

# The third of the six 'I' s of real learning - Incremental

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## A recap and a definition

The six 'I's of the model are that learning is: Individual, immersive, incremental, iterative, intrinsic and intentional. This series briefly outlines each, and encourages combinations to enhance value.

The Cambridge dictionary defines incremental as: "Happening gradually, in a series of small amounts". Both key elements of this process are worth a mention. Gradually rather than swiftly, suddenly or immediately can be a problem, and small amounts are not as apparently valuable as large. Moving quickly in an over-ambitious way to gain value from learning is less likely to create a measurable return on investment than deliberately progressing in a series of small steps.

## Our learning journey is like an onion skin

Slice an onion and peel away the first layer or two - the strong, solid form comprises countless individual, distinct elements that together create an impressive whole. There is, oddly, a direct parallel with how we truly learn.

A developmental journey consists of a multitude of apparently insignificant experiences and insights that often seem unremarkable, are unnoticed, and that are predominantly real-world originated, not designed or packaged as 'training'.

Our incremental, 'onion skin' learning is unique, emerging from a very individual mix of context, circumstances, challenges and activity.

## Small steps, high value

All stakeholders in learning can be lured into the attraction of seeking unrealistic, unsustainable leaps in performance. This is particularly the case when insufficient consideration of individual needs, circumstance or capabilities are known. Employers, Developers and Learners can understandably favour major strides over shuffling steps. There is little excitement in focusing on what is realistic over unsustainable targets and plans.

Much incremental learning is so subtle, so tangled up in real-world events and activity that it goes unnoticed and therefore unvalued. The desire and ability to seek, find and use these apparently unexceptional experiences can prompt a low to no cost individually tailored development plan. Intrinsic, naturally occurring learning from the workplace can be harnessed to propel competence faster than any training course. All it takes is a genuine belief that the constant waves of workplace learning opportunities however seemingly insignificant in isolation, are precious, and must be captured and optimised.

Over-expectation leads to demotivation and little if any return on investment or effort. Building a learning journey gradually, in small steps, is the best way to realise potential, and enhance performance. It may not be dramatic, movement may seem painfully slow, yet there *is* movement, and such a steady pace will add value more often than a hasty dash to disappointment and frustration.

Small steps may have high value, these deserve recognition and celebration. Ultimately, are targets, aims and objectives achieved? Solid, incremental progression builds a solid platform.

## **Keep it simple**

Complex learning, bundled with multiple elements is difficult to process, and specific issues to work on are often hard to unravel. The more complicated and demanding even a well-intentioned learning plan is, the less likely it is to be realised.

Focusing on a single, undramatic issue can be far more productive than over-complicating and over-expecting. If single issues and intended learning applications are crystal clear, this concentrates both the mind and efforts made to use that learning in a precise laser-focused way.

Even small steps can take a lot of time, support and effort.

Incremental learning is likely to be an iterative process – meaning one attempt to apply new insights is not enough. Thus embedding new behaviours may well require many incremental efforts, which ultimately result in successful achievement of a new and better position.

Development practitioners who use incremental learning to assist workplace application will be drawn very positively into the real issues and challenges of each individual they help. This may require the development of new skills around genuine coaching and facilitation.

A change of mindset from impossible aspirations to pragmatic realism can lead to seeing incremental learning as the best way to accelerate development.

## **What this means in practice**

It can be hard to move away from a genuine desire to help that in truth results in poor value on investment by setting goals beyond what is reasonable.

Whatever the medium, for instance, coaching, group-based, or self-directed, it is too often the case that expectation of the intended value of applied learning exceeds what is realistic and possible. Those who help others learn can best serve by encouraging the perception that incremental learning is the most likely way to use new knowledge and skills. This is not dumbing down, it is moving position to one in which small steps that build momentum create a path to sustainable and better performance.

If we accept that real work and life are the true engines of our development, not irregular, typically non-needs based training events, then development practitioners need to encourage those with whom we work to become intentional workplace-driven learners.

This is another tough mindset shift for individuals and employers who often default to a more structured and far more costly way to build performance. Is there more we can do to help each to become no less ambitious, just more aware of the value that small sustainable steps bring?

Changing perspective on the pace of learning is not easy. Such a change requires fittingly, an incremental approach. Don't expect too much of yourself too soon!