

the last word

It's about more than just ticking the boxes

Go to a conference. Learn from a mentor. Attend a course. Join a committee. You'll hear all of these suggestions (and more) for professional development and continuing education, and it's all good advice. But only if you do more than just 'tick the boxes'.

At the University of Adelaide, we actively support professional development. We assign mentors to our new staff members, for example. One mentoring pair dutifully signed the agreement, organised their first meeting and then forgot to join the university's mentoring program. A manager went to a very expensive interstate conference and then let the papers gather dust on a shelf in her office. Another staff member went to a time management session and still has a crowded inbox and a messy desk.

I am the staff member with the time management certificate and the untidy desk, so I know what I'm talking about. Professional development means more than ticking the boxes. (Mentoring? Tick. Attend conference? Tick.) We need to follow through on our commitments and to reflect on the success (or otherwise) of what we've done.

All of us have strengths and weaknesses, skills that we have mastered and areas that need development. We also have a finite supply of energy and time. We need to work out our priorities, choose the right kind of professional development, put what we've learnt into practice and then reflect on what we've done (the opposite of just 'ticking the boxes'.)

Does it matter if a manager attends a conference and then just files the papers afterwards? Yes, if she does this more often than not. No, if she gets good ideas that lead to demonstrable outcomes from most of the conferences that she attends. Does it matter if my desk is untidy? Yes, if it makes me inefficient and annoys my clients. No, if I meet my project deadlines, answer my emails promptly and see my clients away from my desk (we have consultation rooms and I take my iPad everywhere with me.)

And it does matter when a 'customer-service-trained' staff member regularly answers the phone in a brusque and unfriendly tone of voice. And it does matter when a senior manager mumbles his way through presentations and fails to get his ideas across to his audience, despite having been on a course designed to help improve presentation skills.

Make sure that you do more than tick the boxes when it comes to your professional development. Know your organisation's and your own priorities; focus on what will make a difference. Follow through on your commitments and reflect on what you've done. Get feedback from your colleagues and learn from your mistakes.

And now I really must make time to tidy up my desk.

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