The Covenant Group | Redefining Performance™

# The art of using learning to boost team Performance

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CONCEPT IN SHORT

Learning involves more than conferences and workshops. High performing teams understand that the most valuable work is done after the conference or workshop. Structuring and integrating your learning into the workplace can go a long way in redefining your team's performance. High performing teams take specific steps that integrate learning into their teams and workplaces.

Concept at Work
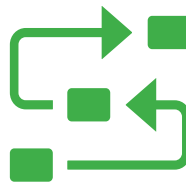
| INTENTION	PROCESS	MEASUREMENT
When individual learning is encouraged, it should be structured to focus on the skills and knowledge that enhance both the individual's and team's performance. When the collective wisdom of the group is leveraged the individual and the team members are able to learn from each other.	High performing teams support all the ways in which adults learn – self-study, reflection, coaching, workshops, classroom, and applied learning. Building high performing teams is hard work. What you do the day after your learning event matters more than the insights or inspiration you received. Your team needs to develop a structured or deliberate approach to integrating learning into the workplace that complements the ways in which adults learn.	There are four ways to measure learning. The Smile Test – how people feel about what they learned. The Knowledge Test – what participants learned. The Application Test – how participants apply what they learned. The Impact Test – measures the results of what is being learned. Measuring learning is not easy and most companies only measure the Smile Test. It is important that your measurements go beyond the Smile Test.

One-day workshops and conferences will continue to dominate workplace learning.
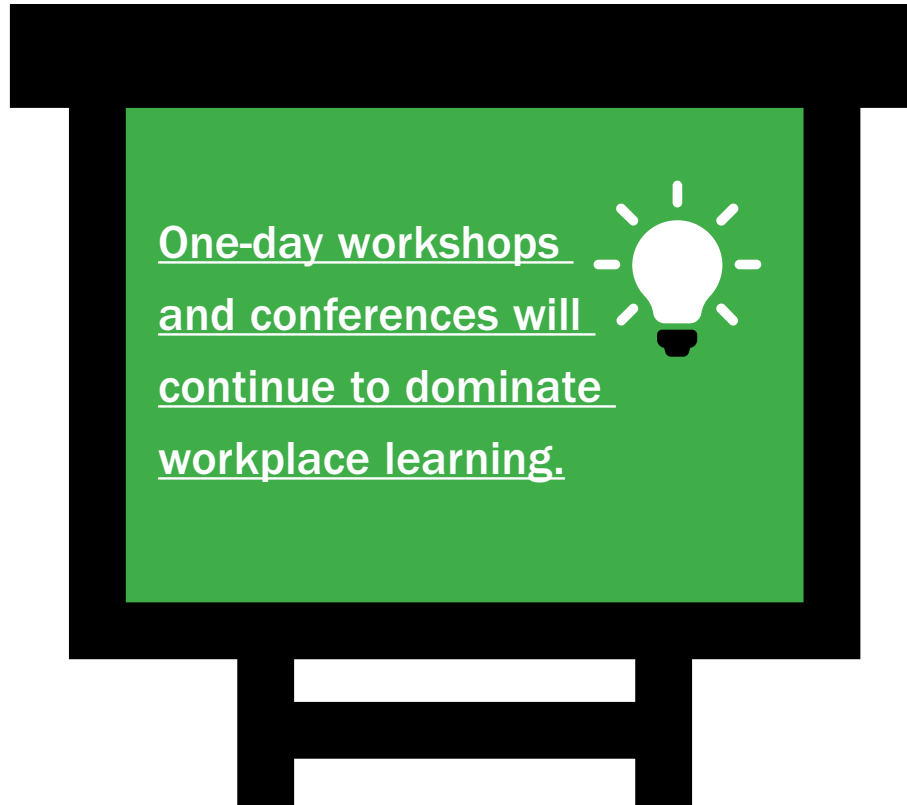
One-day events are great for boosting morale and team bonding, but they are not the most effective way to foster learning. Learning is most effective when it is combined with *Structured Integration and Structured Implementation*. Many people get through school by cramming for exams, but unfortunately it turns out that these short intense approaches to learning are not particularly effective for long-term learning. What is most effective is "distributed practice" or spaced learning. We learn better when learning is distributed over a longer period. Often, one-day workshops and conferences are a fire hose of information and unless you are intentional about your learning, it is unlikely to lead to improved performance. High performing teams are structured and intentional in their approach to integrating learning.
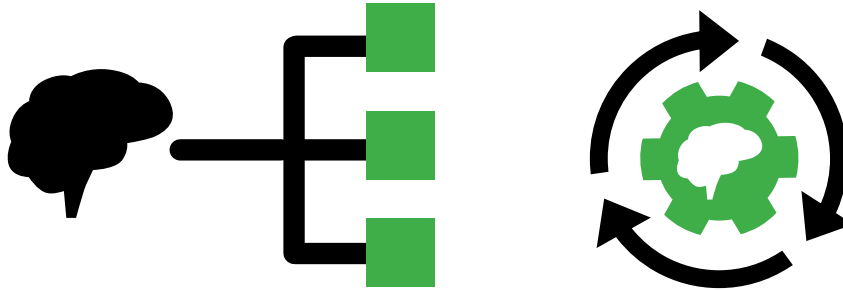
High performing teams structure and integrate their learning

## Effective learning is a competitive advantage of high performing teams.

When combined with *Structured Integration* and *Structured Implementation,* learning can be a powerful contributor to redefining performance. *Structured Integration* and *Implementation* refers to finding ways of developing systems and processes that increase retrieval, retention, and application of new knowledge into the workplace. To maximize learning, teams and organizations need to understand learning as an ongoing process and should invest in making their learning continuous. High performing teams integrate and utilize all the ways in which adults learn – self-study, reflection, coaching, mentoring, workshops, classroom, and applied learning.

Coaching

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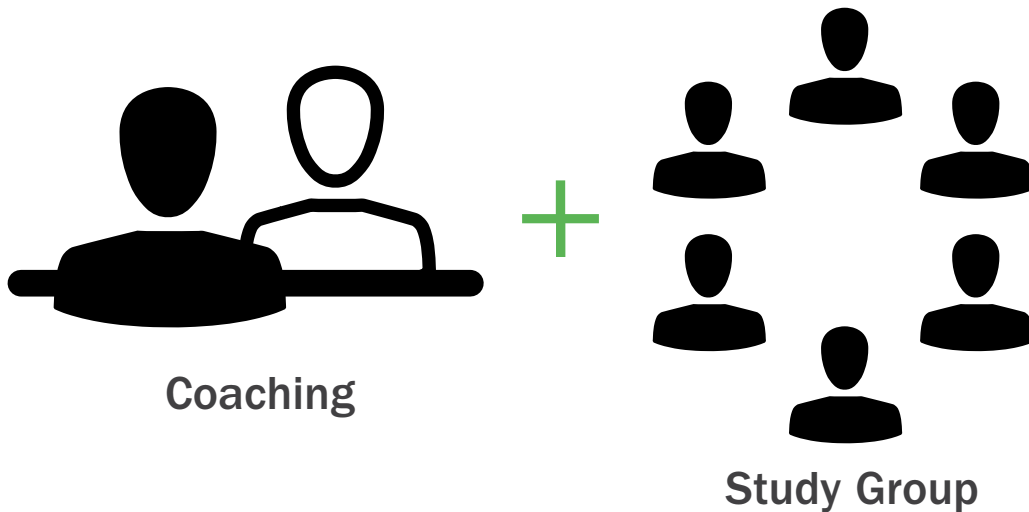
Study Group

When we structure our learning, it increases accountability and improves our chances of effectively implementing what we have learned. For example, we recommend coaching and study groups as ways of bringing structure to your learning. Frequent check-ins with a coach and the creation of a community of practice through a study group keeps you accountable to the tasks you intended to implement. Most people want to avoid saying they did not accomplish a task they said they were going to do. Having a coach and participating in a study group creates positive social pressure or check points that motivate participants to complete their task and measure results. For example, if you participate in a workshop, you should set priorities and share what you wish to be held accountable for with your coach; she or he can support you in implementing the things you learned and track results.

Structured implementation and integration is the key to maximizing learning in your organization.

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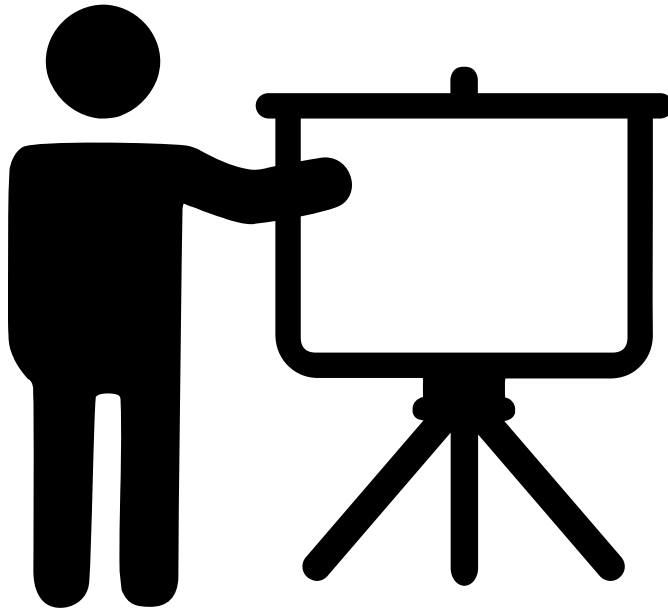
High performing teams use coaching effectively

Coaching is primarily focused on acquiring and applying the skills and knowledge to be effective in one's current role, while mentoring is primarily concerned with preparing for future roles.

High performing teams encourage managers to coach their direct reports, while managers once removed are encouraged to mentor team members two or more levels below. High-performing teams supplement their learning with well thought out systems and processes that integrate learning into the way their teams work.

After teams have been inspired, it is important that learning is integrated in a way that focuses on improvement. For example, in training for a 10k race, an athlete can do training in a way that is maintaining their current fitness level or they can do training that is improving their performance. Depending on the athlete's objectives, the coach can design a program that keeps the athlete just out of their comfort zone so that they are working to improve their performance.

Building on the example of someone training for a 10k race, if the coach designs a program that is too far outside of your comfort zone, it can be overwhelming, cause panic or injury. Peak performance is achieved by working just outside of your comfort zone. Most of us, particularly when we train by ourselves, remain within our comfort zone. Coaches help us train beyond our comfort zone.

DANGER

LEARNING

COMFORT

Live Here

Where the magic happens

Comfort Zone
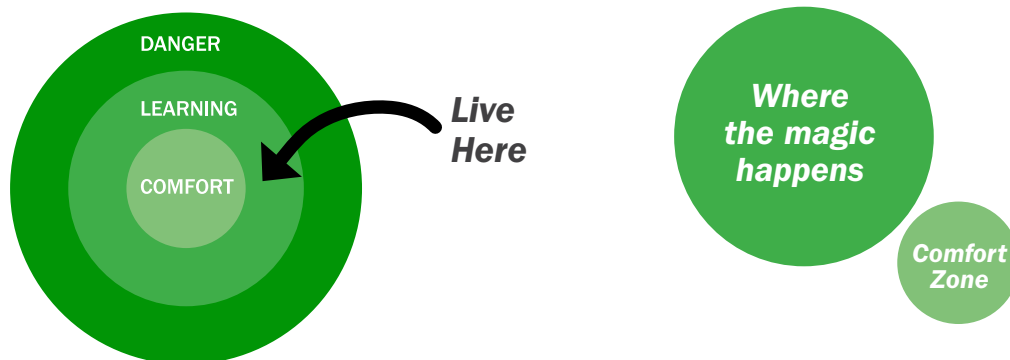
High performing teams understand that the most valuable work is done after the learning event

What you do in the office the day after you have attended a learning event matters more than the inspiration or insight you received at the event

If you are not doing work on your own between meeting your coach, you are unlikely to see improvement. In the example of training for a 10K, while you meet your coach once a week, you still need to be training in between sessions in order to achieve your goal. The inconvenient truth about learning at workshops, panels, and presentations, is that unless the learning is intentionally integrated into the way you work, it does not contribute to improved performance.

Performance is improved by integrating learning into the way team members work. Many of us attend learning events and take detailed notes. These carefully documented notes are rarely integrated into the workplace and often end up on a bookshelf never to be seen again. For example, if you learned about the importance of client experience, you should work with your team, coach, or study group to find ways of integrating your new insights into the way you work. An effective approach might be to update a team member's roles, objectives, and activities to include specific deliverables around client experience. If you include a mechanism by which this person will be held accountable, it can go a long way towards transforming your team's performance.
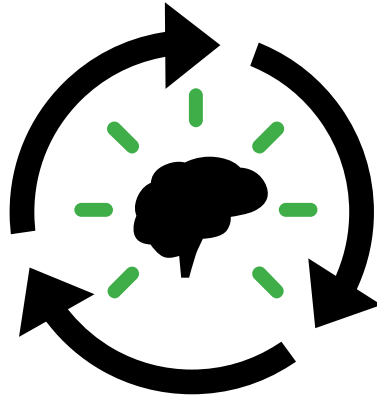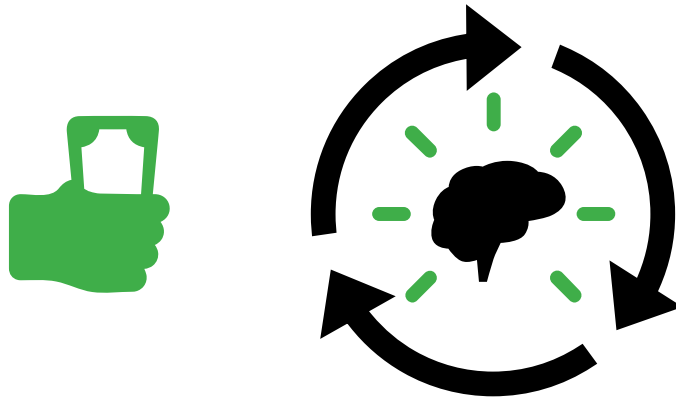
High performing teams focus on Continuous learning

Organizations often decide to host a one-day workshop in an area they recognize can be improved.

For example, they might decide to deliver a one-time team building session, employee engagement workshop, or a workshop on communication. This is usually a reactive response a larger issue that needs to be addressed. High performing teams are proactive in the way they integrate learning. One-off events are not completely ineffective, but after a session, learning quickly fades unless you capture, apply, and utilize the new information. High performing teams understand that one-off activities, although well intentioned, do not solely contribute to the organization's overall performance.

Building on the principle of *Structured Integration* and *Structured Implementation*, what sets high-performing teams apart is that they integrate learning into their daily activities. They make their learning continuous. For example, high performing teams will set aside time after a workshop to integrate and implement their learning.

High performing teams use data and consensus building to improve the quality of their decisions

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High performing teams invest in continuous learning

One-day events are great for getting people together who have not seen each other for some time.

These events allow individuals to network, build rapport, and enjoy a sense of shared experience within teams and across companies. While this can be valuable for both individuals and teams, to see improved performance, we need to push beyond. In our approach, we work to hold team members accountable at regular intervals by revisiting learning. We use coaching and study groups to create accountability at frequent intervals.

Coaches and study group members act as external voices, or positive social pressure points that keep team members on task. The right coach can help hold team members accountable and on target. For example, if team members are expected to report on their progress at a meeting, they tend to focus on ensuring their assignments are completed in time for their next meeting. A coach can play a similar role. If the coach assigns clear tasks, he or she can help to hold whomever they are coaching accountable at their next session. Frequent meetings with a coach or a study group can help keep individual team members on task, on time, and focused on improved performance. This can go a long way in redefining performance.

High performing teams avoid cognitive traps

Another challenge with one-off learning events is that, while in attendance, participants often fall victim to cognitive traps.

Cognitive traps are blindspots or hidden biases that cloud our judgement. Two of the most common traps are the "illusion of mastery" and the "familiarity illusion". These illusions trick your brain into assuming you have mastered or are familiar with a topic. This can hinder the initial learning process because the brain disengages when it assumes it is already familiar, or has mastered a topic. Cognitive traps are common and research suggests that we are all vulnerable to them. Our brains are hardwired to create mental shortcuts, but once we are aware of how the brain operates, we can actively work to overcome these biases or blindspots so we can ultimately enhancing team performance.

# High performing teams focus on attaining mastery of new content

High performing teams work to ensure that they are not just familiar with the content, but they work on mastering it.

We do not master content by listening to presentations, gurus, or coaches. Mastery requires a structured approach to learning. The challenge is overcoming our blindspots. Many of us are familiar with the concepts commonly presented in workshops and conferences. When we listen to familiar content we sometimes mistake familiarity for mastery. High performing teams test their learning by defining their intention, developing a process that helps them achieve their objective, and determine how they can measure their objectives. High performing teams explicitly work to articulate their intention, process, and measurement to circumvent falling into cognitive traps. These teams focus on improving their performance.

Recall a time when you have experienced a particularly
well prepared presentation and thought "I get that". Then,
after hearing the speaker, you try to relay the content to a
colleague or a friend, and realize that you did not know the
content as well as you thought. That moment where you
struggled to articulate content that seems familiar is usually
a sign that you have not mastered the content.

**The best way to ensure
that you are avoiding
these cognitive traps
is to test or measure
your learning.**
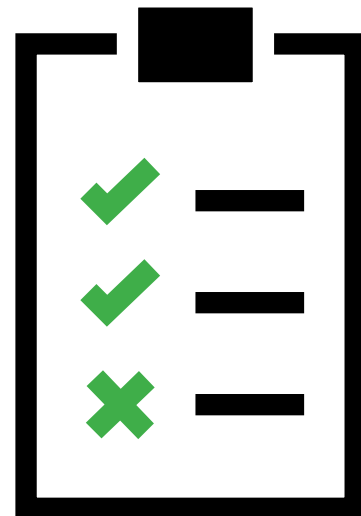
*If your strategy for learning is defensive, it is usually a sign that you need an offensive strategy.*
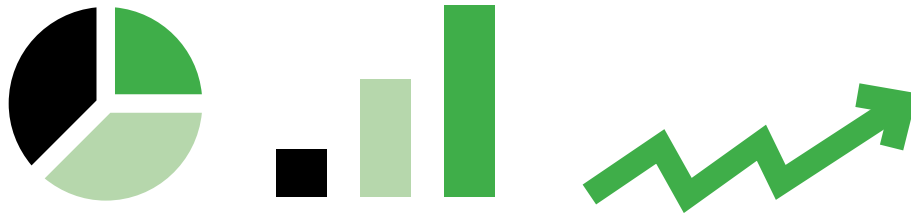
High performing teams use data to ground their decisions

Without strong data points, it is difficult to establish baseline measures.

Admittedly, learning is difficult to measure, but there are ways of identifying baselines measures that allow you to judge where you are in comparison with where you want to be. Teams that develop systems and processes that support the evaluation of retrieval, retention, and application of new information, have vastly improved chances of redefining their performance.

Data helps to depersonalize conversations so that decisions are not based on opinions, but are informed by the metrics you track.

Getting data is not always easy, but there are simple steps you can take to improve the quality of your data. For example, instead of asking, participants to rate the likeability of a speaker or workshop, focus on questions that illicit responses about usability and applicability of the content. This takes time and thought, so set some time aside to think about the kinds of questions that give you data on retrieval, retention, and application of new information.

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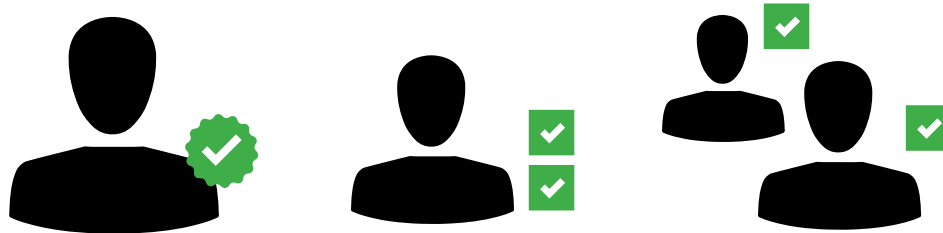
High performing teams communicate the criteria by which they plan to make decisions

Organizations are not a democracy.

One of the most challenging things to manage in a team, is working with the misconception that every team member has an equal vote. High performing teams recognize when decisions should be consensus based, and when they should be expertise based. For example, on a team where the user experience designer suggests that the interface we liked was not following best practices in the space. This one vote vetoed the opinions of everyone on the team.

High performing teams do not just go with consensus, they combine pre-established criteria with the opinions of the group. They work towards data informed consensus. High performing teams are willing to make decisions that go against the consensus of the group when the data, or when someone on the team with domain expertise, suggests an alternative. Team members need to feel like decisions are made fairly. One way to ensure that the teams feel like procedure was followed is to develop criteria by which decisions will be made and communicate that criteria to your team or audience.

Sharing the criteria for which you will make decisions holds you to a higher standard.
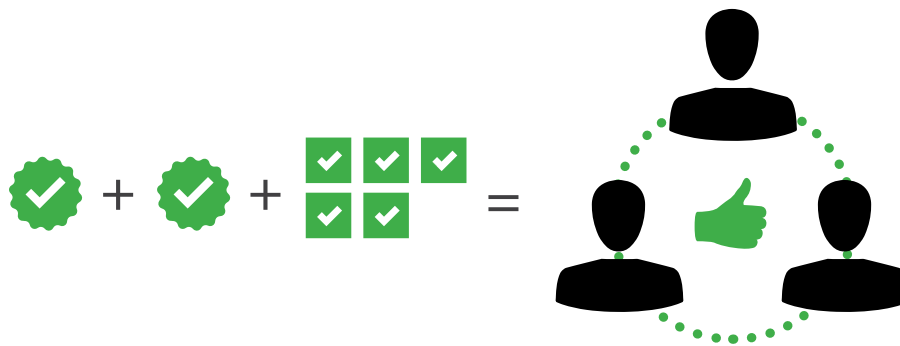
In sharing your criteria, you are creating an opportunity to align your own expectations with that of your team and your audience. Once you have shared your criteria you will need to adhere to the standards you have set forth. If you change the criteria, you will need to communicate your rationale for the change.

An important component of *redefining performance* is making the implicit explicit. If you develop criteria for evaluating your event and your audience knows them, you set the standards by which you will be judged. If participants understand how and why decisions are made, they can contribute to stronger decision making. In an ideal world, you would be able to include them in the decision making process.

High performing teams avoid faulty metrics

Earlier we discussed how listeners often misattribute familiarity for mastery.

When this happens, it can be transferred into the metrics used for decision making. For example, when presenters take the time to distil complex ideas into seemingly simple digestible formats, it can give the listener the impression they are not learning anything new. The familiarity of the content tricks the listener into thinking that they had previously mastered it. Listeners walk away believing they knew that information all along. As a result, when organizers do their surveys, the presentation may receive a low rating.

What makes this even more challenging, is that these kinds of evaluations give us an illusion of objectivity. Ratings are turned into numbers and teams/organizers often look at the numbers to determine which speaker(s) participants enjoyed versus which speakers had the best educational value.

Cognition and memory researchers have taught us:

1. *We are not good at judging our own learning.*

2. *Learning is improved with testing.*

3. *Most learning that takes our performance to another level requires effort. It requires us to move out of our comfort zones.*

The best way to ensure we are not under the spell of the illusion or familiarity is by testing our assumptions around what we think we have mastered. At The Covenant Group we use the Intention, Process, and Measurement framework to help us design our learning so that we are always working towards improved performance. If your intention is learning, then you must put a process in place, and then find ways to measure your intentions. Too often we go the easy route and aim to please attendees at the expense of our intentions.

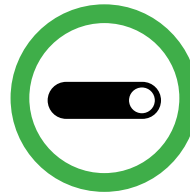One way to think about measurement is to use the following framework:

The Smile Test
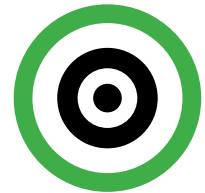
How people feel about what they learned.

The Knowledge Test

Testing what participants learned.

The Application Test

Have participants applied what they have learned.

The Impact Test

Measures the results of what is being learned.

Most organization typically only measure using the Smile Test. High performing teams go beyond the Smile Test and develop systems and processed for measuring knowledge, application and impact.

High performing teams lean away from entertaining events

We have been taught that good teachers make learning fun, and easy.

When designing a learning activity or event, it is important to remember that attendees want to know that your event will help them improve their performance. Many people expect learning events to be fun and entertaining. This however, does not align with current research in cognitive science. Current research suggests that the most effective learning is effortful learning.

Coaching speakers is worth the time, energy, and effort. Your events need to entertain, inspire, and motivate the audience but most importantly your content needs to be educational and contribute to improved performance. The challenge is being able to avoid diluting the speakers content at the expense of making their presentations more engaging. When curating your event, identify presenters who have very good content to share. Don't be blinded by charisma. Many one-day events lean more towards entertainment, inspiration, and motivation – the Smile Test. Although important, these activities tend to be fleeting and do not contribute to improved performance over the long term. Speakers should both educate and entertain their audience.

The challenge is knowing what to do when your audience expects edutainment.

You need to meet your audience in the middle. You can try to reframe this misconception with your audience, but simply telling them that the best learning is effortful learning is not enough for people to change their perception. This is not easy and will mean that you need to prepare and coach speakers very well. Speakers with valuable content can always add color to their presentations by telling stories and using humor where appropriate.

One-off activities, although well intentioned, do not help the organization redefine performance.

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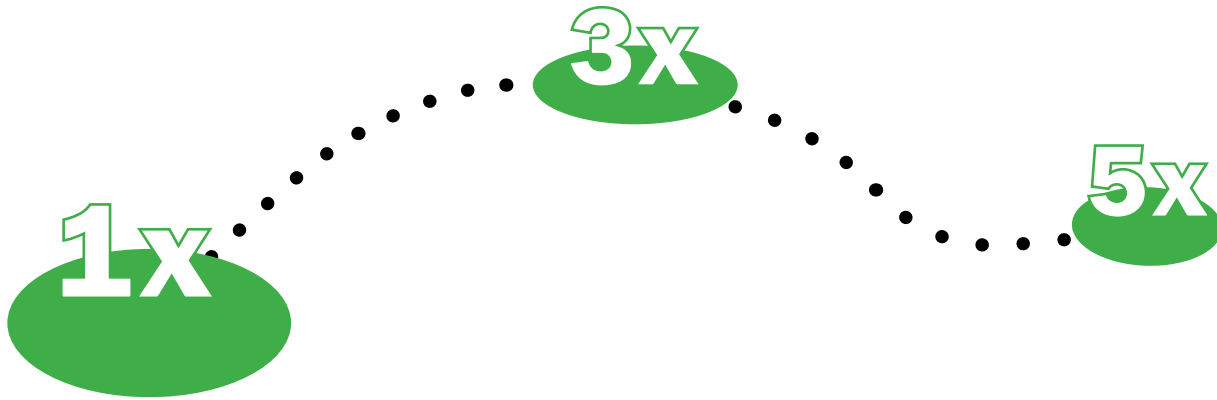
The art of using learning to boost Team performance

Where most teams fall short is that they do not have systems and processes in place that help people integrate what they learned into their workplace.

You must be sure your event is appropriately entertaining. However, the most important component is that you communicate to the audience that *Structured Integration* and *Structured Implementation* is hard work but is necessary in order to become a high-performer. Having a coach and or study group to assist will make that process even more effective as you work to *redefine performance*.

The role of the coach or study group is to hold you accountable as you measure and implement continuous learning. *Structured Integration* and *Structured Implementation* allows teams to focus on what matters most – what you do the day after your learning event. Having a structured or deliberate approach to integrating learning into the workplace will put your team onto the path of high performance.

High performing teams support all the ways in which adults learn –
self-study, reflection, coaching, workshops, classroom, and applied
learning. When these approaches are included in your *Structured
Integration* and *Structured Implementation* plan, you put your team
onto the path of *redefining performance*.

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Our programs are designed to help our clients:

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- **Create** *more sales to clients and prospective clients;*

- **Generate** *new leads; and*

- **Build** *an organization to create more free time and professional satisfaction.*

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Starter kit for High-performing teams use learning.
How high-performing teams use learning to redefine performance.