Skillbook

Understanding Learning Styles

Learning Skills

MindTools®

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1.   Introduction

Have you ever wondered how you learned to learn?

Perhaps you think of school and formal education as your primary time of learning, but your learning journey really began the day you were born. With each new experience, you pieced together notions of cause and effect and, in this way, you developed a foundation of knowledge upon which you were able to build.

Over time, as you became more skilled at learning, you unconsciously adopted a learning pattern that worked well for you. This became your learning preference, also known as your learning style.

Understanding individual learning styles will help you to train others much more effectively, and to approach learning opportunities with the confidence that you need to succeed.

In this **Skillbook**, we'll explore your own, and your team members', natural learning styles, and we'll look at several strategies that you can use to make your learning, and your training, even more effective.

In around one hour, we'll look at:

- Learning styles, and discovering your preferences.
- How role-play engages **Activist** learners.
- Using Cornell Note Taking to support **Reflective** learning.
- The role of Mind Maps® to encourage **Theoretical** learning.
- How case studies help **Pragmatic** learners.

2. Learning Styles

How do you approach a new challenge? Do you quickly draw up a plan and implement it right away, or do you stand back, observe, and weigh up all the implications before you begin? Maybe you like to do your research and understand the theory behind a process before you use it. Or, perhaps you jump straight in and figure out what you're doing along the way.

Management training specialists Peter Honey and Alan Mumford believe that the way you approach a task indicates your natural learning style. They identified four types of learners: **Activists**, **Reflectors**, **Theorists**, and **Pragmatists**.

Figure 1. The Four Main Types of Learners

Adapted from Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1986) "Using Your Learning Styles." Maidenhead: Peter Honey Publications.

Let's look at each of the four types of learners:

- **Activists** – these people learn by doing. They enjoy new experiences and like to be thrown in at the deep end. Activists generally act first and consider the consequences later. Their preferred learning activities include problem-solving, games, role play, and group activities.
- **Reflectors** – these learners tend to be cautious and thoughtful. They prefer to listen and observe, and they like to consider all the possible angles before forming an opinion. They prefer analytical and detail-oriented activities, and they don't like to be rushed.
- **Theorists** – these learners want to think a situation through from beginning to end. They learn from models, concepts and facts, and they like to be able to question and probe. They are great at breaking a situation down into small pieces and working through complex problems systematically and thoroughly.
- **Pragmatists** – these down-to-earth types like to put ideas into practice to see what happens. They are often impatient to get started, and they get frustrated when they are bogged down in open-ended discussion and instruction. They enjoy tasks with useful outcomes, clear guidelines, and examples that they can copy.

Most people use each of these learning styles to varying degrees, but you probably have a natural inclination to use one particular style more often than the others.

Action:

Imagine that you have bought some flat-pack furniture. How would you go about assembling it?

a. Start putting the pieces together in the order that they come out of the box, using trial and error.
b. Watch a video by the manufacturer that demonstrates how to put the item together, then get started.
c. Take everything out of the box and arrange the pieces in a logical order, then study the instructions from start to finish before picking up your screwdriver.
d. Work through the instructions step by step, assembling your new piece of furniture as you go, until the task is complete.

The answer that you chose may help you to decide what type of learner you are:

a = Activist, b = Reflector, c = Theorist, d = Pragmatist.

3. Applying Your Learning Style

Different learning styles naturally lend themselves to different types of activity. Here are some examples:

Learning Style	Prefers	Dislikes
Activist	New experiences and challenges, being thrown in at the deep end, teamwork, chairing meetings, and leading decision-making.	Lectures and long discussions, reading and writing alone, closely following precise details, or analyzing lots of data.
Reflector	Observing individuals or groups at work, taking time to reflect on what they have learned, analyzing data, and working on tasks without tight deadlines.	Role-playing or leading other people, being asked to take action without having time to prepare first, and tight deadlines.
Theorist	Working on complex tasks where they can use their skills and knowledge, putting their understanding to the test, "blue sky" thinking, questioning, and probing ideas and concepts.	Unstructured activities, vague instructions, performing procedures where the underlying principles and concepts are unclear, and "emotional" situations, where they are asked to discuss their feelings.
Pragmatist	Learning about things that have a clear practical application, trying out techniques with feedback, learning "on the job," applying worked examples to their own situation, using instruction manuals.	"Book learning," learning principles and concepts that have no apparent practical use, and working without direction or guidelines.

Action:

Think of a skill that you would like to learn – in your professional or personal life.

Now, bearing in mind what you have just learned about your preferred learning style, write down on the next page an example of the type of activity that would help you to learn that skill.

Skill

Example Activity

> ### Note:
>
> This training session describes a popular and proven approach to learning styles from Honey and Mumford, and from David Kolb, as we explore in Chapter 4.
>
> But other practitioners have different approaches. You can find out more about these in our articles, Learning Styles and VAK Learning Styles.

4.   Adapting Your Learning Style

L earning will feel easier when you perform activities that suit your preferred learning style. However, there will be plenty of occasions when you will have no option but to take whatever learning opportunity is presented to you. This is where learning **strategies** come into play.

Honey and Mumford's learning styles originated from David Kolb's model of the Learning Cycle, which describes the learning process as a continuous loop.

For deep and meaningful learning to occur, Kolb argued that you must complete all four stages. As you will see, each of Honey and Mumford's learning styles corresponds to one of Kolb's learning stages, shown in figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Kolb's Learning Cycle
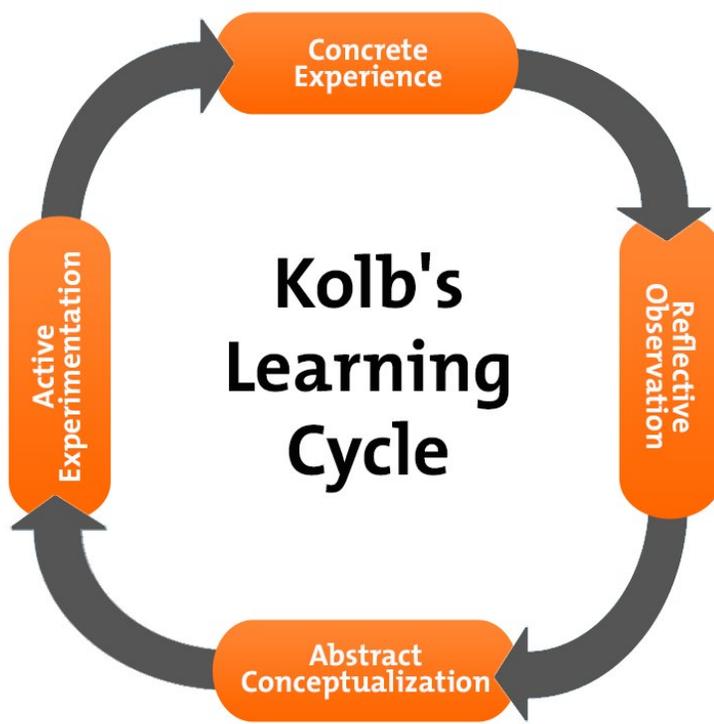
Adapted from Kolb, D.A. (1984) "Experiential Learning: Experience as a Source of Learning and Development." New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Kolb's learning cycle shows how an event (Concrete Experience) prompts you to reflect (Reflective Observation) on what you saw, heard or felt. From this, you come to understand general rules or apply known theories to the experience (Abstract Conceptualization). This, in turn, helps you to generate ideas about how you might change that experience (Active Experimentation), which, in itself, makes the next event happen (Concrete Experience) – and so, the cycle continues.

Figure 3: Learning Styles and Learning Cycle
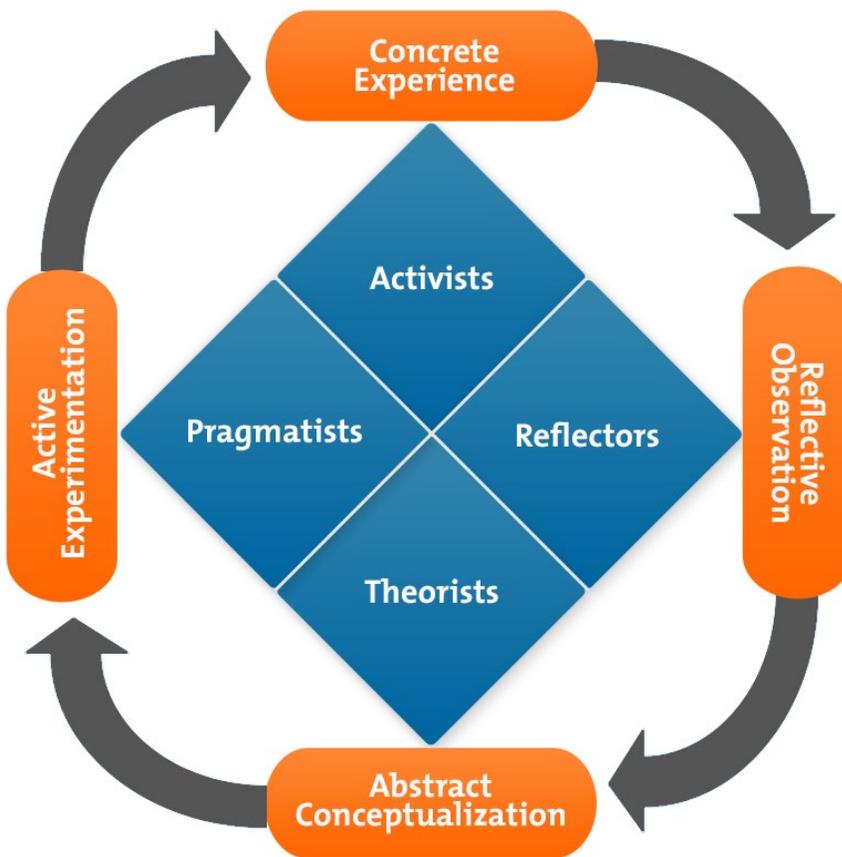
Honey and Mumford's learning styles show how different people are driven by different stages in the learning cycle: Activists prefer concrete experience, Reflectors observe and reflect, Theorists want to understand the underlying concepts and relationships, and Pragmatists like to "have a go" and see if they can make things work.

However, when seen in the context of Kolb's learning cycle, we can see that learning styles are just a preference. We all pass through Kolb's complete cycle along our learning path, which means that we all have the capacity to adopt each of the learning styles, and improve our skills in them.

We'll look at strategies that you can use to strengthen your skills in each of these areas on the following pages.

5. Improving Activist Skills With Role-Play

Activist learners relate best to Kolb's Concrete Experience learning stage. This is when learners don't simply watch or read about something, but actively experience it.

Of course, it's not always practical or even possible to learn about some things by doing them, so, to engage active learners or to improve your own inner Activist, try using role-play.

Role-play is a useful technique for exploring a situation or scenario by "acting it out" with someone else. It is often used to practice unfamiliar, difficult or emotive situations, but it is also useful for Activist learners, because they are able to interact with others, which creates the concrete experience that they need.

You can set up and run a role-play scenario using the four steps below:

Step 1:   Identify the Situation

Start by introducing the learning topic. Encourage discussion to raise any issues and to get participants to think about their ideas or perspectives.

If people are unfamiliar with one another, you may wish to do some ice breaker exercises first. Our article, Ice Breakers, has examples of exercises you can use to encourage people to explore the topics they will be learning about.

Step 2:   Assign Roles

Once you've set the scene, identify the various roles that people will play. These might involve someone performing a particular job, while other role-players represent supportive or hostile clients. The roles could be much more abstract, such as representing different countries competing to manufacture and trade a particular product.

Allocate the roles to the participants in your role-play exercise, and encourage them to adopt the perspectives, goals, motivations, and feelings of the person (or thing) that they are representing.

Step 3:   Act out the Scenario

Act out the scenario. Encourage participants to stay in character for the duration of the exercise. (A particularly emotive topic can be good for engagement, but make sure that the tone remains respectful.)

Step 4: Discuss What You Have Learned

At the end of the role-play, discuss what you've learned, and summarize the main points.

Action:

Plan how you could set up and run a role-playing session using the table, below.

Learning Topic	
Roles	
Main Points to Be Learned	

Tip:

Our article, Role-Playing, has more tips and suggestions for running a successful role-play activity.

6. Improving Reflector Skills With Cornell Note Taking

Reflective learners relate best to Kolb's Reflective Observation stage, in which they spend time analyzing data to identify underlying concepts and structures. This type of learner generally does well in traditional forms of training, which use lectures, note taking, handouts, and passages of text.

Other types of learner, however, can struggle with this kind of learning activity. If this sounds like you, or if you are training people who don't enjoy reflective activities, Cornell Note Taking can help.

The Cornell system is a way of organizing your notes, or other written material, that encourages you to reflect upon what you have read or written.

Start by taking notes, or reviewing the supplied text. Then, go back over the text and identify key words, phrases and actions. Write these in the margin beside the relevant paragraph, and use them to create a summary of the material.

Then, using the key concepts in the margin, review the information by asking yourself questions and checking your answers against the detailed notes. As you repeat this process, your understanding of the material will grow.

Action:

Listen to the first section of our Book Insight podcast, "The Effective Executive." Stop when you hear the musical interlude at around nine minutes, 50 seconds.

As you listen, make notes in the table on the next page. Or, you can create your own Cornell Note Taking paper by drawing a 2.5-inch margin on the left side of a full piece of paper and adding a 2-inch footer at the bottom.

Use the larger, right-hand column. Make your notes as detailed as you wish. The objective is to record as much information as possible.

Cornell Note Paper

Key Words Column	Note-Taking Column
Summary	

Action:

Read through the notes you took while listening to our "Effective Executive" podcast, and draw out its key concepts. Write them down in the key words section. Try to stick to one word, or use very short phrases. You might find it useful to pose these key concepts as questions.

Next, write a summary of the notes you have just taken. Record this summary in the bottom section of the notes page.

This completes the observing and recording phases of the Cornell system. By engaging in the two exercises above, you have already begun to use Reflective Observation skills.

You need to review what you have learned, to increase your understanding of the material even more. This can be done as many times as you like, and your recall of the information will increase each time that you do it.

Action:

Place a blank sheet of paper over the note-taking column of the previous page.

Look at the key words you have written in the left-hand column, and come up with some questions that will test your knowledge and understanding of your detailed notes. Write these down in the first column of the table on the next page.

Next, answer the questions in the adjacent column, using your key words and phrases from before.

When you've finished, check your answers by reviewing your detailed notes again. Repeat this process as many times as you need to have good recall.

Question	Answer

Action: ✓

Now, put away your notes, and the questions and answers that you wrote on the previous page. Test your understanding by answering the five questions in the table, below.

Q1: What type of worker does this book address?

Q2: According to Peter Drucker, who is an executive and where does this person work?

Q3: What two questions should executives ask themselves, once they have documented how they spend their time?

| Q4: What does Drucker mean by executives who "focus downward"? |
| --- |
| |

Q5: What question would Drucker ask himself when evaluating an employee, and why?

Check your answers with the ones on page 21. If you are dissatisfied with your results, you may need to spend more time reviewing your notes.

Tip:

Our article, The Cornell System, gives detailed instructions for using this approach to help you to observe, record and review information.
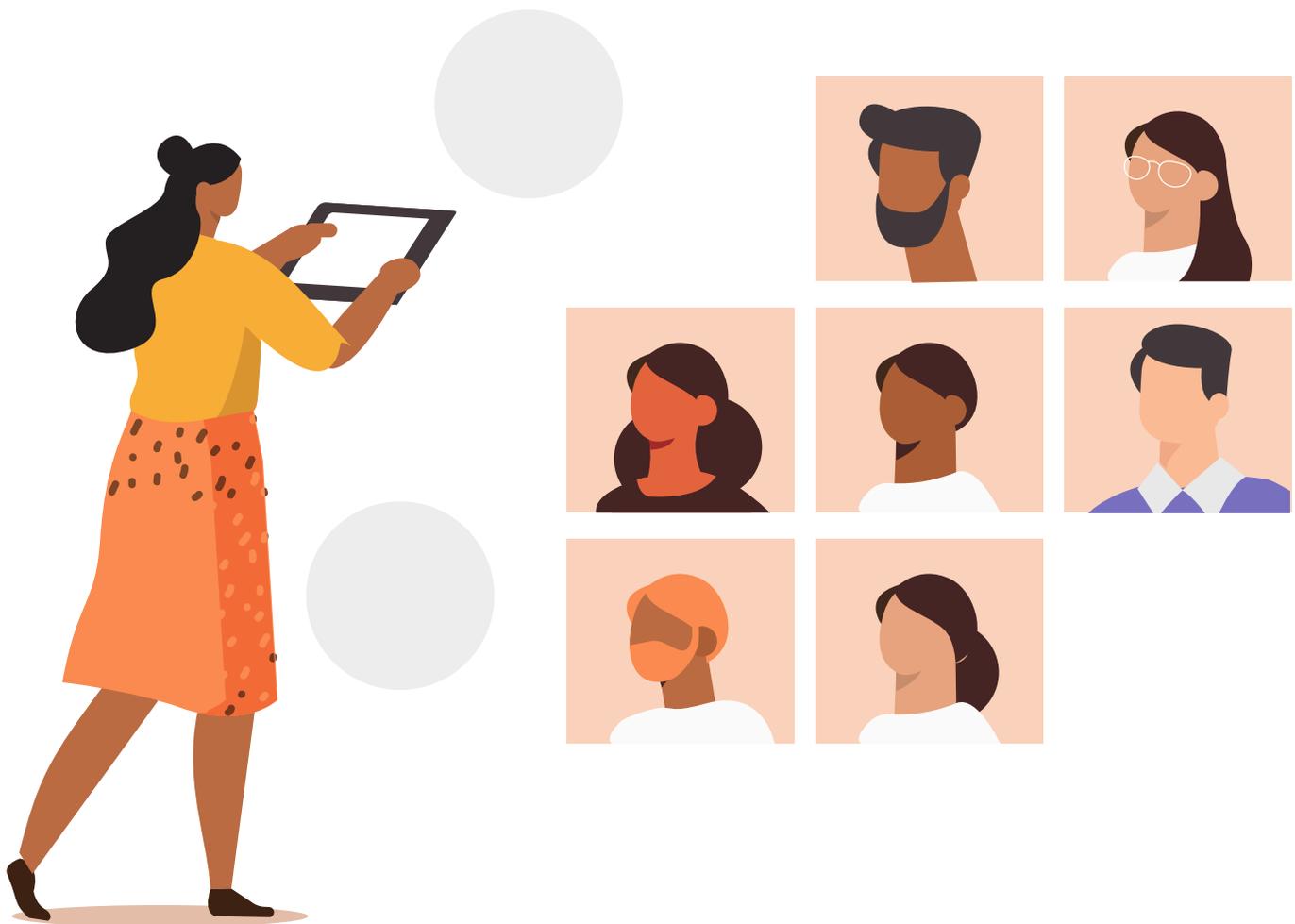
7. Improving Theorist Skills With Mind Maps

T heorists relate best to Kolb's Abstract Conceptualization stage of learning. Here, learners put new information into context by relating it to what they already know, either from personal experience or from established theories.

Theorists naturally enjoy making connections between pieces of information, so Mind Maps® are ideal for engaging a theoretical learner, or for improving your own Abstract Conceptualization skills.

How to Draw a Mind Map

Start with a central idea or concept. As you learn and think more about the idea, write down your thoughts on lines radiating out from the center. Continue to expand the map with new thoughts and ideas, while looking for connections between what you have written down.

Figure 4, below, shows an example of a Mind Map used to prepare for a presentation.

Figure 4: Mind Map About Making a Presentation
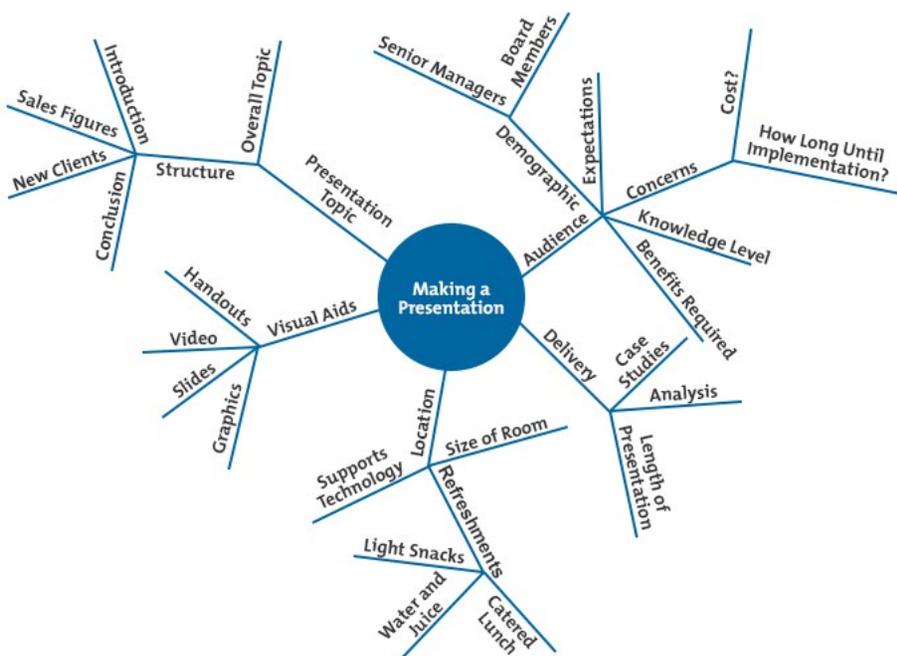
Action:

Go to our article, Running Effective Meetings, and then create a Mind Map as you read it to record what you have learned.

Begin by writing "Running Effective Meetings" in the circle at the center of the page overleaf. Then, as you come to the main points or ideas (subheadings are good indicators of these), draw a line out from the center and write a concise description along it.

Continue to extend your Mind Map by drawing new lines radiating out from the initial ones to record any supporting facts or ideas that you find in the article. You can continue in this way, adding as many levels to the diagram as you like, until you reach the end of the article.

Use your prior knowledge and experience to look for interconnections between the lines you have drawn. See if you can find any links that were not apparent from the article. This often helps you to see how the groups of ideas affect one another when they are applied to the real world. Mark these interconnections with dotted lines.

You can compare your Mind Map with one that we have created for the same scenario, on page 22.

Tip:

Our article, Mind Maps, gives you detailed instructions on how to use this highly effective system of note taking.

Preparing a Mind Map is a useful way to take your new understanding to the next level. Looking at a process holistically, and creating visual connections between the steps and stages, helps to bring out the "big picture."
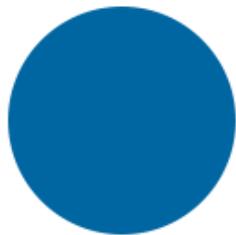
8. Improving Pragmatist Skills With Case Studies

Pragmatists relate best to Kolb's Active Experimentation phase of learning, which is when ideas are put into practice.

Pragmatists tend not to enjoy learning about something "in theory." Instead, they like to see how it will work. A good way to engage this kind of learner is through case studies. These are a form of problem-based learning, where you present a situation that needs a resolution.

Case studies can be historical or fictional accounts of something that happened in a particular company, industry or project, over a set period of time.

If you are training a Pragmatist, a relevant case study will really help him or her to engage with the topic. Alternatively, if you are a Pragmatist yourself and you are struggling to grasp a particular concept, try to come up with a case study from your own experience that helps to explain it.

Action:

Read our article on why projects fail. Now visit the Classic Mistakes page of the Why Projects Fail blog, and find an example that clearly illustrates one or more of the principles outlined in our article.

Did the case study help you to understand the principles better? Maybe it brought to mind an example from your own experience, too.

Tip:

Read our article, Case Study-Based Learning, for more information on how to make case studies an integral part of the way that you train people.

9. Key Points

Each of us has a preferred style of learning that feels most natural to us. Whether you are an Activist, Reflector, Theorist, or Pragmatist determines which type of learning opportunity that you are most drawn to. When you can seek out these types of activity, learning just seems to flow.

You can direct your own learning more effectively, and train others with different learning styles in a more accessible way, if you develop an understanding of the different learning styles.

There are various strategies that you can use to engage and expand your skills in each of the learning styles:

- Role-Play helps to engage Activist learners, who like to "get stuck in."
- Cornell Note Taking encourages Reflective thinkers to analyze detailed information.
- Mind Maps help Theorists to break concepts down to the fine details.
- Case studies provide the real-life examples and applications favored by Pragmatists.

While you may find one particular learning style more comfortable, you are most effective when you can draw upon a repertoire of learning skills across all styles of learning.

Learning is a lifelong activity, and applying these key learning strategies can help you to make the process much more effective and enjoyable!

Appendix 1.   Answers to Questions on "The Effective Executive"

Q1: What type of worker does this book address?

The type of worker is called a knowledge worker. This is someone who is paid for what they know, and how they apply it, rather than for what they make with their hands.

Q2: According to Peter Drucker, who is an executive and where does this person work?

An executive is any knowledge worker who makes decisions that will have an impact on an organization's ability to be successful and achieve its results. Following this definition, there are executives throughout an organization, not just in the corner offices, with "executive" or "C" level titles.

Q3: What two questions should executives ask themselves, once they have documented how they spend their time?

Does this need to be done at all?

Can someone else do this instead of me?

Q4: What does Drucker mean by executives who "focus downward"?

He says executives worry too much about what their team members are doing, instead of considering their own roles in improving organizational performance. Simply making sure that your people are working properly will only keep you at the status quo. To improve, executives need to be creating value through their own contributions, too.

Q5: What question would Drucker ask himself when evaluating an employee, and why?

What does this person do exceptionally well? By focusing on people's strengths, you can get a great amount of productivity. Organize people's talents so they are concentrating their time and energy on their strengths instead of minimizing their weaknesses. This way, you can expect even greater performance in the areas that they excel in.

Appendix 2.   Our Mind Map for Running Effective Meetings