

## Learning Design That Leads to Transformative Experiences

Behavior change starts with a well-designed learning solution.

BY ALAINA SZLACHTA

**F**or learning experience designers to create effective learning opportunities, they must be intentional about the strategies they use to develop content. And for learning solutions to be effective, they need to be transformative.

### What it is

Transformative learning experiences change behavior and help people overcome their natural ceiling of achievement, thereby driving new or improved tangible results. For transformative learning to occur, there must be a clear, measurable result for the learning solution to influence. Such learning experiences lead to the desired outcomes more quickly and easily than attempts made otherwise.

### How it works

People often begin the learning development process by answering “What do people need to know?” instead of “Why do people need to know?” By articulating why your audience will benefit from the learning content, you can identify the measurable result and craft learning experiences that inspire transformation.

Starting with why provides a clear focus, a filtering system to narrow the content and

activities featured in the learning solution, and a measurable goal to track effectiveness.

### Guidelines

One of my clients, a financial consulting company, wanted to build a series of digital learning products that would aid small-business owners in improving their profit margin. During an exploratory consultation, the client and I determined that we could deem the final solution effective if it helps learners improve their profit margin by a specified amount within a predetermined timeframe. With that information as the benchmark, I used the following strategies to build a transformative learning solution, one that instigates behavior change and drives results.

**Identify the root of the problem that warrants a learning solution.** Learning experience designers and organizational stakeholders are often disappointed with a learning solution because it does not generate any tangible transformation (or less-significant results than anticipated). The reason may be a lack of clarity and identification of this underlying question: Why do learners need to know? Without an accurate diagnosis of the root problem, you cannot clarify learning’s role in the solution.



### CHECKLIST Planning and Developing a Learning Solution



Determine the root of your problem to clarify if and how learning can play a role in the solution.



Establish measurable outcomes for your learning initiative.

**Articulate measurable outcomes that would occur after resolving the root problem.**

Those outcomes translate to your solution's specific measurable goals. My client and I believed that once entrepreneurs began using the right tools and systems to manage their money, they would have accurate business insights to improve their profit margin. Therefore, the goal in designing the learning products aligns with what participants could reasonably expect to achieve at the end of the learning experience.

When identifying target goals, check whether they are the most significant outcomes to address the original problem causing the need for the learning solution in the first place.

**Work backward to develop learning content that aligns with the desired outcomes.** Use Kirkpatrick's four levels of training evaluation to help you develop learning content. After identifying the measurable goal, determine what critical behaviors participants need to engage in, and at what frequency, to achieve the measurable goal (Level 3: behavior). Next, determine what participants need to know to engage in the critical behaviors (Level 2: learning). At that point, you can determine what learning experience methodologies are most appropriate to engage participants in the process of knowledge and skill development.

**Build support systems and resources before, during, and after all learning events to sustain the behavioral change you wish to see.** Learning products are more powerful when you build them into the organizational culture or the environment of learners' everyday lives. If you are unsure what support systems to feature in your next learning initiative, conduct a focus group with participants of a previous

**RESOURCES**

Dirksen, J. 2016. *Design for How People Learn*. San Francisco, CA: Peachpit Press.

Kirkpatrick, J.D., and W.K. Kirkpatrick. 2016. *Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training Evaluation*. Alexandria, VA: ATD Press.

Weinbauer-Heidel, I., and M. Ibeschitz-Manderbach. 2018. *What Makes Training Really Work: 12 Levers of Transfer Effectiveness*. Hamburg, Germany: Tredition.

learning program. Ask them what resources or additional sources of support would have helped them recall and apply what they learned in the training to their jobs or their lives.

**Integrate evaluation systems into the learning experience to track the initiative's effectiveness.** After completing the above steps but before focusing on learning content development, establish your evaluation systems. With the proper evaluation systems extending beyond reaction and learning, you'll have valuable feedback to continue improving the learning experience over time, and your solution's impact story could help inspire future learners.

**Results**

My client reports a 50 percent increase in requests for learning products since rolling out the solution. Because the overall learning experience had integrated evaluation systems—such as baseline and milestone surveys assessing net worth, profit margin and personal financial goals, and periodic focus groups exploring participants' reactions to the learning methodology—the client and I have the necessary insights on how to improve the learning products and decrease the amount of time it may take for learners to achieve their desired results.

Whether you start by identifying the root problem or actionable goals and measurable result, be sure your impact goal offers a viable solution to the root problem. And always remember that great learning experiences cause marked transformation in their participants.

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Identify the appropriate content and learning methodologies.



Build in support systems to sustain the desired outcomes and change.



Incorporate evaluation systems throughout the learning experience.



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