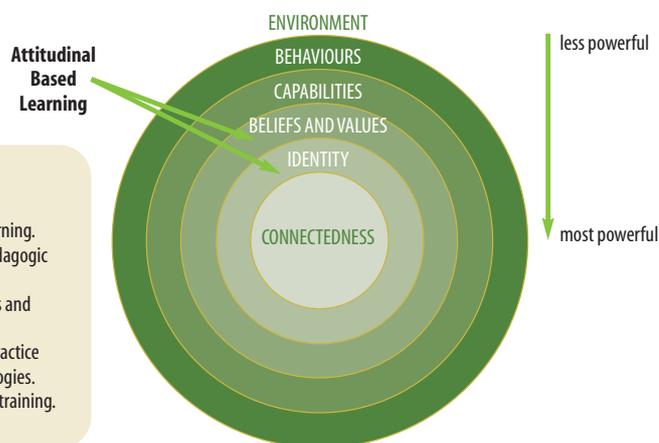


Attitudinal Based Learning:

giving learners the choices they need

Focusing on changing learners' attitudes will have a ripple effect on capabilities, behaviours and the environment

Figure 1: Framework used by learners to make choices



Key learning points

- The basic concepts of Attitudinal Based Learning.
- The difference in effectiveness between pedagogic and andragogic learning processes.
- The relationship between beliefs and values and delegate behaviour.
- How Attitudinal Based Learning works in practice and adds value to other learning methodologies.
- How to introduce attitudinal elements into training.

ATTITUDINAL BASED LEARNING

Attitudinal Based Learning uses an individual learner's choice to learn to provide a more solid foundation for sustained change than can be achieved by simply developing knowledge or skills. **Paul Dunn** and **Chris Finnemore** introduce the ideas on which ABL is established, explain how it works in practice and provide a simple guide to adding an attitudinal element to training.

You can take a horse to water, but how do you make it drink? You can coach, train and develop skills; you can even 'accelerate' learning, but these only 'take the horse to water'. Ultimately, it is the horse that chooses whether to drink or not.

The basis on which a person decides to learn, to take on board new knowledge, to develop new behaviours and to 'change' is peculiar to each individual. Specifically, the decision to learn is driven by the perceived usefulness of new material and how well it fits to the learner's existing map of the world. Attitudinal Based Learning (ABL) focuses on this decision-making process as the crucial set-up to any learning event. Irrespective of whether the overall outcome is skills or knowledge increase, whether the subject matter is technical or not, focusing on the learner's attitude provides a more solid foundation for sustained change than traditional, content-focused models. This article aims to introduce ABL by:

- considering the thinking on which the concept is based
- exploring how it works in practice
- contrasting it with 'traditional' design methodologies
- providing a simple ten-step process to achieve attitudinal changes within your training.

THE THINKING BEHIND ABL

Malcolm Knowles, a well-known theorist in adult education, argues that adults require substantively different learning processes to children.¹ While the pedagogic structures of classroom education, where the teacher is in control of what, when and how learning takes place, may suit children these methods are, at best, likely to meet resistance from adults. With a much stronger sense of self, adults require a learning process that enables them to fit new knowledge, skills or behaviour into their own unique context. Forcing ideas, content or skills on adult learners, without this opportunity 'to fit', simply creates a counter-productive learning resistance cycle. In practice, this is evidenced by the behavioural response from delegates towards 'chalk and talk' events, or those who are 'sent' on development.

ABL processes, therefore, are systematically designed to treat the learner's context as the core construct to which new choices are offered. Knowles referred to this type of approach as 'andragogic'.

The shift in mindset of trainers demanded by this conclusion is enormous. People are not re-programmable machines; their behaviour is not always rational; they have the ability of free thought and can exercise choice. The learner is in control, decides what is to be learned – or not, how it is to be used – or not. Thus a trainer's job becomes one of convincing people that learning is to their advantage, rather than simply acting as a conduit for the development of new knowledge or skills within them. Furthermore, in this paradigm, organisational needs can only be satisfied if the learner decides that change is worthwhile to them.

Robert Dilts, Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) developer and trainer, provides some suggestions about the levels at which these decisions are made. He argues that external behaviour is the manifestation of the multiple levels on which our personality operates. Dilts proposes that the deeper the level at which change is incorporated the more significant the impact will be.² Thus,

focusing on changing learners' attitudes (beliefs and values) will have a ripple effect on capabilities, behaviours and the environment. In this way, ABL interventions deliver a superior return on investment and more sustained levels of change.

So, let us consider the framework that learners use to make choices (see Figure 1, opposite).

- Do learners make choices on the basis of a change in their environment? Sometimes.
- Do learners make choices on the basis of behaviours? Sometimes.
- Do they make choices based on the application of new skills? Sometimes.
- Do they make choices based on their beliefs and attitudes? Almost always.
- Do they make choices on the basis of their own identity and their personal place in the world? Always.

A four-box model combines these ideas by Knowles and Dilts to demonstrate how they impact on the motivation of a learner (see Figure 2, on page 36). The horizontal axis represents the perceived fit to the learner's current 'map' of the world. The vertical axis represents the perceived usefulness (or not) of potential new material, given their personal context, as driven by the internalised questions: 'Do I want this? Is it useful to me?'

The 'probability of use' of a new knowledge, skill or behaviour, therefore, is determined by the trainer's ability not only to establish links to the learner's current map of the world, but also to demonstrate its usefulness to them. Thus, the implication of this model is that, in order to bring about rapid yet sustained behavioural change in people, trainers need to focus on their attitude towards the behaviour, not on the behaviour itself.

ABL IN PRACTICE

ABL starts by finding agreement on what delegates believe is true, useful and works. In practice this requires time to be spent up front considering the required change at a level that is conceptual, high chunk and attitudinal. Once this agreement is found, then – and only then – can they progress to new thinking. Let us explore, for example, leadership behaviours. A typical ABL process would ask learners:

- to identify for themselves from their own map of the world truly great leaders
- to consider what beliefs, attitudes, skills and behaviours made them truly great
- whether all this data is useful to a budding leader.

Most learners would agree that budding leaders would find the information useful. Notice that the whole process has taken place in the learners' context, not the trainer's. The next step in the process would be to ask the learners to:

- consider how this data would apply to their working context, challenging and changing it to fit their environment
- consider whether this list would be useful for them to apply as individuals.

By the time the question reaches the personal level, learners have already come to an agreement of how great leaders should behave. When the question is turned to them personally, the flow of the facilitation has left them with little choice but to acknowledge that if they want to become great leaders adopting these behaviours would be useful. In this way, their 'avenues of escape' have been cut

ATTITUDINAL BASED LEARNING

A learner who is provided with information that is perceived as useful and that fits his or her personal map of the world **will want to learn**

► off, learners are left with no choice but to agree and their relationship with, and attitude towards, leadership behaviours have changed.

In structuring the process in this way the learner has not only been able to 'fit' the new material into his/her existing map of the world, but also identified the usefulness of it. Once this has been achieved, the learner will be keen to learn the new skills or attitudes, and apply these in practice.

COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL DESIGN

The ABL process can be used to 'frame' any subject, technical or non-technical, skills or knowledge based. ABL does not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Best practice ideas such as Accelerated Learning, Gestalt Theory and NLP are not discarded but included and enhanced by the use of ABL techniques.

The contrast between ABL and other, more 'traditional', methodologies is a subtle yet important one. At the very start of the training cycle, the needs analysis, ABL is more concerned with the beliefs that underpin a skill than the skill itself. The needs analysis sets out to identify the belief systems that maintain the status quo, what more useful systems they might be replaced by, and where the critical leverage points are. A critical element of this stage is understanding how the desired change fits with, and will be supported by, organisational values and structures, as it is here that the change initiated in the training room will need to be re-enforced.

Experience of asking these types of questions suggests that the perceived need is not always the real need. More importantly it suggests that 'training courses' are called for when often it is 'leadership interventions' that are needed.

With training outcomes including key attitudinal elements identified, the focus turns to design. The purpose of the design is to ensure that the necessary attitude shifts are achieved and so every opportunity to manage the learners' relationship with the material is critical.

The first and most important element to be considered is the set-up. All delegates come to a learning event with some type of 'baggage'. Whether positive or negative, this 'baggage' will affect the learners' disposition to the overall event, and is therefore something to be managed. The tone, language and presentation of joining instructions, for example, can serve to either reinforce or disrupt a particular mindset, and so present an opportunity for the trainer to have an influence before the delegate even arrives on the course. First impressions of the physical training environment can also have a similar impact on a delegate's orientation towards learning.

Moving into the course itself, the usual list of 'By the end of this course you will ...' statements is replaced by a more general overview of the material to be covered. The 'you will' statements remove any choice from the learner, and as such are too confrontational. Similarly, rather than the trainer stood at the front explaining why delegates should want to learn about a particular subject, attitudinal learning designers use structures that enable learners to find their own motivation for learning – to choose their own reason for being

there, to choose their own way of making sense of it all. As discussed earlier, these frameworks will typically consider subjects on a high-level conceptual basis, leaving any personal 'choice-points' about future belief systems to the back end of the course, once all of the 'avenues of escape' have been cut off.

FOCUS TOWARDS ABL

The following ten-stage process will change the focus of training towards ABL.

1. Identify the attitudes that need changing in the Training Needs Analysis.
2. Prepare a list of attitude based outcomes that describe the beliefs and values after the change.
3. Focus the design on producing and reinforcing these attitude shifts rather than the content itself.
4. Start learning sessions at a conceptual and high-chunk level, focusing outside the organisation.
5. Work with these existing high-chunk 'useful' ideas at the beginning, then add the new thinking as the session develops.
6. Get learners to work out what is 'right', especially around behaviours, then overlay the organisational needs on top and find commonality.
7. Avoid confronting learners' personal maps of the world with statements such as 'By the end of this session you will ...', especially during the early stages.
8. Avoid challenging individuals personally in the early stages; operating in small, playful groups can be helpful in achieving this.
9. Having established what learners think is right, mix delivery methodologies to explore new ideas.
10. Ensure learners feel they are intelligent, responsible and 'adult'; provide ideas or new thoughts rather than demands or 'musts'.

CONCLUSION

Once a horse is at the water's edge, if it wants to drink it will drink. Similarly, a learner who is provided with information that is

perceived as useful and that fits his or her personal map of the world will want to learn. Trainers who can bring learners to the conclusion that the information 'fits' their personal framework and is useful to them will achieve a significant increase in the take-up and application of new knowledge, skills and behaviours – and isn't that what it's all about? 🐾

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1. Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner*, Butterworth Heinemann, 1973.
2. Robert Dilts, *Changing Belief Systems with NLP*, Meta Publications, 1990. For further information visit www.meta-publications.com.

Figure 2: Demonstration of how the ideas of Knowles and Dilts impact on the motivation of the learner

