

### Creating a culture of learning within your organization

To remain competitive in a constantly changing global marketplace, organizations need employees who are adaptable, engaged, productive, and ready to meet emerging business challenges. It has also become increasingly important to attract new, highly-skilled talent, while retaining employees with long-term industry experience and knowledge. As a manager, one of the most effective ways you can do this is by establishing a culture of learning – a workplace in which continuous learning is encouraged at all levels of your organization.

#### Benefits of a learning culture

At a time when organizational learning is most needed, many companies are reducing their learning and development (L&D) budgets in an attempt to reduce operational costs. However, the return on investment of a strategic L&D program far exceeds its costs. A well-planned and executed program will result in:

- Superior employee performance
- More innovation and creativity
- Greater productivity
- Employees who are adaptive to change
- A more engaged, motivated and loyal workforce
- Well-developed leaders at every level of the organization
- Employees equipped with up-to-date technical skills
- An organization that attracts and retains the best and brightest employees
- Enhanced succession planning through the creation of qualified successors within the organization

#### What is a culture of learning?

A culture of learning goes far beyond “training days”, lunch ‘n’ learns and the occasional seminar or workshop. Rather, it permeates every aspect of a business. It focuses not only on improving products, but enhancing and developing your organization’s most important asset – your people. In addition, a learning culture:

- **Looks for embedded knowledge and encourages knowledge transfer.** Mentoring programs cost nothing and mean a great deal. Mentors feel their experience is valued and respected while the mentored individual feels the organization wants them to succeed. For organizations, successful mentoring means retaining a wealth of industry knowledge and expertise.
- **Tailors learning to the individual.** What skills would your employees like to acquire? As their manager, what do you see as important? Encouraging your people to set career goals and pursue necessary training to reach those goals sends a clear message that you and your organization are invested in their future.
- **Fosters creativity,** innovative thinking and finding new ways to do business.
- **Allows your employees to apply their newly learned skills.** Your people must feel comfortable about making occasional mistakes and having your support, as their manager, when practicing new ways of working.
- **Understands the workforce** and provides learning and development in a variety of ways to encompass generational and cultural learning preferences.



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## Ingredients to create a culture of learning

Creating an organizational culture of continuous learning and development includes the following components:

- **Commitment of the executive leadership team.** A learning culture cannot be established or maintained without the commitment and involvement of senior management. It begins at the top and cascades down through the organization's business objectives and values.
- **Personalized learning.** Different age groups, cultures and personalities mean that a "one size fits all" approach to delivering training is not effective. L&D needs to be delivered through a variety of methods (e-learning, workshops, mentoring, coaching, college courses, etc.) and content, objectives and outcomes must be appropriate and timely for each employee. This can be achieved through performance appraisals or regular L&D meetings between you and your employees.
- **Aligning learning to business needs.** Employees at every level of the organization should be consulted regularly about the problems they are facing, so they can apply their knowledge and experience when offering practical, relevant solutions. As business needs constantly shift, L&D must remain timely and relevant.
- **Remove barriers to learning.** One example of this might be to allow your employees time off for relevant training. If job duties make that difficult, try to provide online learning where your employees can complete assignments from any location and at any time. However, keep in mind that self-directed, online learning must be easy to use and easily accessible.
- **Setting clear, measurable objectives.** These are set after a thorough inquiry with the HR team, senior management, you and your employees.
- **Listen to feedback.** Many companies find confidential online assessments and employee surveys a good way to determine employees' views and how to improve and expand their L&D program.
- **Encourage experimentation.** Your employees must be encouraged to experiment with new ideas, use newly learned skills and take calculated risks. As a manager, it is important to recognize and reward those employees on your team who offer innovative and creative solutions.

## Your role as a People Leader

Investing in your employees' L&D and listening to how their new knowledge can support the organization will help establish yourself as a manager who values the insights and opinions of your highly skilled team. More importantly, implementation of your employees' suggestions can improve service, increase productivity and positively impact the bottom line. If your team feels you are investing in their development and their ideas make a difference, they will not only feel valued, but will also be loyal to you and to your organization.

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## Learning and development across the generations

In most industrialized countries, the workforce contains three distinct generations, each with its own style of communicating and learning. Effectively reaching all three demographic groups can be challenging for organizations with limited learning and development budgets. However, there are some general trends in the way each of these generations learn, which can be helpful to People Leaders like you.

### Baby Boomers

The post-WWII generation is typically called the “Baby Boomers” because there were so many of them born in the same time period. But this older generation of workers, usually defined as being born between 1946 and 1964, all grew up without computers. They were educated in what’s called the “chalk and talk” style where teachers stood at the front of a classroom writing on a blackboard and disseminated information found in textbooks. It was a one-way, highly structured process. As adults, this group remains comfortable with this method. In other words, they’re fine with the way learning and development has traditionally been delivered -- structured seminars, workshops, lectures, PowerPoint presentations, books and manuals.

Baby Boomers grew up in a world in which they had to compete for everything – for school teams, for entry into university, for homes and for good jobs. Their need for individual recognition and attention usually stems from growing up in such a competitive environment.

### Generation X

Born between 1965 and 1979, Gen X is the “dot com” generation that ushered in the digital age. Just as they’re wedged between the Boomers and youngest group of workers – Generation Y – they straddle the print and computer age. They witnessed the emergence of computer games and the Internet, but were still educated in traditional “chalk and talk” classrooms, so they’re comfortable in both worlds. Xers are used to getting things done on their own, hence they tend to be more independent problem-solvers and self-starters.

Gen Xers typically expect a life of continuous learning and take responsibility for that learning. They were also raised to believe learning should be fun, so they love role playing and hands-on experiences. Creating learning and development initiatives aimed at this group might mean mixing it up and being creative.

### Generation Y

Finally, there’s the digital generation – Gen Y. These are young adults born between 1980 and 2000 who’ve been raised with video games, text messaging, Facebook and Twitter and have one hand on their smartphone and the other on their laptop. It’s second nature to multitask and access information immediately at any time and from any location. They like their training to be mobile as well, something they can do when they want, where they want and preferably with a social networking twist. Gen Yers are team players who like to collaborate and help each other reach a common goal, so an online community where they can network, collaborate and chat is a great training method. Online training portals with learning based on social networking principals and delivered in short blasts are the best way to reach your Gen Yers.

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## On the horizon

There's also another up-and-coming group, Generation Z, who are now in school and university. As a People Leader, you should begin considering what strengths and challenges this demographic will bring into the workforce and your organization. Multitasking is like breathing to this generation – how will your organization maintain their focus and attention?

## Cultural implications

Keep in mind that cultural differences also play a huge role. While North Americans tend to be comfortable asking questions, wanting feedback and challenging certain ideas, employees from other countries may not be. We tend to be more comfortable in the educational style and philosophy we grew up with – and these differ from country to country. As a People Leader, it is important to acknowledge and be sensitive to this phenomenon. Someone who is not asking questions or is seemingly uninterested in self-directed group activities isn't necessarily disengaged from the process – he or she just may not feel comfortable in that style of learning.

## The ties that bind

Training specifically targeted to each generation's and each culture's needs is not the reality for companies operating with limited learning and development (L&D) budgets. So can a cost-effective L&D program be created that meets the learning requirements of all employees? The answer is yes.

To meet the needs of all employees, learning should integrate traditional training, online learning, and informal learning (such as coaching and mentoring). Organizations need to become better at *facilitating the transfer of* knowledge as opposed to *imparting* knowledge. This is the way to build effective training opportunities that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce and produce an attractive return on a company's L&D investment.

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