

LEARNING

MEANING and CONCEPT:

The concept of learning is very important for organisational behaviour. It has assumed tremendous significance because everything that we do in an organisation, some learning is definitely involved. The concept of learning can be used in many contexts. It refers to the process of acquiring the response adequately to a situation which may or may not have previously encountered.

A widely accepted simple definition of 'learning' is any relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of experience. As per this definition, one cannot see the process of learning but if there is a noticeable change in behaviour then it can be said that learning has taken place. This means we are actually seeing the changed behaviour in individuals as a result of learning. Thus, learning as a concept seems to be an abstract and a theoretical one and is not observable directly. It is also said that learning is a relatively permanent change in the frequency of occurrence of a specific individual behaviour.

In an organisational setting, it is the work-set and organisational norms, which will act as objective bases for determining whether an employee's behaviour is desirable or undesirable and whether he or she needs to learn and practise productive work behaviour. Thus, it is the process by which skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour are formed and developed as a result of education, training, socialisation and experience.

Learning also occurs as a result of conditioning and restriction. A person is persuaded to adopt guidance or regulation or conformity and compliance based on each situational requirement. Moreover, people learn at different rates, times and stages during their life time. Of course, ultimately it is the individual's own needs and drives, and rewards that enhance one's potential and expertise, marketability along with increased esteem, and respect and status that will act as the motivational drive(s) in inducing the person to learn.

There are six important components of learning:

- 1) Learning involves change, although the change may be for good or bad from an organisation's point of view.
- 2) Not all changes reflect learning. To constitute learning, change should be relatively permanent.
- 3) Learning is reflected in behaviour. A change in an individual's thought process or attitudes, not accompanied by behaviour, is no learning.
- 4) The change in behaviour should occur as a result of experience, practice, or training.
- 5) The practice or experience must be reinforced in order for learning to occur. If reinforcement does not accompany the practice or experience, the behaviour will eventually disappear.
- 6) Learning occurs throughout one's life.

THEORIES OF LEARNING

1. Classical Conditioning

Classical conditioning (also known as Pavlovian or respondent conditioning) is learning through association and was discovered by Pavlov, a Russian physiologist. In simple terms, two stimuli are linked together to produce a new learned response in a person or animal. The most famous example of classical conditioning was Pavlov's experiment with dogs, who salivated in response to a bell tone. Pavlov showed that when a bell was sounded each time the dog was fed, the dog learned to associate the sound with the presentation of the food.

2. Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning, also known as instrumental conditioning, is a method of learning normally attributed to B.F. Skinner, where the consequences of a response determine the probability of it being repeated. Through operant conditioning behaviour which is reinforced (rewarded) will likely be repeated, and behaviour which is punished will occur less frequently.

By the 1920s, John B. Watson had left academic psychology, and other behaviourists were becoming influential, proposing new forms of learning other than classical conditioning. Skinner believed that we do have such a thing as a mind, but that it is simply more productive to study observable behaviour rather than internal mental events. The work of Skinner was rooted in a view that classical conditioning was far too simplistic to be a complete explanation of complex human behaviour. He believed that the best way to understand behaviour is to look at the causes of an action and its consequences. He called this approach operant conditioning.

3. Cognitive Theory

It is about understanding how human mind works while people learn. The theory focuses on how information is processed by the brain, and how learning occurs through that internal processing of information. It is based on the idea that people mentally process the information they receive, rather than simply responding to stimuli from their environment.

Cognitive learning is centred on the mental processes by which the learner takes in, interprets, stores and retrieves information. The mental processes occur between stimulus/input and response/output. The individual takes in the stimulus, processes it in their mind, and then acts upon the stimulus.

4. Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is a theory of learning process and social behaviour which proposes that new behaviours can be acquired by observing and imitating others. It states that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement. In addition to the observation of behaviour, learning also occurs through the observation of rewards and punishments, a process known as vicarious reinforcement. When a particular behaviour is rewarded regularly, it will most

likely persist; conversely, if a particular behaviour is constantly punished, it will most likely desist. The theory expands on traditional behavioural theories, in which behaviour is governed solely by reinforcements, by placing emphasis on the important roles of various internal processes in the learning individual.

LEARNING PROCESS/NATURE

Theories of Learning: Learning is part of every one's life. In our life, all complex behaviour is learned. Learning is defined as any relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a result of experience. Whenever any change occurs learning is taken place in the individual. If an individual behaves, reacts, responds as a result of experience which is different from others, a person has encountered some new learning experience in his life. This definition consists of the following four key elements:

- i) **Change process:** Learning involves some change in oneself in terms of observable actions explicitly shown to others or change in one's attitude or thought process occur with oneself implicitly. Change may be good or bad or positive or negative from an organization point of view. If a person is happened to experience some negative incidents, that person will hold prejudices or bias or to restrict their output. On the contrary, if a person is encountering some good incident, that person is likely to hold positive attitude.
- ii) **Permanent change:** Due to whatever exposure a person encounters, the impact what it generates may be long lasting and permanent. Hence, the change must be of relatively permanent. If change occurs due to fatigue or alcohol consumption or temporary adaptation, it may be vanished once the goal is achieved.
- iii) **Setting behavioural actions:** Explicit changes occurring in behaviour is the main goal of learning process. A change in an individual's thought process or attitudes without any changes in any explicit behaviour will not be considered as learning process.
- iv) **Need for meaningful experiences:** Some form of experiences is necessary for learning. Experience may be acquired directly through observation or practice. If experience results in a relatively permanent change in behaviour, one can confidently say that learning has taken place. Theories of Learning: There are three types of learning theories. These theories are classical conditioning, operant conditioning and social learning.

DETERMINANTS OF LEARNING

The important factors that determine learning are:

1. **Motive:** Motives also called drives, prompt people to action. They are primary energisers of behaviour. They are the ways of behaviour and mainspring of action. They are largely subjective and represent the mental feelings of human beings. They are cognitive variables. They arise continuously and determine the general direction of an individual's behaviour without motive learning cannot occur.

2. **Stimuli:** Stimuli are objects that exist in the environment in which a person lives. Stimuli increase the probability of eliciting a specific response from a person.
3. **Generalisation:** The principle of generalisation has important implications for human learning. Generalisation takes place when the similar new stimuli repeat in the environment. When two stimuli are exactly alike, they will have probability of eliciting specific response. It makes possible for a manager to predict human behaviour when stimuli are exactly alike.
4. **Discrimination:** What is not generalisation is discrimination. In case of discrimination, responses vary to different stimuli. For example, an MBA student may learn to respond to video teaching but not to the oral lecturing by his professor.
5. **Responses:** The stimulus results in responses - be these in the physical form or in terms of attitudes or perception or in other phenomena. However, the responses need to be operationally defined and preferably physically observable.
6. **Reinforcement:** Reinforcement is a fundamental conditioning of learning. Reinforcement can be defined as anything that both increases the strength of response and tends to induce repetitions of behaviour that preceded the reinforcement. No measurable modification of behaviour can take place without reinforcement.
7. **Retention:** Retention means remembrance of learned behaviour overtime. Converse is forgetting. Learning which is forgotten over time is called "extinction". When the response strength returns after extinction without only intervening reinforcement it is called "spontaneous recovery".

LEARNING AND OB

Learning is a principal motivation for many employees to stay in organizations. Learning has a major impact on individual behaviour as it influences abilities, role perceptions and motivation. Along with its role in individual behaviour, learning is necessary for knowledge management. Knowledge management improves an organization's capacity to obtain, share and use knowledge in order to improve its operations and success.