and attitude is reflected in the systems employee relates to

The systemic constructivist perspective found in systemic coaches and the concept of transformational leadership seem so deeply intertwined, that I would like to put forward the following hypotheses: *A leader's ability to internalize a systemic constructivist perspective makes him or her more likely to engage in transformational leadership behaviours, which in turn increases employee engagement in informal learning activities.* Such a relation is illustrated in illustration 1. This mediation hypotheses remains to be empirically tested of course.

Illustration 1. Proposed model.



Discussion

In the sections above, we got to know the concept of workplace learning and the massive relevance of informal learning. In addition, the concept of transformational leadership and its

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particular relevance to the support of informal learning has been introduced. For both topics, the strong interrelatedness to constructivism and systems thinking was outlined. This led me to conclude that a leader's ability to internalize a systemic constructivist perspective would strengthen the relationship between transformational leadership and informal learning. Leaders and managers would benefit from learning about and internalizing the constructivist and systemic school of thought. This would likely increase their transformational leadership skills and positively impact their own and their employees' likelihood to engage in informal learning. This is especially relevant for practice, as transformational leadership interventions a frequently of high cost and time investment. Beginning to habitually adopt a systemic constructivist mindset may be a hitherto undervalued method of cultivating one's transformational leadership potential. Let's look at some practical suggestions for doing this.

Practical considerations.

In order for a leader to internalize a systemic constructivist perspective, the following interventions can be considered:

Cross-functional collaboration. Making it a habit to work with experts and colleagues from different functional backgrounds increases exposure to different perspectives and approaches. This makes it more likely that leaders will fully understand their systemic interconnectedness and encourage them to allow and consider multiple perspectives.

Coaching. Being paired with a coach well-educated in constructivism and systems thinking will create individual experiences of applying such methods to guide through challenging situations, thereby internalizing the perspective themselves.

Continuous learning paired with self-reflection. A leader's engagement in formal or social learning activities to familiarize themselves with constructivism and systems theory, coupled with regular self-reflection on their own leadership style, can create awareness of shortcomings and uncover areas for improvement.

Value of curiosity. Making a habit of asking questions, exploring out-of-the-box ideas and challenging own assumptions can create transparency in a leader's thought patterns and open up rigid mental models.

Self-Examination. Setting aside dedicated time to assess and reflect on one's own thoughts, beliefs, systems and patterns of behavior (e.g. reactions in certain situations) can help a leader to

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uncover one's own biases and patterns and lead to increased self-awareness. This feeds into the 'blank slate' metaphor, enabling more conscious leadership.

Incorporate multidisciplinary insights. Giving a leader access to expertise from different fields outside his or her area of expertise (e.g. expert talks, research databases, podcasts...) will broaden his or her horizons and highlight the relativity of knowledge and truth. This will enable him/her to value inquiry and avoid rushing to judgement.

While this list is certainly just a start and by no means exhaustive of all the ways to cultivate the systemic constructivist mindset, these are some practical ideas to get you started. Because any change needs to be built into your daily routine, the payoff from small, consistent changes will be greater than trying a lot of things at once.

*“All big things come from small beginnings.
The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision.”*
(Clear, 2018)

Conclusion

This was fun! I love that I could ponder on the thoughts of my former research as well as the new insights I gained throughout my systemic coaching training. I would like to point out the considerable power that a systemic constructivist mindset can have in the context of becoming a learning organisation, probably in far more ways than its potential positive impact on transformational leadership. I hope to inspire some managers who might read this to question their way of leading and to open up to the ideas that each of us constructs and builds our own truth and that there is never a one size fits all solution to interacting with your employees, especially if you want them to learn and thrive. Each of us is part of a unique interplay of systems, with our own unique experiences and needs. Top-down management has no place in the modern organisation, nor does a blunt and narrow mindset.

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