

# Perspectives for Managers

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## Learning Scripts for Impact

Based on the forthcoming book “Mastering Executive Education: How to Combine Content with Context and Emotion, The IMD Guide.”



**Paul Strebel**  
Sandoz Family Foundation Professor  
of Strategic Change Management

and



**Tracey Keys,**  
IMD Research Associate

The business press continues to question the value and “product” of business education programs. We agree that business learning needs to add value back in the workplace. The question is how? Over the last two years, we have researched what is common across great off-site learning experiences at IMD to find out what the drivers of such experiences are and how they can be combined to create high-impact learning – learning that “sticks” and is applied in the workplace.

Here, we offer a brief summary of the key insights. This summary will help you understand what generates a high-impact off-site learning experience so you can cut through the wide array of learning choices to target your time (and spend) most efficiently, choosing learning experiences based on best practices as well as ways of learning that best suit your needs. Equally important, it provides insights and approaches that can be used in-house to develop the learning of your teams as well as the learning processes of your organization more broadly.

### Rethinking Executive Education – What’s Wrong with the Status Quo?

In order to win, tomorrow’s successful executives will have to combine insight with the art and science of management. It won’t do just to rely on chance for creative insight, to learn the skills that underpin the art of management only in corporate training programs, or to look to consultants and business academics for the science that informs new concepts.

Managers themselves have to be able to integrate and customize the relevant insights for the particular business context they face.

At the same time, they must manage their own emotions and those of their people.

To meet these new challenges, what needs to change to increase the return on executive education, so it delivers the value companies seek? The answer lies on the frontline, in actively identifying and applying best practices in the way executive education is conceived and delivered.

First, there has to be a broader perspective on what learning executives need, and when they need it. Continuous learning is critical to stay ahead in a fast-changing world – and because this world is increasingly interconnected this means not just rational learning about facts and models but learning about managing people and relationships across many boundaries, whether organizational, geographic or cultural. Executive education can no longer be thought of as only an MBA, but different experiences as executives grow through their careers and face different types of challenges. For example, young managers may need to learn “skills” in areas they are unfamiliar with such as finance or marketing. But senior executives, perhaps Board level, need to focus more on developing the ability to think across boundaries to develop vision and strategy and to lead people in the chosen direction. This is compounded by the need for a much more rapid exposure to new approaches and contexts, over days or weeks rather than years.

To meet these needs, teaching approaches need to change. Much executive education has evolved out of academic university courses. Good university courses are based on the rational logic of the latest thinking in the field, packaged into a series of lectures delivered to (usually) young students. But

seasoned executives bring a career of intuitive experience to the table and are rightly cynical about the fruits of “pure logic.” Great lecturers can captivate them, but to do so they have to go well beyond logic and add passion and emotion. The case method alone is not enough. Cases are a great in-depth introduction to business life and hone the problem-solving skills of younger managers. Experienced executives already know about business life as they bring their own case studies, their accumulated experiences, with them. They want less on problem-solving and skill-building, more on path-finding and execution. Additional innovations in the use of multimedia and guest speakers are also not sufficient. While these have improved the learning experience, again they alone do not deliver what business today needs to build solid advantages in people and learning. What’s needed is executive education that translates into real impact.

High-impact learning provides the solution. It is not just about learning facts. It is about content linked to context that is retained by the executive and applied outside the learning setting in the workplace, learning that generates changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

High-impact learning is a much broader, holistic approach to developing the whole person – one that recognizes that you cannot divorce the rational from the emotional elements of learning. Learning in its essence is not only about stretching and challenging the mind to become capable of more, but also managing one’s emotions and how one relates to and influences others.

Taking an holistic approach also requires integrating off-site learning experiences with the strategic learning needs of the company. Off-site learning experiences clearly have to be customized to fit with both the learning needs of the executive and the on-the-job processes. More than that, to justify the expense of taking time out from the job, the off-site experience must provide learning with impact; learning that helps to shape the leaders and organizations that companies need not just to survive, but to prosper.

## Drivers of High-Impact Learning

By looking at recent neuroscientific research on the brain and consciousness, and observing and analyzing the most successful IMD sessions and programs with hundreds of companies and thousands of executives, we see four common factors underpinning great learning experiences. These drivers are:

- **Emotional highs:** the explicit engagement of executives at an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Going beyond the “comfort zone” is critical to opening executives to new perspectives, while positive emotions provide a foundation for retaining and applying learning in future.
- **Energizing roles:** the active management of relationships and roles among the participants and the educator to develop the interactions required for learning. Placing the learner at the heart of the experience and changing roles to create energy and sharing fosters deeper learning.
- **Real world context:** the reflection of “real” business challenges that executives are facing daily in the content and context of the learning process. Relevance drives engagement, as well as retention and application of learning. It requires deep

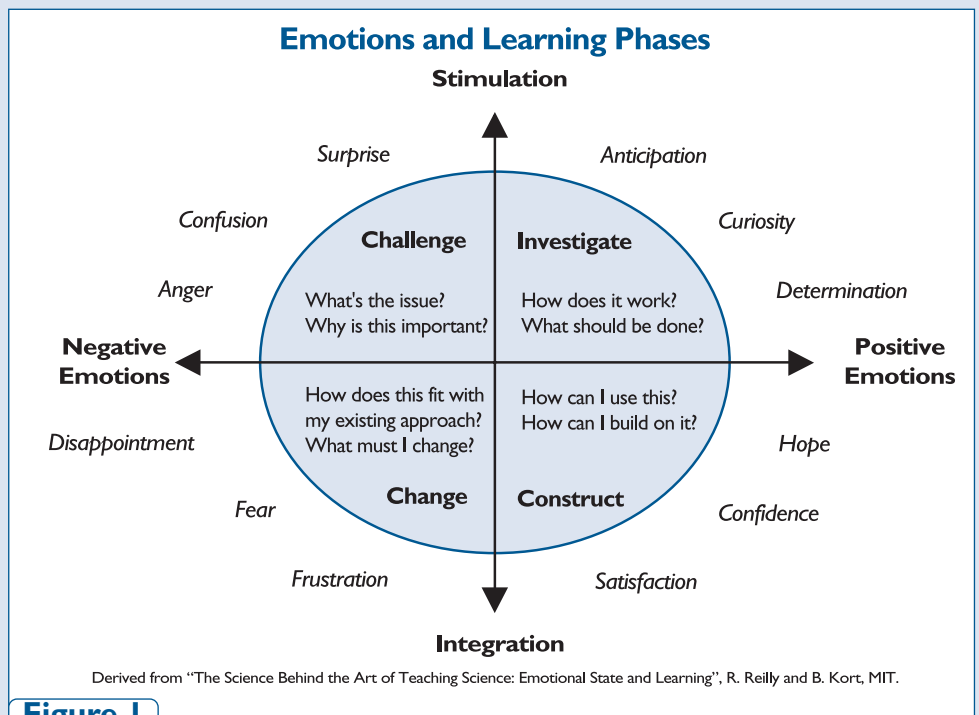
understanding of the executives and the business environment to create situations and content that participants can relate to effectively.

- **3-Dimensional learning:** learning experiences designed around intellectual awareness, emotional awareness and action-based application. All three dimensions are required to embed learning. Using many different approaches and stimuli helps to accelerate this process.

## Phases in High Impact Learning

In addition to these drivers, the long tradition of psychological and sociological research on adult learning points to several phases in learning. The basic phases can be summarised as follows:

- **Challenge:** *What’s the issue? Exposure to new information, new ways of doing things. Why is this important?* A challenge to existing beliefs and/or behavior raises the tension and gets the participants involved. Common emotions involved in this phase are surprise, confusion and sometimes anger.
- **Investigate:** *How does it work? Analysis to understand what the challenge is really all about, and how key relationships will be*



**Figure 1**

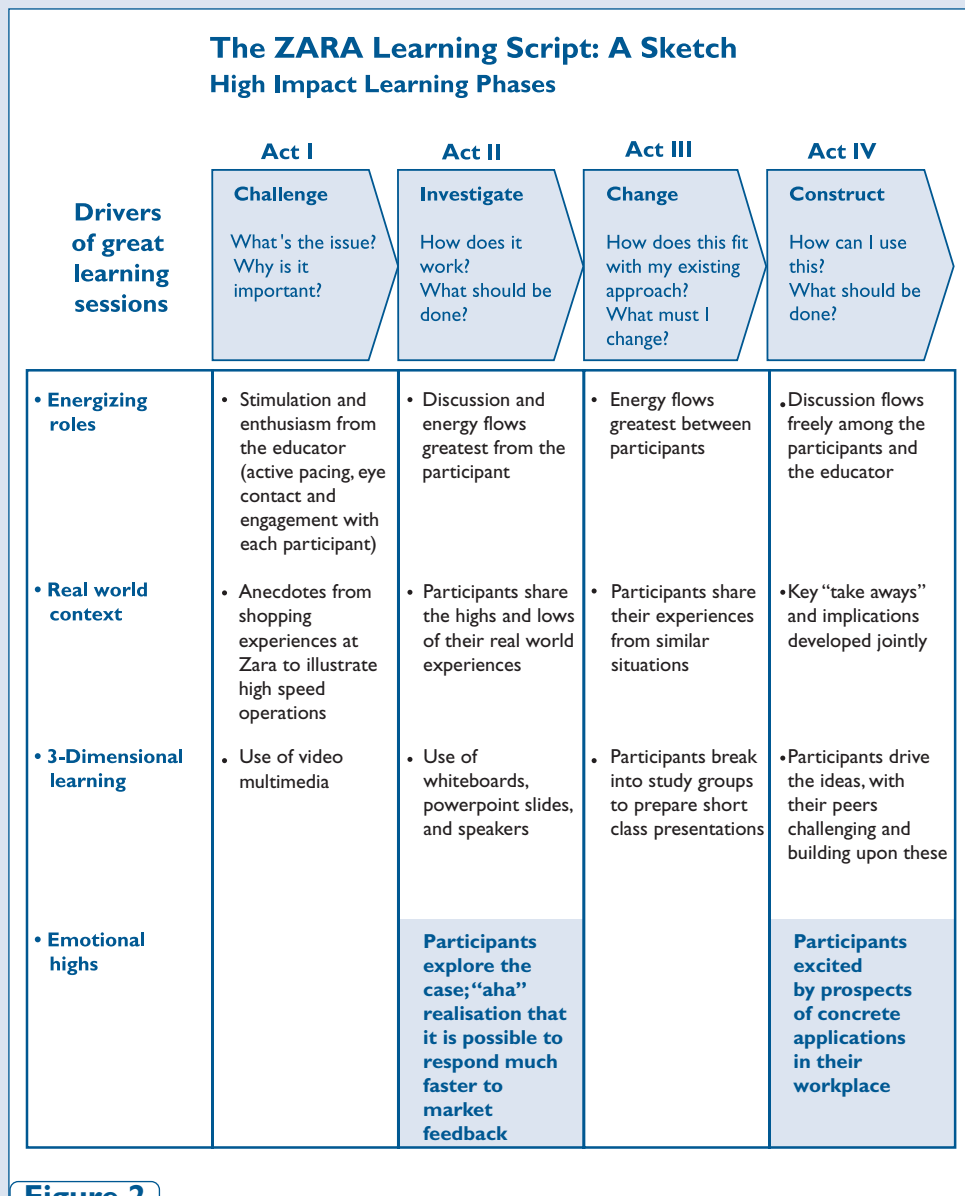


Figure 2

impacted. *What should be done?* Choices and solutions, or more explicit articulation, of what might be done to deal with the challenge. Common emotions include anticipation, curiosity and determination.

*How can I build on it?* Constructing new mental models and approaches that integrate the learning. Common related emotions are hope, confidence and satisfaction.

- **Change:** *How does this fit with my existing approach? What’s similar and different to what I already know and do? What must I change?* Reflection on what this means for the participant’s beliefs and behavior going forward. Common emotions are disappointment, fear and frustration.
- **Construct:** *How can I use this?* Actual or simulated experience to see how the proposal, or solution, works in practice.

The nature of learning is fluid and its exact mechanics remain obscure despite neurological breakthroughs, because every person is unique. So, as an individual learns, some phases may be repeated or undertaken outside the learning setting. In particular, fundamental change to beliefs and behaviours and construction of a new world view require active testing and experience. Therefore the learning may only become truly embedded after the learning experience has been applied repeatedly – which is why it is crucial to link

off-site experiences to the organization’s strategic agenda.

## Learning Scripts

If the drivers and the adult learning phases are the levers that the educator has in his or her toolbox to promote great learning, where’s the roadmap for putting them together to get where you want to go in terms of achieving specific learning objectives? Meet the **learning script**. As an executive, it’s not unusual to be sitting at the start of a session wondering what the educator is doing – understanding how learning scripts work can be useful in getting the most out of the experience.

Great learning scripts resemble theatrical scripts in that they comprise a series of parts (or acts), each with associated content, activities and roles. Each program and each session within it needs a script, although clearly the program design allows greater time to make use of the different drivers of learning. For example, a learning script for a session *might* comprise four acts, each using a mix of the key drivers outlined earlier. Figure 2 illustrates how these may be applied in each act of the script, using an actual study of operating speed at Zara, the international clothing manufacturer and retailer.<sup>1</sup>

Orchestration<sup>2</sup> and customization of these scripts is a complex challenge requiring a mix of insight, method and art. Each learning script is customized to reflect the context and objectives of the executives on several dimensions: Their timeline (before, during and after the learning experience), place (the learning context and the dynamics of the world around us), relationships (groups and networks), individual experience and knowledge (conscious and unconscious). These insights into participant needs are then combined with method in the selection and design of the learning acts with a variety of content and activity, and art in the conducting of learning roles that energize and connect with emotion.

In brief, great learning scripts for executives are where content meets context and emotion.

## A New Generation of Wireless Presentation Devices at Logitech

When Yves Karcher set about the 'Learning from your Customer' assignment as part of his IMD Executive MBA ("EMBA"), he could hardly have imagined the impact it would have on him and his company. Just 12 months down the line, his company - Logitech, the leading manufacturer of cordless PC peripherals - has just unveiled the first in a new generation of wireless presentation devices - a direct result of Yves' EMBA project.

The assignment introduced Yves to a novel approach that involved him (an engineering director and product unit manager for Retail Pointing Devices) interacting directly with customers, broadening his own knowledge of his company and becoming a driver of positive change in product development.

Yves comments, "If I had not done the project for IMD, I would not be so passionate about the outcome. I felt a duty to improve the product for the customers based on what I had heard." His long-term goal is to see the same approach used for all future projects.

*This article is based on the forthcoming book *Mastering Executive Education: How to Combine Content with Context and Emotion, The IMD Guide to be published by FT Prentice Hall, September 2005, all rights reserved.**

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## Choosing the "Right" Learning Experiences – What Do I Look For?

As you consider how to make the most of executive education, it is important to recognise that the most effective learning experiences:

- Are based on best practices: scripted to explicitly address the four key drivers of high-impact learning and to promote the relevant phases of learning.
- Take a holistic view of the individual's development needs: extending beyond the purely rational and intellectual to include the emotional dimension and opportunities for application.
- Are customized to reflect the context and strategic learning needs of the executive i.e. different programs fulfill different needs.
- Are not a "one-time fix", but need to be viewed as a step in the process of continuous learning.

Without these, the potential for real impact and integration of learning into the workplace will be limited.



1 ZARA, The fashion retail billionaire, 2003, IMD Catalog No. 698. This case on Zara, part of the Inditex group, was developed by Gilles Delbos and illustrates the unique characteristics of the Zara business model: no advertisement, very fast product introduction, simplified decision processes and the internal network of companies that work within the group.

2 It is no coincidence that one of our major programs (Orchestrating Winning Performance) also uses the orchestra analogy in its title: orchestras that perform outstanding music are a subtle mix of careful scripting and improvisation, held together by a common objective and leader. This combination of art, science and conducting closely reflects the domain of the teacher, faculty or facilitator.

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IMD  
P.O. Box 915, CH-1001 Lausanne,  
Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 21 618 0342  
Fax: +41 21 618 0715  
info@imd.ch  
<http://www.imd.ch>

Editor: Roger Whittle

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