

Making learning easier - Educational strategies and a learning culture offer competitive advantages in a dynamic marketplace

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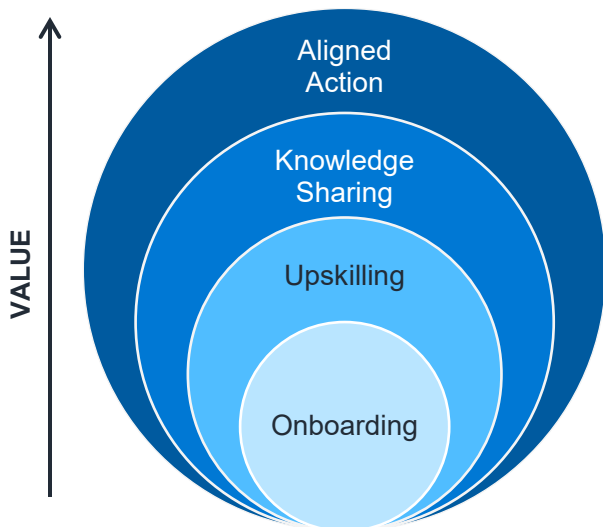


Staying relevant and competitive in a continuously changing marketplace

Even though time is limited, it is critical to take advantage of new trends and innovations, build new skills, and stay up-to-date with new concepts and approaches. What are the most effective ways to achieve those vital skills? And where might you focus your efforts?

A culture of continual learning accelerates effectiveness and time to value, from the time an employee is first brought into the organization through their entire time at the company. Especially in a world where many employees contribute virtually at least part of the time, training must occur between all levels within a firm, and it is important to be cognizant of growing your entire team's skill set. An organization that cultivates this culture effectively can best attract, retain, and develop top talent in this new marketplace.

FIGURE 1: LEARNING CULTURE – ACCELERATING VALUE



Onboarding is a critical time to introduce the culture and priorities of the organization, the expectations in an employee's new role, and how they can contribute. Onboarding also brings

two-way advantages, both in getting to know the new person better and seeing the company through their fresh eyes. It also often reveals opportunities to improve processes, procedures, and communication of policies. A strong onboarding saves valuable time later.

Managers often seek easily accessible educational resources to fill gaps in cross-functional knowledge for new hires. An executive director in Chicago had recruited new team members for their expertise in data science, and noted they needed training on the business language and contextual nuances of his industry. A customer business leader in Arizona expressed that her new role needed her to have more knowledge on how to leverage analytics for performance improvement. A new financial executive in eastern Washington wanted to gain more insight into socioeconomic drivers and impacts. Educational resources can bridge different spheres of knowledge and help professionals achieve a common level of understanding.

Upskilling, reskilling, and continuous professional education¹ can be reinvigorating and confidence-building for both the trainee and the trainer. If continuous learning can be personalized, opportune, and easily accessible, this becomes a low-cost path to achieve a common language for better collaboration and cross-functional alignment across an organization. This can also help maintain (and develop) organizational culture in an environment where the majority of interpersonal connections are not in person.

79% of Learning & Development leaders say that it's less expensive to reskill a current employee than hire a new one.

49% of Learning & Development leaders say executives are concerned that employees do not have the right skills to execute business strategy.

- LinkedIn 2022 Workplace Learning Report²

This article aims to highlight the need for and benefits of a learning culture, particularly why achieving proficiency at learning can bring competitive advantages to businesses and professionals navigating transformational change. Case studies and examples from several different industries will illustrate how organizations are using tools like eLearning, practical learning, peer mentoring, and "soft skills" training to facilitate a learning culture. These approaches comprise just one of the key ingredients for an effective learning culture. The final section discusses additional success factors to build that vital culture.

Adapting to technological change

It is hard to turn on the news these days without seeing at least one story about the pace of technology and its potential, both to make our jobs vastly easier and to make our jobs so easy that people fear becoming obsolete. Although these fears have been around for quite some time, it is natural to be wary of new competition to one's hard-fought career.

Rather than feeling threatened by technological change, a wide range of professionals are exploring how technology can help them be more productive and more creative. Being aware of these tools and fostering your employees' curiosity can help your team stay at the cutting edge of your industry.

Highlighting three examples out of many:

1. GENERATIVE AI

When ChatGPT was first released by OpenAI late in November 2022, it was met with initial panic from the education sector, and multiple schools and universities banned ChatGPT or warned students against using it to cheat. AI-based detectors of AI did not assuage concerns, since every essay ChatGPT produces is unique, even from an identical prompt. Yet since then, multiple sectors including education are beginning to explore how this technology can aid professionals and students. Duolingo and Quizlet integrated OpenAI's advanced chatbots into their applications to make lessons and practice assessments more interactive, and are now in use by half of all U.S. high school students and 500 million people worldwide.³

GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer, and ChatGPT uses large language models pre-trained on vast amounts of text data on a neural network architecture. It can understand and respond to natural language prompts, such as questions, requirements, or other materials. Early adopters of free public versions and paid advanced versions have tested its value in helping to summarize long texts, simplify complex topics, find information with cited sources if requested, create plans and schedules, improve writing flow, suggest ideas, or even write programming code to some degree.^{4, 5} Other large language models include Google's Bard and Microsoft's Bing Chat.

As with other artificial intelligence, there is a risk of bias and inaccuracies (known as hallucinations), and so effective use requires caution and patience. Moreover, different types of generative AI models are better for certain tasks and have their own strengths and weaknesses; for instance, large language models are not the best choice for solving complex mathematical questions. While these technologies present challenges and risks, these rapidly evolving technologies are likely to have a big impact in the world, and it may be worthwhile to understand their limitations and learn where and how to use them.

"Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change." - Stephen Hawking

2. CLOUD COMPUTING

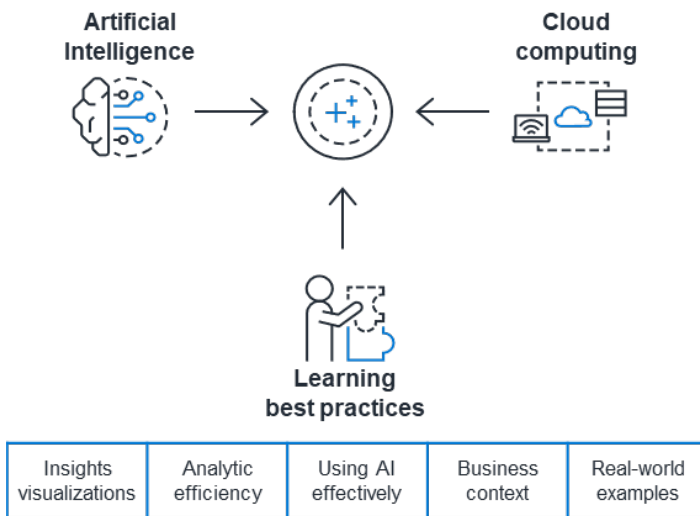
Cloud computing services provide on-demand, pay-as-you-go access to web-connected servers and software via the internet. Using the cloud enables businesses to smooth out their information technology infrastructure and maintenance costs, and allows automatic scaling up or down of resources to match traffic, charging customers only for the amount of resources used. Common service models include Infrastructure-as-a-Service (IaaS) and Platform-as-a-Service (PaaS) for software developers, both of which are offered by companies such as Microsoft Azure and Amazon Web Services, plus Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), such as Microsoft 365 and most commercial software today. Employees can access files and applications in the cloud from anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

Distributed computing in the cloud enables processing of vastly larger volumes of complex data in dramatically shortened timeframes—a few days instead of a few weeks, or hours and minutes instead of days.⁶ Use cases include drug development for life sciences, diagnostic images in healthcare, encryption of large volumes of data, computer-intensive engineering, digital twins for simulation modeling, management of power plants and manufacturing plants, financial services, user authentication, and edge computing applications that minimize latency for mobile apps, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and more.

Enterprises undertaking digital transformation journeys to move to the cloud benefit from change management approaches. Whether you are using the public cloud, private cloud, hybrid cloud (mix of public and private), or multicloud, professionals need to get comfortable with new operating cost structures, new terminology, and new ways to manage user access, security, and compliance monitoring.

“Cloud is about how you do computing, not where you do computing.”
- Paul Maritz, former VMware CEO

FIGURE 2: UPSKILLING TO ACCELERATE TECHNOLOGY ADAPTATION



There are, of course, hurdles along the transformation journey. According to Flexera’s survey of information technology professionals and executive leaders worldwide, managing cloud spend is the top cloud challenge facing organizations in 2023, surpassing security for the first time.⁷ At the same time, organizations are focused on optimizing usage and migrating a larger number of workloads to the cloud, achieving savings by reducing the need to maintain traditional data centers. Education and training can help build awareness and mitigate risks so that companies can attain net benefits faster.⁸

3. VISUALIZATION

Valuable for discerning actionable insights from data analyses, visualization is a key category of tools for all users of information—from consumers and business users to technical analysts, data scientists, and engineers. Frequently, the hardest part of technical analysis is the communication of key insights to stakeholders (and perhaps even to oneself), and these tools have proven invaluable to these efforts. Software companies have invested in creating easy-to-use Low Code or No Code (LC/NC) tools to empower customers to run ad hoc data queries and interpret the data for decision-making and downstream users.

Businesses are taking a re-ignited interest in data visualization software, such as Microsoft Power BI, Tableau, and Qlik Sense. These vary in learning-curve steepness, integration with other products and services, and scalability. Training and partnership with 'citizen developers' work together to achieve meaningful dashboards and drill-down reports.

Adaptability to technological evolution is a competitive advantage, and educational resources to support continuous learning can help cultivate a competitive edge.

eLearning anywhere anytime

One popular way to support continuous learning is eLearning, which refers to any digital course that users take online. eLearning is a flexible, customizable and easily accessible approach for education. These online courses can be delivered via a computer, tablet, or smart phone. The convenience of eLearning courses is highly valued by professionals. People can learn at their own pace, whenever and wherever they happen to be. They can replay or skip ahead or review concepts as many times as they like. As a result, eLearning takes 40% to 60% less time for participants to learn a body of material compared to a traditional classroom setting,⁹ and information retention is five to six times higher through eLearning than in face-to-face classrooms.¹⁰

Moreover, eLearning developers can tailor a curriculum, build specific learning tracks to best engage their teams to reach organizational goals, and heighten engagement through a variety of interactive exercises and knowledge checks. Creating well-researched content, human connection and relatable compelling storytelling, and a seamless interface in your own learning management system requires a multi-disciplinary team.

“Six in 10 workers will require training before 2027, but only half of workers are seen to have access to adequate training opportunities today. The highest priority for skills training from 2023-2027 is analytical thinking, which is set to account for 10% of training initiatives, on average.

The second priority for workforce development is to promote creative thinking, which will be the subject of 8% of upskilling initiatives. Training workers to utilize AI and big data ranks third among company skills-training priorities in the next five years...”

- World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report 2023¹¹

Case study: One example of eLearning in analytics comes from the healthcare industry. The multi-format storytelling design of Milliman MedInsight's Certification and Learning Program was guided by client input. More than 100 subject matter experts were engaged to create a portfolio of well-researched eLearning courses in healthcare, spanning industry primers, technical certifications, advanced data analytics, population health, and health equity. eLearning requires a cross-functional team.

It also generates custom courses and programs on a range of topics, such as a climate risk certificate program for a well-recognized professional society, life insurance technology solutions, and tailored courses on Medicaid services and terminology specific to client needs. Feedback is regularly reviewed:

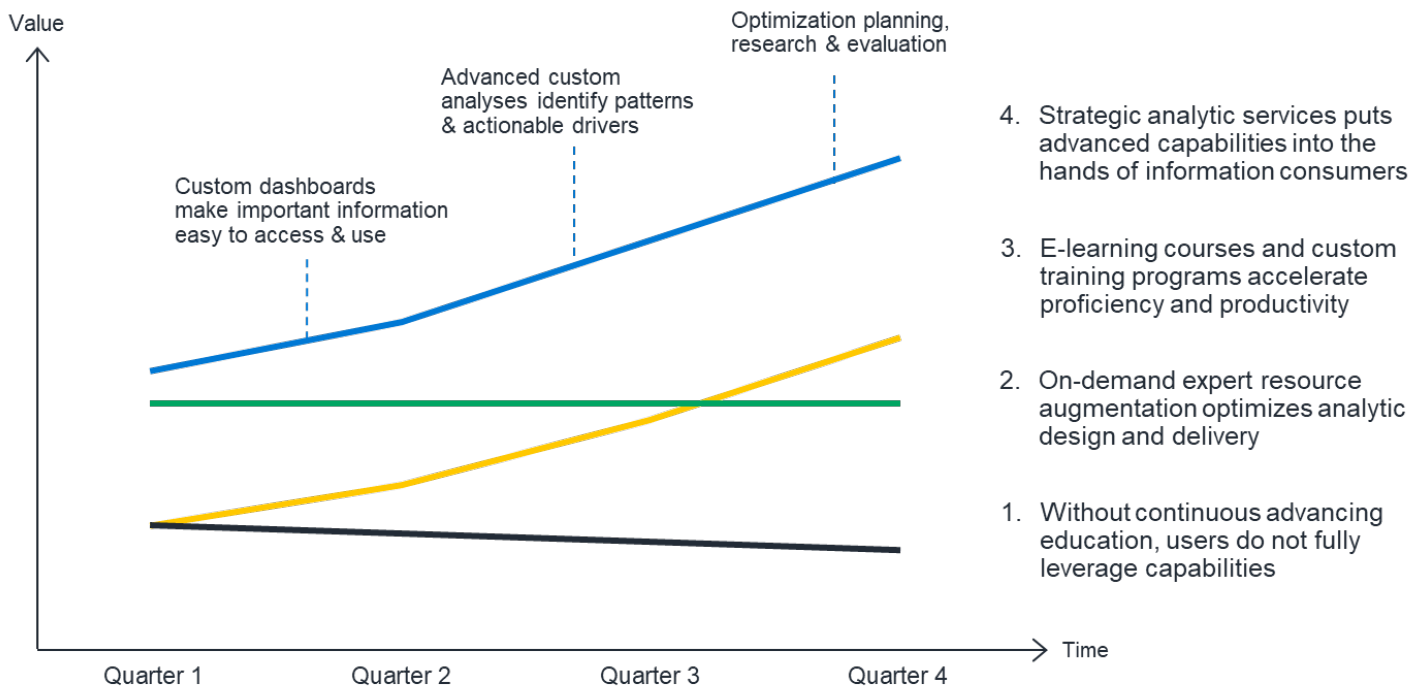
“Great teaching interface, simple but effective examples and high-level explanations” - Assistant Actuary

“Easy to follow and it all helped me ground my understanding with examples” - Data Scientist

“Very organized and the information was provided with real life scenarios, graphs, or well written out examples” - Operations Specialist

Milliman has also found that adding instructor-led coaching classes creates an effective hybrid model for learner engagement and success.

FIGURE 3: INTEGRATING E-LEARNING TO ACCELERATE VALUE



A common myth is that people learn better in their preferred learning styles—visual, audio, kinesthetic (learning by doing).¹² While people don't necessarily learn better in their preferred style, presenting information in various styles can create a more dynamic and memorable learning experience.

Example: One example illustrates the effectiveness of incorporating visual, audio, and kinesthetic features in eLearning design. A company had just installed a new expense management system; however, its vendor would only agree to providing an audio-only call to walk through its handbook manual. To cascade training throughout its organization, the Learning and Development department stepped in to add animated visuals to the audio recording, including avatar characters, a flip-book animation of the manual, embedded screen recordings, and pop-up hot tips. This resulted in a dynamic and surprisingly entertaining course to teach all aspects of the new expense management system.

The importance of practical learning

Practical learning focuses on real-world examples, hands-on experience, and dialog to share knowledge on findings and challenges. Learning labs are a great way to give learners a chance to shine: Presenters are invited users who showcase their work on a specific project, and topics are selected based on interest areas or questions raised by the user community or customers.

Example: An example of practical learning comes from working with a group of call center employees for a state department of revenue. Here, new employees are tasked with answering caller questions about their state income tax and experience a wide range of emotions on the other end of their line. By creating practical role-play scenarios, chosen from real-life recorded calls, the employees can practice what they would say in a given situation and then discuss how they might change their response or why a certain response was appropriate. This can include callers upset about a mistake on their forms, callers experiencing a financial hardship, and even callers who may be a bit lonely and want to have a more casual conversation rather than focus on their tax question. Debriefing these scenarios also allows the employees to hear how the actual call was handled, which helps them to see examples of how there are sometimes several correct ways to handle a single situation. Role-playing provides a key opportunity to discuss the nuance in an applied format, allowing the learner to make their own connections.

There is value to both theoretical and logical teaching. Learners gain insights from the imperfect real world, learning from mistakes, and experiencing nuances in implementation. Applied approaches are just as crucial to understanding as deep dive knowledge.

Lean-Agile principles are effective in mitigating risk and being responsive to feedback. Early and rapid feedback helps practitioners determine when and how to pivot to an alternative path.

MICRO-LEARNING

One useful approach to practical learning is micro-learning. This refers to bite-sized chunks (typically completed in less than ten minutes apiece) of training that are positioned to be immediately available at the point of use.¹³ Brevity and accessibility are the key characteristics of micro-learning, allowing students to fit learning around other parts of a busy schedule.

Case study: A nationwide managed services company needed to upgrade their hardware at hotel chains, retail pharmacy chains, cinema chains, fast food chains. They needed to train over fifty fully remote field technicians and temporary contractors, all of whom were traveling, and they had minimum staff available to conduct training. Their instructional designer created a five-minute detailed tutorial with a simple narrative, zoomed-in views, and a quality assurance checklist. To make it accessible by cell phone, this was uploaded to a private YouTube channel, so that it could serve as a guide before and during the hardware installation. Efficient production by minimal staff, speed of execution, and effective delivery were important advantages for this large-scale initiative.

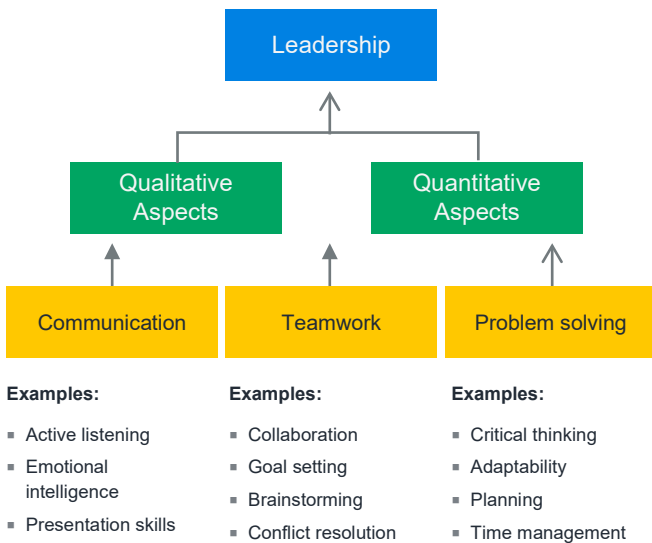
Case study: Another example is a technology company producing specialized software for business users and technical users, which developed reminder videos lasting only one to three minutes accessible at a click directly from the software itself. Their micro-learning was intended to supplement fuller training courses. Feedback indicated that users found these short videos easier to follow than screenshots on tip sheets. Ironically, this company found that it takes an experienced professional over two weeks to produce each three-minute video. Subject matter experts perfected on-screen demonstrations, followed by spotlighting, integrating static and dynamic content, matching narration timing, and then post-production editing of annotations, flow and transitions, intro and outro sequences, and additional resources. These microlearning videos were a popular feature for all user types.

The significance of soft skills

Diverse colleagues and customers around the world need to tackle complex business challenges and substantial changes. These problems and goals are bigger than any solo person. It's vital that individuals grow in their interpersonal and self-management skills (so-called "soft skills") that allow them to thrive in a dynamic team environment.

A major advantage of training the soft skills is that the concepts are often applicable to external situations as well as internal. For example, if a person learns how to improve their emotional intelligence dimension of conflict management, they can then leverage that skill in a work situation, when dealing with a client, or even at home with their families. The skills and the opportunity to practice them become more abundant and can help improve working relationships and quality of life.

FIGURE 4: CULTIVATING SOFT SKILLS



Training programs are often as diverse as the teams they support and often include a variety of structures to provide opportunities for knowledge transfer, retention, and application.

Many companies will see some similarities in the programs they offer, including an onboarding buddy program, a mentorship program, a manager development program, and a broader leadership development program. Each of these will target a specific audience with unique goals and objectives. Companies may also create their own subsets of programs that could address more department-specific needs such as upskilling on a certain technology or methodology.

The value of peer coaching and mentoring

Peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring build connections. These confidential small group or one-to-one coaching relationships provide a safe space for exploring ideas, enable insights from diverse perspectives, and give participants an opportunity to develop their skills. Every mentor-mentee relationship is unique and confidential.

“Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.” - John C. Crosby

It might initially seem surprising that peer-to-peer mentoring is so effective; however, there are a myriad of benefits to both the mentee and the mentor. Participants practice their listening skills, learn to give and receive honest feedback, and build an environment of trust and support. Mentors can share the benefits of additional experience and the ability to view the mentee's situations with an external lens. A program or small group cohort inspires collaboration, contribution, and personal accountability. Coaching connections often boost well-being and engagement¹⁴ and help to foster a sense of community within the organization.

Case study: Within a year-long leadership development program at a global advisory firm, participants are able to post questions in an online collaboration tool to crowdsource ideas on how to handle a situation they are facing. A recent example included a senior leader hoping to get some advice on how to help keep up morale on their team as they go through a challenging organizational change. This resulted in multiple replies with ideas and support for the senior leader, who is now better equipped to support their team.

This type of connection generated value beyond the initial ask. By asking a question, participants opened the door for others to tell stories and share their experiences. This not only provided answers to the person who asked the question but also sparked additional connections by others reading their stories and identifying similarities in their own situations. These connections often became the foundation for follow-up conversations, often sounding like “I saw your message in our online collaboration tool and it reminded me of something I'm currently working on. Mind if I ask you a few questions about how you handled that situation?”

This cascade effect of peer coaching and mentoring helps to lay a foundation for other business relationships that can extend to client work, office collaborations, and even partnerships that may not have otherwise happened.

Components of an effective learning culture

The components of an effective learning culture are largely the same regardless of the industry or type of work done by the learners in the organization. The delivery mechanism and style of the learning created will likely be unique, but for there to be an effective learning culture, a few common components need to be in place.

There needs to be a recognition that learning is an important component of the business. In any business where growth and innovation are necessary, learning should be valued as a means for that growth and innovation. When senior leadership fails to support learning either by deprioritizing learning programs, reducing funding for learning programs, or not allocating time for attending events, the opportunities for growth and innovation begin to dwindle. Instead, leaders should consider training costs and time when creating budgets and capacity plans. Training and development should be a topic of discussion when planning business strategy. Explicitly telling their teams that they value the time spent training is a simple but effective way of conveying this message.

A focus on creating useful, relevant, and impactful learning assets will drive an effective learning culture. This involves a dedicated team of learning professionals, which often includes instructional designers, learning consultants, and facilitators. These teams partner with the business units to identify their needs, work with their subject matter experts to gather the applicable content, and then package that information in a format that will provide the best opportunities for knowledge transfer,

retention, and application. While some companies try to create this by using their subject matter experts alone, the value of including learning professionals in your learning culture is found in the way the content is received and applied.

Acknowledging that learning is a partnership activity is another critical component of an effective learning culture. A manager has a key role to play in the learning process of their team. They can partner with their team prior to the learning event to discuss the individual priorities of the learner, what content is going to be most relevant to their role, and how the manager hopes the content will help them contribute to the team/company. After the learning event, the manager also needs to ensure the learner has opportunities to apply their learning. For example, if a manager sends an employee through a training about presentation skills, that manager would ideally also facilitate opportunities for the employee to put those skills into action, such as upcoming presentations, preferably where the manager or a coach can observe and reinforce improvement in their skills through feedback.

Learning culture extends far beyond the classroom and shows up in how people engage with each other in meetings and on projects. A learning culture will include lessons learned, after-action, or other similarly named post-project meetings to discuss what went well, what was unexpected, and what could have gone better. Setting the stage for these meetings to be focused on behaviors rather than blaming individuals for mistakes is key to creating a learning culture. When teams can freely share when something didn't go as planned and what they learned from that experience, everyone is richer for it. In contrast, if teams are hesitant to share their mistakes for fear of reprisal, growth and innovation slow or even stagnate.

FIGURE 5: BUILDING A LEARNING CULTURE

1. Recognize that learning is critical for growth and innovation.

2. Provide flexible access to relevant and useful learning assets.

3. Integrate managers, mentors and peers to build a nurturing and collaborative learning environment.

4. Enable learners to put new skills into action immediately.

5. Share insights, mistakes, and improvements openly.

6. Lead by example, encourage curiosity, and break down knowledge silos.

Everyone has a role to play in creating a learning culture, not just managers and leaders. While managers and leaders can lead by example by attending learning events, communicating their experiences, and encouraging their teams to do the same, employees have a part to play too. They can also be asking questions and sharing information across teams. They can be exchanging relevant highlights from articles they see with their colleagues, or bringing them up in team meetings as something that the whole team might benefit from. These actions are indicative of a strong learning culture.

The establishment of a learning culture can help promote constructive feedback, a growth mindset, and trust between colleagues at all levels.

Summary

A strong learning culture offers organizations a competitive edge. Emerging trends and job requirements are always changing. Whether a change involves new technologies, a change in business model, or pursuit of a new market, cultivating an environment that makes learning easy improves knowledge sharing, adaptability, and organizational performance. A learning culture requires leadership to inspire continuous self-development; it needs tools like eLearning, practical classes, peer mentoring and soft skills training; and it needs supportive behaviors from managers. Learning is a team sport.



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ENDNOTES

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