

Learning Styles in Practice

Using Learning-Style Awareness in Leadership Development, Coaching, Mentoring & SUPERvision

People take in, process & apply information differently — & the people we lead, coach, mentor & SUPERvise are no exception. Learning-style awareness doesn't mean putting someone in a box; used well, it's a lens that helps you notice when your own default approach might not be landing, & gives you other doors to try. This article looks at how that awareness shows up in four related but distinct practices, before pointing to some of the tools available to explore it further.

Leadership Development

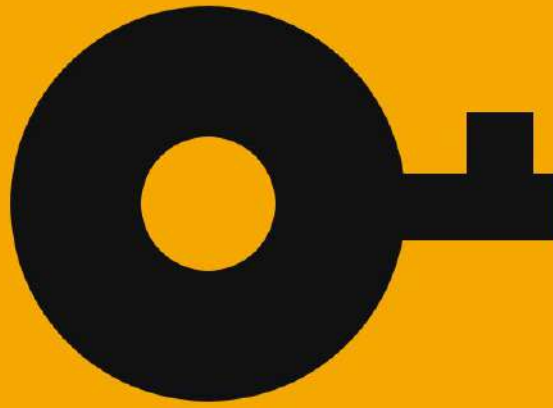
Leaders tend to develop others the way they themselves learn best — the leader who thinks out loud runs talk-heavy one-to-ones; the leader who learns by reading sends a document and moves on. Learning-style awareness interrupts that default. It helps a leader flex how they communicate, delegate & give feedback to fit the person in front of them, not just their own preference.

This matters most when leadership development is being cascaded through a team or organisation. A programme designed around one dominant style — heavy on lecture-style input, for instance — will land unevenly. Leaders who understand the range of ways people learn are better placed to design development that actually develops, and to build the kind of psychologically safe environment where someone can say what genuinely helps them learn, rather than what's easiest to ask for.

Coaching

A coach who understands how a client best processes information can shape how they invite reflection, not just what they ask. A client who thinks visually may get more from mapping a challenge out on paper than from talking around it. An auditory processor may need to talk it through out loud, sometimes more than once, before clarity arrives. A kinesthetic client might find more insight in physically representing a dilemma — through movement, role-play, or constellations-style work — than in sitting still and discussing it.

The risk, without this awareness, is that a coach unconsciously defaults to the method that works for the coach, not the client. Matching the mode of exploration to how the client actually processes — rather than assuming one method of reflection fits everyone — tends to deepen the insight generated, not just the comfort of the conversation.



Mentoring

A mentor's hard-won experience is usually offered in the mentor's own preferred style — a reflective mentor tends to hand over written notes or frameworks; an active mentor tends to default to “let me show you.” Neither is wrong, but neither reliably lands with a mentee who processes differently.

Understanding a mentee's learning preference helps wisdom actually transfer, rather than being technically shared but not absorbed. It also shapes practical choices within the relationship: whether to send a reading list or have a conversation, whether to talk through a scenario or walk the mentee through doing it, whether reflection between sessions works better written down or thought through out loud.

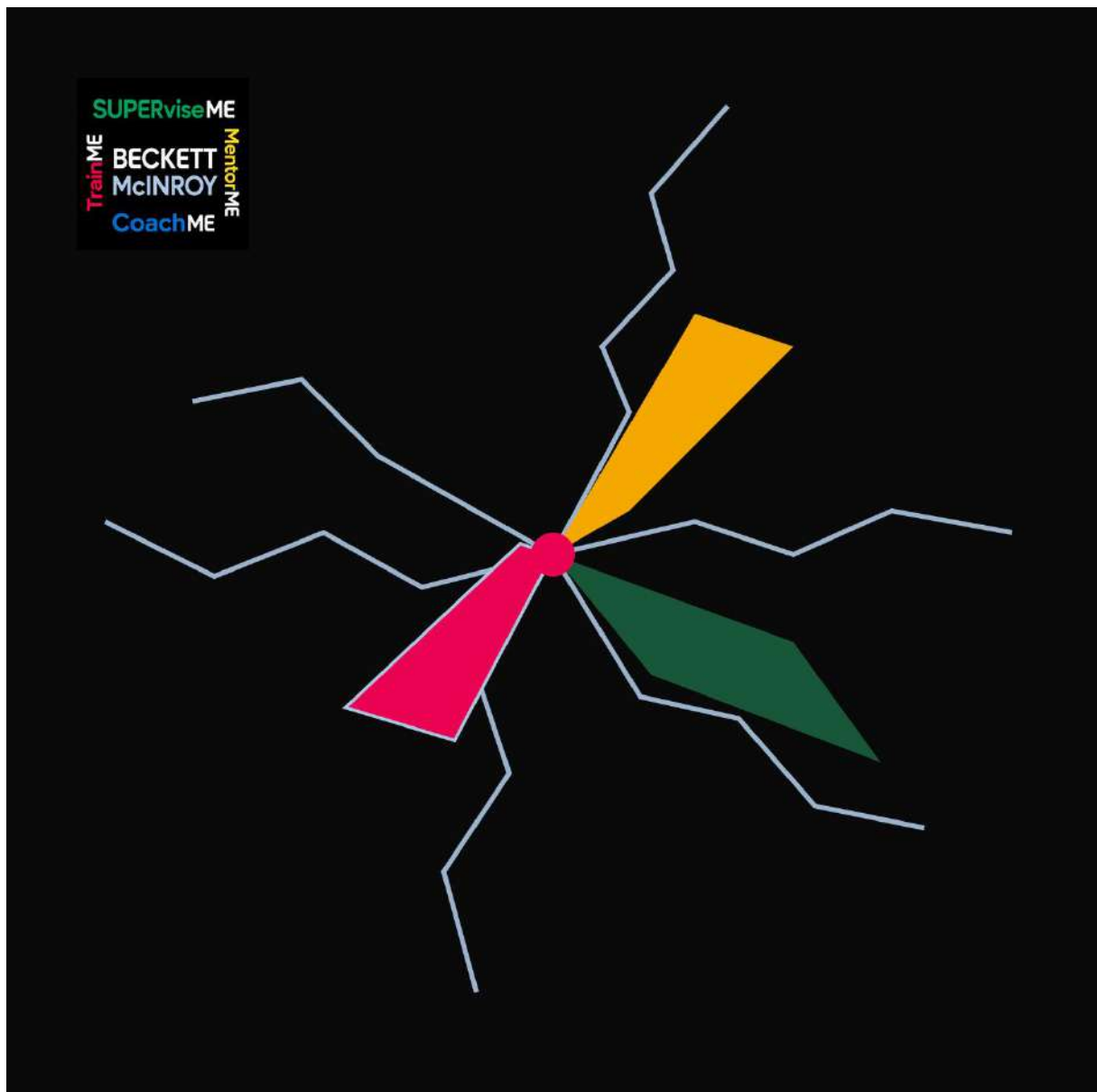
SUPERvision

In SUPERvision, learning-style awareness cuts two ways — the SUPERvisor's own style, and the SUPERvisee's. Some SUPERvisees process a case best by talking it through in the room; others need to write a reflective account beforehand to find out what they actually think; others get further by physically walking through what happened, almost re-enacting the moment, than by discussing it in the abstract.

A SUPERvisor attuned to this can adapt how a session is structured — verbal exploration, written preparation, or a more experiential, embodied technique — to help a SUPERvisee get beneath the surface of a case, rather than staying at a purely intellectual account of it. This is particularly relevant in group SUPERvision, where several learning styles are usually in the room at once.

There Are More Options Than These Six

The inventories listed below are a well-used, practical starting point — not an exhaustive list. Other established frameworks worth exploring include Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, the Gregorc Mind Styles Model, and various style-mapping tools drawn from personality frameworks such as Myers-Briggs. No single inventory captures the whole picture of how someone learns, and it's worth trying more than one — both to triangulate a fuller view of the person in front of you, and because people often relate more readily to one framework's language than another's.



Six Learning Styles Inventories to Start With

■ Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ)

Variations available for purchase at:

<http://www.learningstyles.net/en/our-assessments>

■ Entwistle Revised Approaches to Study Inventory (RASI) and Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST)

RASI:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/integrativelearning/images/File/Project%20Showcase/18-itemEntwistlesRASI.pdf>

ASSIST scoring key:

<http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/questionnaires/ASSIST.pdf>

■ Fleming VARK Questionnaire – “How do I learn best?”

<http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire>

■ Honey and Mumford

<https://www.mint-hr.com/mumford/>

■ Felder and Soloman Index of Learning Styles Questionnaire (ILS)

<http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html>

This explores four dimensions within the Felder–Silverman model: active/reflective, sensing/intuitive, visual/verbal and sequential/global.

■ Barsch Learning Style Inventory (BSLI)

http://ww2.nscs.edu/gerth_d/AAA0000000/barsch_inventory.htm

This provides scores across visual, auditory and kinaesthetic modalities.

A Note on the Evidence

These inventories are genuinely useful as reflective, conversation-opening tools — they build self-awareness and give language to real differences in how people prefer to engage.

Worth flagging, though: the stronger claim sometimes made for them — that matching your training, coaching, or SUPERvision method to someone's identified “style” measurably improves their outcomes — is contested in the psychological research literature and has not been reliably demonstrated.

The practical value here lies less in diagnosing a fixed label and more in the richer conversation these tools tend to open up.