



# THE NATURE OF TRUE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Experiential Learning White Paper



# *True* Experiential Learning



“On the job learning”

“Learning from experience”

“Experience is a great teacher”

“70/20/10”

(70% learning on the job, 20% learning from others, and 10% in the classroom)

“Experiential activities”

(“trust falls”, ropes courses, etc)

“Simulations”

“Experiential Learning”

either in a classroom, workshop, or training session; whether virtually or digitally.

These are all often seen as “experiential learning”

Not so. Each is different, and carries their own benefits and challenges.

True “experiential learning” is a sophisticated blend of adult learning theory, immersive and engaging participation, key behavioral principles that drive performance improvement, and immediate relevance either back on the job or to the wider aspects of individual overall competence.

Typically experiential learning programs that satisfy these many criteria have been carefully designed and tested to ensure a predictable outcome, and to bring participants face to face with how their current on the job behaviours can be improved to give greater job satisfaction, and deliver a higher level of performance.

The experiences themselves are relatively short, and because of their design appear as a game, but are actually simulations of the real world environment set in an exciting theme, such as a space rescue, museum heist, archaeological discovery, or stained glass studio. Consequently, they allow participants to very quickly see their current behaviours mirrored in their actions and decisions during the experience.

What follows is a very extensive debrief that “holds up a mirror”, showing the impact of their current approach (their game results), and what could have been possible (improved results with different behaviours). These learnings can be around team effectiveness, communication,

leadership skills, silo elimination, or any one of several other areas of interest.

Because the learning occurs in a safe environment (the experience) around a challenging but engaging activity (the mission to be completed in the game) with a focused outcome (teamwork, or change management or coaching skills, etc) the participant sees the value of personally changing their behavior. They learn how to behave differently in practical terms during the debrief that follows, and recognize the impact those changes will have back on the job. The experience they just completed is now seen to be a powerful and sophisticated metaphor for their real world.

### **This approach builds two things into the participants:**

- Personal conviction of the value of changing behavior
- The actual practical things to do differently to improve on the job performance.

## **There is no better way to drive these two essential results in as short a time, or as meaningfully, as true experiential learning.**

Which leads to the question of why this level of intense focus on personal improvement is so crucial in the first place. Why build conviction around the need to change, and why provide the practical tools to do so?

Organizations are constantly seeking to find and hire the right talent, then, in the more advanced companies, constantly working to enhance the effectiveness of those people. They are keen to see talent accept increasing responsibility, and very keen to see top talent stay. This is true for all employees at every level as it relates to key functions, and for those in leadership positions.

# *How best to do this?*

The answer is complicated, and requires a multi layered approach. Leaders must provide strong empowered leadership to their people; teams must learn to be optimally effective; respect for each individual must be a cornerstone of all personal interactions; coaching must be the norm to ensure the best possible on the job performance; and there must be a commitment to equipping each person with the tools and skills to constantly improve.

When these things are in place the organization flourishes; people not only want to stay, but will encourage others to join; performance is optimized; and a competitive advantage is maintained. This advantage can be seen in focus on the customer, on safety, on constant improvement and innovation, and in a compelling future where each feels they belong and can personally make all the difference.

To arrive at this state an organization must be committed to several forms of personal development, and preferably ones that place a high priority on experiential learning. This brings me back to my opening statements, and the need to understand the nature and strengths and weaknesses of each.

- “**On the job learning**”
- “**Learning from experience**”
- “**Experience is a great teacher**”
- “**70/20/10**”
- “**Experiential activities**”
- “**Simulations**”
- “**Experiential learning**”



# *Strengths and Weakness of:*



## **“On the job learning”**

This is too often “learning by trial and error”. Instead, it can be enhanced using a buddy or partner approach, where those new to a position have a colleague assigned to them from whom they can learn. Additionally, a strong leader who is skilled at coaching and communication can accelerate learning; and a robust training package, usually the responsibility of the corporate Training Group, can make a dramatic difference.

## **“Learning from experience”**

This can be a two edged sword, and often a deadly one. In a high risk environment (eg on deep sea oil rigs) learning the importance of safety procedures should not see “learning by experience” as another way of saying “learning the hard way”. Yet often that’s what is meant by this approach. Instead, if this approach is to be used, it usually requires introduction of a mentorship or apprenticeship program.

## **“Experience is a great teacher”**

This is a powerful approach to learning, especially in a controlled environment. For example, assigning high potentials to challenging projects as part of their growth allows them to gain valuable experience in a contained environment, and the learning (by experience) they get will serve them in good stead when they’re given greater responsibility. Encouraging learning to occur from mistakes accelerates innovation, improves personal confidence and builds stronger performance. The only concern is to ensure that the size of the mandate given is not so large as to be devastating if failure does occur.

## **“70/20/10”**

This has merit, but is often far less effective than hoped for. It presumes that the individual whose learning is dependant on this approach has a leader who is an extremely effective teacher and coach, with an aptitude for being the primary source of each individual’s learning. It further assumes that the (usually) comprehensive training elements will be consistently prioritized as envisioned, and implemented by employees whose regular work load is already typically heavy and all consuming. To ensure success with this approach a very significant amount of oversight, follow up, and administration by the Training and Development Group is usually required; or a very intense and consistent focus brought to bear by several members at the Executive level of the organization.

effective than as individuals), but tend not to target specific behaviours which need to improve, nor show expressly what must change. They tend to be seen as interesting in the moment, but not with long term sustained impact.

## **“Experiential activities”**

These are often engaging or fun, but do little to drive sustained behavior change. They have their place to raise awareness of some principles (eg working in teams is more effective than as individuals), but tend not to target specific behaviours which need to improve, nor show expressly what must change. They tend to be seen as interesting in the moment, but not with long term sustained impact.

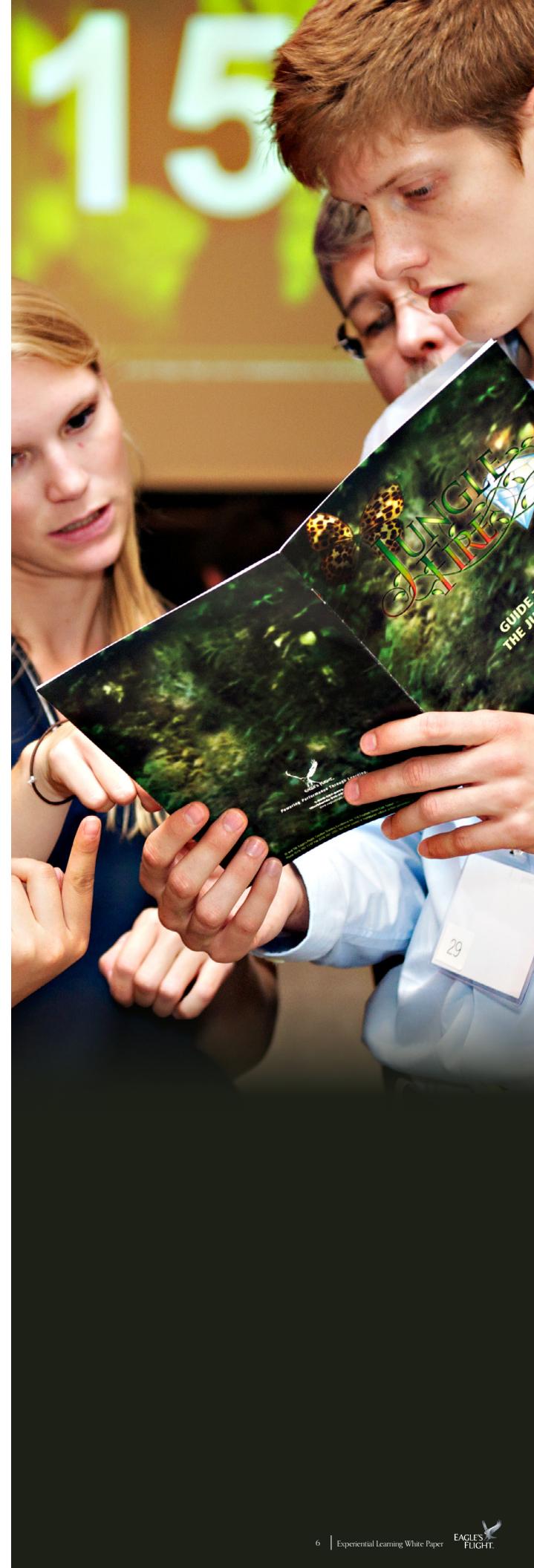
## **“Simulations”**

A true simulation is an exact replica of a work situation used to teach the participant a required and previously prescribed procedure. For example, a training center may replicate the aisles of a supermarket to teach sales reps how to properly set up their product on the shelves, consistent with the facings purchased; or an airline company may require pilots to spend time in their flight simulator to become familiar with a new piece of software being installed on the planes. Simulations such as these are intended to exactly mimic the real world, and so enable mastery of a particular skill, usually through feedback or repetition. Their use is limited when the required competence lies in the area of acquiring the skills and principles necessary to confront a variety of (often unforeseen) circumstances, such as delivering enviable customer service, encouraging empowerment, or enhancing the performance of a high performing team.

## **“Experiential learning”**

This is a powerful tool to build conviction and demonstrate specific new behaviours which will improve performance. However, if the experience itself is provided without a comprehensive and relevant debrief then it can easily be seen as “just a game”, and as such of little relevance to the realities of business. On the other hand, if the right experience is selected to drive specific outcomes, and is well designed, typically there are a number of relevant “aha” moments that will stay with participants long after the actual learning event. To ensure the benefit of this approach the debrief must link to the real world of the participants, and show how the learnings from the experience will deliver improved performance.

This form of experiential learning has the added benefit that it is relatively short in terms of time required, so can be delivered either as a stand alone learning event, or incorporated into a learning curriculum, a culture transformation, a safety initiative, a focus on innovation or customer centricity.



Experiential learning is an arrow in the quiver of an organization committed to changing how individuals perform, whether the area of concern is sales, leadership, personal growth or culture transformation. It is an effective arrow to be sure, but most effective when paired with the other arrows of behavior change, such as exemplary leadership and a disciplined change process.

## Some typical questions and answers re: Experiential Learning

### Q: Are virtual experiences available and are they as good as in class experiences?

A: Eagle's Flight is a world leader in experiential learning, and can deliver the same impact and results both virtually and in class.

### Q: How long is an experiential learning event?

A: They range from 1 - 3.5 hours depending on the degree of learning required from the debrief.

### Q: Why does experiential learning usually create such a memorable experience?

A: We all tend to more easily remember stories, and the theme of the experience acts like a story, or movie, in the minds of the participants, so has better recall than typical presentations or other learning approaches.

### Q: How can an experience build conviction?

A: Conviction usually flows from understanding. As participants learn to "win in the game" they just played, and then see how that game is really just a mirror of their real world, they understand how to "win at work" by applying the principles they just learned. Since the experience, the learning and the understanding are personally discovered (rather than "taught"), conviction to change is developed.

### Q: How can a 1 -3 hour experience make that much of an impact?

A: Firstly, a great experience only concentrates on a few key principles, so the learning is focussed; secondly, the metaphor of the experience allows time to be compressed. Back on the job a similar focus on only a few principles would normally occur over several days, be inevitably overlaid with numerous other priorities, and so lack the intensity of learning that can occur in a focussed experience.

### Q: What can experiential learning be used for?

A: To build conviction; to provide practice of a key learning; to teach key principles, either through the risk of failure or the sense of accomplishment; to develop self awareness; and to establish a frame of reference for future learning (eg why silos are inefficient, before teaching how to avoid them).

### Q: Why is experiential learning increasing in popularity as a learning vehicle

A: World class experiential learning programs provide several unique benefits that are harder to get in other training methodologies:





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Since our founding in 1988, Eagle's Flight has developed and refined a framework for creating predictable, sustainable behavior change. We specialize in experiential learning and provide organizations with a better outcome by truly engaging the learner. Successful organizational development programs require ongoing work, but this can easily get lost in the shuffle of daily tasks that feel more urgent. Partnering with a provider that has a strong track record of helping organizations achieve long-term, measurable change will help ensure that your development goals are met.

If you would like to learn more about how Eagle's Flight can support your corporate culture goals, please contact us.

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