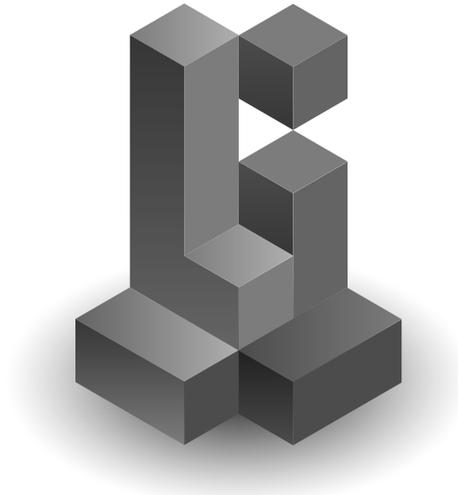


Raising performance in  
organisations by improving learning



the  
learning  
imperative

Mark Burns and Andy Griffith



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# Foreword

I'm an incorrigible learner; I love the thrill of discovery and the challenge of new disciplines.

My wife despairs of my ever-expanding list of hobbies – running, cycling, mountain biking, sailing, photography, kayaking (and the rest) – and the growing pile of kit in the garage that inevitably accompanies these endeavours.

My career has followed a similar pattern. Having led a couple of geography departments through successful Ofsted inspections, I qualified as an accountant with KPMG and worked in the dark arts of corporate recovery. I then moved on to work for a FTSE 100 software business in a variety of roles, including international posts in which quickly learning your brief was critical to effective engagement with local teams. Right now I'm working on the executive team of a leading housing association intent on tackling the housing crisis head-on.

Incredible then for a learner like me that it took reading Mark and Andy's book for it to really hit home how critical learning is for an organisation's success. The headlines concerning *The Learning Imperative* are, of course, all about learning, but don't let them fool you: this book is not only about learning but also about how to make teams work, how to lead and how to create cultures that deliver outstanding results regardless of sector. This is a book ultimately about high performance, and as I read it I found myself reflecting on some time I spent on a training course with the Red Arrows. How do you create and maintain a world-beating team capable of wing-tip-to-wing-tip stunts at several hundred miles an hour? You focus absolutely on techniques and methods that help both the individual and the team progress.

What I've learned over the years is that before systems, technology or investment comes people. Some great results come from understanding the skills and abilities of your people and applying them to the right tasks. But that is less than half the story and even less than half of the joy of leadership. The real joy comes from spotting talent and opportunity and helping that talent grow and deliver. There is nothing more satisfying than seeing people develop and progress into senior roles and working on larger projects, excelling and delivering great results in

ways that you hadn't envisaged – because you took the time to help them learn and unleash their potential.

Seeing individuals progress is brilliant, but what if you could apply that same thinking and energy to whole teams, departments or businesses? What if you could apply the learning imperative to the culture of your organisation? What would results be like if everyone were on that powerful journey of development? In this book Mark and Andy provide the tools and methodology to help you cultivate in your organisation a positive learning culture which will be invaluable to anyone – not only to those who want to succeed today but also to those who want to create an organisation that can succeed regardless of the social, technological or political changes that will impact them in the future.

*Matt Forrest, Executive Director of Business Development, Home Group*

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Andy Griffith: My thanks, for supporting me with research, advice and the opportunity to learn from them and their organisations, to Andy O'Brien, Carel Buxton, Caroline Saxelby, Mark Nevin, Sean Cushion, Tony McGuinness, Vincent Charnley, John Baker, Samantha McQuillan, Paul Matthews, Peter Hyman and Ian Clarke. Thanks also to my family, Clair, Joe and Anna, for their encouragement.



# Contents

<i>Foreword</i> .....	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
Introduction .....	1
<b>Part I: Learning and your team</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1 The importance of learning .....	7
2 The learning–performance matrix .....	25
<b>Part II: Overcoming barriers to learning</b> .....	<b>47</b>
3 Processing overload .....	55
4 Low relational trust .....	83
5 Perception gaps .....	109
<b>Part III: Designing effective learning</b> .....	<b>151</b>
6 Planning backwards .....	155
7 Developing shared clarity .....	175
8 The you stage .....	197
Conclusion .....	215
<i>Appendix 1: Feedback survey</i> .....	<i>217</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Learning programme planner</i> .....	<i>221</i>
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	<i>223</i>



# Introduction

This is a book about creating high quality learning in organisations – learning that leads to improved performance, motivation and personal growth. The idea for a book on this topic had been germinating within us for some time, but it was a chance conversation during a morning coffee break that spurred us into action. We were working with a group of middle managers. They were a passionate group, but they were really struggling because of the way their organisation was performing.

Over a coffee, one of the group leaned forward and whispered, 'Is everywhere else as tough as this place? I mean, how can any organisation thrive with the constant change and ever-increasing pressure we're dealing with?'

We paused to consider a response. On the one hand, it was appropriate to recognise the external pressures they were enduring. On the other hand, we had been working with two other organisations in very similar contexts during the previous fortnight which, despite the pressure, really could be described as thriving. It was the hesitation and our facial expressions that gave us away. 'No way! So what are they doing so differently? I thought it would be the same everywhere.'

This book seeks to answer the question, 'What are they doing differently?', for anyone who has ever wondered whether there is a better way.

For the last ten years, we have both worked intensively with many organisations, both in the UK and abroad. Our primary role has been to design high quality learning for employees in order to yield improved performance. At the outset, much of this work involved working directly with employees. However, over time, we have increasingly been working with leaders to help them create more impactful learning for their own teams.

Through this work, we have gained many insights into why some organisations thrive while others don't. We have been able to observe learning in organisations up close. We have analysed the key ingredients that ensure effective learning, as well as the barriers that inhibit it.

In addition, it has brought us into contact with passionate leaders who have shared with us the practical challenges they have faced when improving learning performance in their teams. As part of our research, we have interviewed many of those who have most impressed us with the way they have gone about enhancing the quality of organisational learning. From these interviews, we have been able to gather together a range of case studies and examples to bring this work to life.

We are acutely aware of the intense pressures that leaders of modern day organisations face. This appears to be a common thread across the public, private and third sectors. Consequently, in order to give you a clear, concise and, above all, practical manual, we have sought to keep the theory and academic references to a minimum. For those who would like to explore further, there are pointers to further reading at the end of each chapter.

## How to use the book

We have designed the book in three sections to provide a step-by-step guide to developing high impact learning for any team.

### Part I

Chapter 1 sets out *why* creating and maintaining a learning team needs to be a high priority on every leader's agenda. It is designed to help you understand why learning is central to the long-term success of any team or organisation.

Chapter 2 explores the first steps in *how* to achieve this. It provides an easy-to-use framework to help you establish exactly where your team are starting from, and the learning destination they need to get to – that is, open to learning and high performing. Using this framework will ensure that learning is targeted on the specific development needs of each individual in the team.

## Part II

The chapters in Part II are designed to help you build or maintain an open-to-learning mindset in your team. This is achieved by establishing three key foundations: processing capacity for learning, strong relational trust and accurate self-perception. These foundations facilitate the development of team members who are habitually reflective, curious and open to feedback. To assist with this process, the book offers tools to diagnose any closed-to-learning mindsets and provides strategies designed to make sure that teams develop a positive learning culture.

## Part III

The final part of the book provides a step-by-step guide to designing and leading effective learning for others. Whether you are planning a one-hour training session or a much longer multi-session programme, the chapters in this section will help to ensure that the learning programmes your team participate in are engaging, appropriately challenging and, most importantly, develop their performance.

Whether you are an experienced leader or someone just starting out in the role, we are confident that this intentionally practical and hands-on book will provide you with ideas and inspiration to help improve the engagement of your team and make a powerful impact on their learning. This is learning that not only supports the ongoing development of your team to meet the needs of tomorrow, but also makes each and every colleague feel valued and nurtured. That is exactly what we mean by the *learning imperative*.

Part I

# Learning and your team



## Chapter 1

# The importance of learning

We were on the 11.07 out of Liverpool Street station. Sitting across the table from me (Mark) and my 6-year-old daughter, Ruby, was the store manager of (according to the documents in front of her) a major high street retail chain. She was making a series of calls, and, judging by the nature of the conversations, it seemed she was returning from a major review at head office. With each successive call we could sense her palpably growing frustration with various colleagues and their failure – in her eyes – to do their jobs properly.

Ruby – who, due to her curiosity, might well end up working for the secret services one day – was intrigued to eavesdrop on these conversations and was fascinated by the new range of language she was hearing. Arriving into Ipswich station, the preoccupied manager was surprised to discover that she had reached her destination. She leapt up, grabbed her belongings and hustled down the carriage. My little co-traveller observed all of this in silence. Then she turned to me and fixed me with a puzzled look. I knew a question was coming.

'Why doesn't she just teach them?'

'To do what?' I replied.

'To learn how to do their jobs properly. Then she can be less angry!'

There certainly appeared to be learning gaps in the store manager's organisation. But for whom?

- Have you ever wondered why it is a struggle to engage your team in learning?

- Do you sometimes feel tired or stressed by constantly finding and fixing issues in your team?
- Do you find 'developing your team' the one task on your to-do list that you never get to?

## What's in this chapter for me?

This chapter will examine first why learning is such a crucial foundation to the future success of all teams and organisations. Having addressed the imperative of learning, we will then go on to explore the common reasons why learning is not always given the priority it deserves. As part of this process, we will give you the opportunity to reflect on your own team or organisation and the importance of its ongoing growth and development.

## What do we mean by a 'learning team'?

A team, as we define it in this book, is the particular group of people who you directly lead or over whom you have direct or indirect influence. This could be a small team of two or three or, if you are a chief executive, a team of several hundred to many thousands.

As the authors of this book, we are making the assumption that you, the reader, are curious about the value of learning for your team and organisation, and seeking clarity and practical strategies to help develop and implement effective and sustainable learning and development.

Throughout the book, we will use case studies from real life. We will cite the experiences of individuals, teams and organisations we have worked with to illustrate the principles and strategies we are advocating. Our case studies are drawn from a wide range of contexts, locations and types of organisation. They include those that have learning and development deeply embedded in their DNA, and those that don't. We will also include the learning journeys of organisations and leaders who thought they were optimising the learning of their staff, but who later came to realise that the approaches they were using were ineffective.

Drawing on our experiences, we suggest that a learning team is a group of individuals who commit to learn together. After all, down the ages, human development has been enhanced by people collaborating, sharing learning and struggling through adversity to explore new ideas, new perspectives, new possibilities. We consider how this collaborative power can be focused on ensuring the ongoing growth and development of your team and your organisation into the future.

## In what contexts does learning take place?

Learning takes place in many forms in organisations. On some occasions it will be through formal learning programmes. More often, however, it will be in less formal situations such as on-the-job experiences. In this setting, individuals learn from their mistakes as they attempt to master their work role and from the feedback they receive on their performance. Individuals also learn alongside fellow workers through a variety of activities, including social learning, coaching, mentoring, collaborative learning and other methods of engagement with peers. This book will help you to maximise the potential for learning across each of these contexts.

Learning can take many different forms. One of the models we have found most useful in achieving deep learning is the KASH model. This stands for the ongoing development of the *knowledge, attitudes, skills* and *habits* of individuals within teams and which contributes to individual and collective improved performance. While Paul Kirschner, John Sweller and Richard Clark have defined learning as 'a change in long-term memory',<sup>1</sup> in the workplace, learning is likely to lead to the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits which are readily available from memory to use.

The pursuit of KASH reminds us that this book isn't just about how to design effective learning in our team, although we cover that in Part III. This book explores much, much more. One of our key aims is to support you to foster an

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1 Paul A. Kirschner, John Sweller and Richard E. Clark, 'Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching', *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2) (2006), 75–86 at 75.

environment in which a strong learning team, who are intrinsically motivated to grow and develop, can thrive.



You can download a free KASH template at: [www.learningimperative.co.uk/downloads/KASH](http://www.learningimperative.co.uk/downloads/KASH).

## Why is a learning team an 'imperative' rather than a 'nice to have'?

As one leader said to us, as we sat with him in his office reflecting on three tumultuous years of change, 'Guys, it's been an interesting three years. However, we're looking forward now to calmer waters while we embed the changes we have made.' Just two weeks later we received an email from him. 'Spoke too soon,' it

# Learning is central to the long-term success of any team. It is far too important to dismiss or to relegate to a 'nice to do' list.

In *The Learning Imperative*, bestselling authors Mark Burns and Andy Griffith explore the common barriers to effective learning and present a range of practical tools and strategies to help organisations bring about – and reap the benefits of – a more positive learning culture. Together they map out the key stages of the learning journey and provide a step-by-step guide for team leaders and managers who want to improve learning in their teams. They also provide essential guidance on the design and delivery of effective training programmes.

Whether you are an experienced leader or just starting out in the role, this user-friendly manual will empower you to boost your team's performance and to make a powerful impact on their learning.

If you are serious about improving performance through learning in the workplace, *The Learning Imperative* delivers key strategies for achieving this in spades.

*Luke Fisher, Chief Executive, Steribottle Ltd*

Whether you're a manager, leader, trainer or teacher, *The Learning Imperative* provides plenty of opportunity for self-reflection and growth – see where the journey takes you.

*Catherine Blackburn, Learning and Development Lead – North Region, Next plc*

*The Learning Imperative* should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in progressive management. Mark and Andy display a subtleness in their writing with their thoughtful, realistic approach – reminding us all of the importance of learning in any organisation.

*Steve Pegram, Chief Operating Officer, Bardel Entertainment*

Practical, well-constructed and full of insightful tips, *The Learning Imperative* is a book that I will continue to refer back to.

*Martin Riley, Managing Director, Medway Community Healthcare CIC*

*The Learning Imperative* is for anyone who wants to motivate their team to grow and perform well.

*Dr Niki Kaiser, Network Research Lead,  
Norwich Research School at Notre Dame High School*

**Mark Burns** is co-director of MALIT Ltd and has a proven track record in improving teaching and leadership in education. More recently, he has worked with FTSE 100 retailers and third sector organisations to develop the quality and impact of their learning and development programmes.

**Andy Griffith** is the founding director of MALIT Ltd. He has won a national training award for his work in education and has consulted for a number of organisations including the BBC and Comic Relief. Andy's prime focus is to design training and learning opportunities that challenge people to strive for excellence.

Mark and Andy's work has been shortlisted in the Best Learning & Development Initiative – Public/Third Sector category of the 2018 CIPD People Management Awards.

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