



# Establish a healthy culture of learning

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# Introduction

Let's get one thing straight. You have a culture of learning within your organisation. Of course you do. Even if nobody in your business places any value in learning, that is still a learning culture. Saying you haven't got one is like saying you don't have a culture, full stop. What you mean is that you have one that might not match up to your expectations, and that is a different matter.

So, if you hear yourself saying, 'I really want to encourage a culture of learning,' I imagine there are a few key things that are going through your mind:

- You want all staff, at all levels, to engage with, and take ownership for, their own development
- You want development to be given the time it needs, and not constantly be de-prioritised because people are 'too busy'
- You want everyone to see that development is valid work
- You want managers to spend more time discussing development with their teams and for their development plans to have something in them
- To spend far less of your own time having the same conversations, over and over again, trying to convince people of all of the above. That way you can spend more time on actually supporting the learning!

So, how do you go about trying to engender a more positive culture of learning within your organisation?

# 1

## Help people to understand that they learn all of the time!

One of the biggest barriers is the failure of people in organisations to distinguish between training and learning. If their perception is that they only ever learn when some kind of intervention is taking place, in whatever format that happens to be, then you will have a culture of training, not learning.

You will be familiar with the 70:20:10 model, so use this to help teams understand that the majority of their learning takes place during their every day lives. Give them the tools and resources to help them notice when they have learned something and to understand how they can apply this in their ongoing work. This can be reinforced by working with your leadership teams to build real life and virtual forums where people can share what they've learned with others. Not only does this help to establish development as a valid topic of discussion, but it also shares that learning across the team and multiplies its value.

## Tie learning to future achievement.

Quite often, individuals get switched off from learning because they see little value, to them, in what they are doing. This is usually because their experience of learning is via training interventions that have been introduced 'top down' in a form of mandatory or compliance training. If you have been around in an organisation for a long time you'll often hear longer serving employees referring to the latest 'fad' or remarking that they did the same training ten years ago.

As an example, how many times were you told when learning mathematics at school how the principles you were learning would help you in later life? How exactly would algebra become useful to you when you were a 46 year old management development consultant? I'd imagine that it didn't happen often, which was why you may, as a 16 year old, have not engaged and switched off from the learning process.

Communicating the value to the organisation, department and individual is an incredibly important part of the learning professional's role, and in particular the 'What's in it for me?' for the individual. Helping them to see how what they are learning, on a day to day basis, will help them not only achieve their own objectives but also assist with career progression will enhance the likelihood of them engaging, not just with a current intervention, but with learning as a concept.

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## Mix it up. Offer variety and make learning easily accessible.

Instant access to learning via on line platforms is a huge topic right now. Millennial learners want to be able to access resources when they want to, in easily digestible chunks and to be able to generate their own content to share with others. They make regular use of platforms such as You Tube and TED to find and share content that speaks to them directly, in their own language.

If you want to engender a positive learning culture then you have to explore alternative ways of providing your content to meet this shift in demand. In the 2016 CIPD/Halogen Employee Outlook Survey over 90% of people polled said that on the job learning is the most useful form, with less than 30% of companies saying that they actively support it.

- Speak to the staff in your organisation to define how they want to learn and what their preferred methods of accessing resources are.
- Explore platforms and methods for curating and sharing existing on line content
- Create forums and platforms for employees to create and share their own content. This doesn't have to be expensive—you can easily set up You Tube channels or private Facebook groups to do this
- Look at the option of using webinars and live streaming to deliver content in real time.
- Explore how coaching, mentoring and activities such as Action Learning can help to consolidate and embed the learning from shared content.

As L&D professionals we have to be comfortable with a significant part of the role moving to curation of content rather than creation. In what seems like a contradiction, this will actually ensure more active dialogue with your learners, and therefore a greater sense of engagement and trust.

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## Find your evangelists, you don't need to do this all yourself

If you want a positive learning culture, you can't do this on your own. Even if you have a large training department, you will struggle to engender the behaviours you need, because the workforce will see this as your job, and that your default position will be telling them what to do.

You need to identify those people **at all levels** within your organisation that can act as your evangelists. Provide development for them to become great story tellers, help build their profile within the workforce and create platforms for them to share their insights and opinions on learning.

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Involve them in creating user generated content to pass on what they have learned to their colleagues. Other employees will pay far more attention to them as peers and are more likely to follow their lead.

If you don't have someone championing learning on the board, then identify someone who takes this seriously and build a great relationships with them. It doesn't have to be the HR Director either, they will support the learning agenda regardless. This needs to be someone who personally values learning, and will be happy holding the other board members to account.

## Create a feedback culture

Now, this might seem a bit much, asking you to create one culture to develop another, but having a workforce that is comfortable giving well structured and useful feedback to one another is crucial to underpinning your learning culture.

I don't just mean that everyone should get comfortable with telling other people when they aren't doing something right, or aren't performing. That's really important, of course, but within a positive learning culture they must also get better at pointing out when someone does something better, or differently, that helps them to move forward. Positive reinforcement embeds learning better than anything else. Just think about it...

At some point between being born and being 2 years old, most of us decide that big people get around a lot quicker by walking than we can crawling, so we decide to walk.

When we pulled ourselves up into a standing position for the first time, what did our parents do? They celebrated and encouraged and told us how great we were. They did this again when we started moving our legs the right way and, when finally we took our first unaided step, you would have thought we'd flown to the moon. But it was all of that positive reinforcement that told us when we were doing the right things to progress, so we stuck with it and it stuck with us!

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## Celebrate successes and recognise those who openly learn.

Public recognition of success is a powerful way of shifting behaviour in others. This is why internal and external awards exist. We love to be seen to be at our best and ahead of the curve and to get our moment in the limelight.

One of the responsibilities of the learning and development professional is to facilitate great communication about learning success within their organisation. This is for a number of reasons

1. It raises the profile of learning and development and therefore your team, across your organisation
2. It helps to consolidate learning from initiatives you have delivered, as people see examples of it actually working and are encouraged to give it a go
3. It provides a tangible goal for people to work towards, if they see others being rewarded for their focus on self improvement
4. It shows that the organisation values learning and development as highly as it does commercial success

So, take some time to work with your communications teams to explore the various methods you can use to communicate learning success across your organisation, from message boards to newsletters, company magazines to Facebook, Twitter and Linked In feeds. They are all great ways to support the development of your positive learning culture.

## Help others see mistakes and failure as their friends

If we just go back to the previous story of learning to walk, the other thing that our parents did to help us along was to see our failure as something to learn from. I can pretty much guarantee that at no point did your parents say, 'Well, Peter, I think you've given this walking thing enough of a chance now and you're just not going to make it,' simply because you fell over a couple of times. It's more likely that they picked you up, said something like, 'whoops!' and balanced you back on your feet again.

Mistakes and failures are our natural method of learning. People who fear mistakes will still learn, but they won't develop. What they will learn is that it is safer to do nothing and avoid mistakes than it is to move forwards.

So, work with people **at all levels** to look at mistakes in a different light. Help to develop thought processes that step back from a mistake, analyse what went wrong and consider alternative courses of action to avoid it happening again. Breed more coaching behaviours in your managers and leaders. Coaching is a fantastic way of looking at things that aren't working with a positive frame of mind. Done well it actually increases problem solving capability and drives self confidence and is one of the greatest building blocks of a positive learning culture.

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## Walk the walk. Be the change you want to see...

Do you live in constant fear of someone asking you if they can see your personal development plan? I have known L&D professionals in the past who would not be able to tell you what they were doing for their own development, and this simply won't help you at all.

It was Ghandi that used the term *be the change you want to see* and it is absolutely the code to work by if you are a learning and development professional. There is no way that a workforce will place any credibility on learning in the workplace if they don't see evidence of it from you. And I don't just mean being able to show what courses you have been on, or qualifications you've earned.

You have to live and breathe the learning principles and values you wish to engender in your staff.

- Actively seek feedback from others, and be confident in providing feedback to them
- Coach and support people who are facing challenges.
- Know who the people are that others can go to for advice and guidance on their work.
- Challenge managers and leaders if they aren't living up to their side of the bargain, pointing out when old behaviours begin to creep in and undermine new ways of working
- Admit your mistakes, and model great practice in dealing with them and moving forwards
- Share your own successes and utilise available communication channels to celebrate others' successes too.

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## It will take a while, but it will be worth it

If you work in learning and development you'll know that engendering change is often hard, and can be a long journey. I'd hope that most of you reading this will be in organisations where you aren't starting from a blank slate. In fact your mere existence shows that there is a decent level of investment in learning within your organisation and what you want to do here is just move things forward a bit.

### Conclusion

At the centre of all of this is that the learning culture and environment should be driven by the needs of the user, your workforce. If you do nothing more than invest more time creating a dialogue with your staff to understand what it is they want and need and then put things in place to deliver, you will make a significant impact on the nature of and engagement with learning at every level.

As always, if you've enjoyed reading this and want to discuss further, then please feel free to get in touch. And good luck!

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