



Applying the Science of Learning to Your Meetings

Whether the purpose of your meeting is to share information, reach agreements, or make decisions, it is likely the objectives require participants to undergo some level of learning. The science of adult learning helps us understand the cognitive and behavioral underpinnings of how people learn, and with that understanding we can facilitate the building of knowledge and skills. Check out these principles and some ideas to translate them into practice during your meetings.

This list comprises frequently suggested ideas offered by Office for Coastal Management facilitators and should not be considered a complete list.

Make it relatable.

Activities that demonstrate relevance for the learner will help the learning stick.

How to apply it: Share case studies and scenarios that highlight problems participants can relate to, and show how new skills and knowledge can help. Include a question that asks participants to reflect on something close to them.

Timing matters.

Timing plays an important role in how mental associations arise and how knowledge is retained.

How to apply it: Find out what participants need to know now. Share information and build skills that can be used in the next 30 days.

Leverage experience.

Experiences (both first- and second-hand) motivate learners and lead to a change in an individual's knowledge and behaviors.

How to apply it: Ask participants to share everyday life experiences related to the topic and what they have learned from them.

Emphasize community.

Learning is most effective when it takes place in communities.

How to apply it: Foster communities of practice, where participants have a common interest and are motivated to learn and build social capital. Create peer-to-peer sharing opportunities.

Avoid overload.

Cognitive overload happens when working memory receives more information than it can handle comfortably. This can lead to frustration and impede learning.

How to apply it: Share information in smaller chunks, and avoid overloading presentations with too much data. Remember that it is difficult for people to listen, read, and react all at once. Include pauses and opportunities for reflection.

Prioritize safety and inclusion.

People are motivated to learn when they feel safe and valued.

How to apply it: Build a meeting environment where everyone feels like they matter. Establish norms that foster inclusion and respect. Work to make sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute, and be sure to recognize their contributions.

Practice.

Learning sticks best with practice, but it's best to space practice over time.

How to apply it: Provide opportunities to practice new skills (e.g., communication techniques, decision-making tools, facilitation tips) during the meeting, and allow participants to self-assess and get feedback from others. If your participants meet periodically, revisit what was learned at the last meeting, and see if anyone has had the opportunity to put it into practice.

Build on what they know.

Learning is easier when we build on what we already know.

How to apply it: Reinforce the point that participants already have a wide and deep base of knowledge. Use polls or breakout discussions to find out what people already know, and point out connections to new information.

Go deep.

The longer participants are engaged with content and the more deeply they are invited to think about it, the more likely they will be to retain it for future use.

How to apply it: It can be difficult to find the time during meetings for participants to “go deep” on a topic, so look for ways to do this outside of a meeting. Use topic-focused breakout groups or start a book club (even if the reading is an article or blog post) where the discussion can allow profound contemplation and discourse.

Sources:

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