

4 Ways to Create a Learning Culture on Your Team

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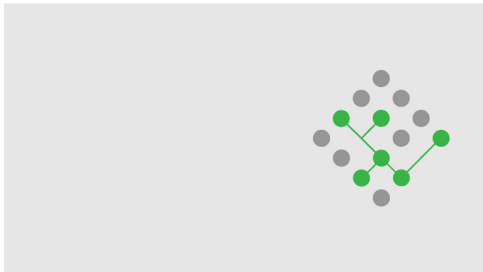
Summary. Research from LinkedIn has shown that half of today's most in-demand skills weren't even on the list three years ago. As a result, there is now a premium on intellectual curiosity and the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt one's skill set. How can... [more](#)

Technology is disrupting every industry and area of life, and work is no exception. One of the main career implications of the digital revolution is a shift in demand for human expertise. For instance, LinkedIn's talent research shows that half of today's most in-demand skills weren't even on the list three years ago.

As a result, there is now a premium on intellectual curiosity and learnability, the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt one's skill set to remain employable. What you know is less relevant than what you may learn, and knowing the answer to questions is less critical than having the ability to ask the right questions in the first place. Unsurprisingly, employers such as Google, American Express, and Bridgewater Associates make learning an integral part of their talent management systems. As a Bersin report pointed out: "The single biggest driver of business impact is the strength of an organization's learning culture."

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However, true learning cultures, defined by CEB as "a culture that supports an open mindset, an independent quest for knowledge, and shared learning directed toward the mission and goals of the organization," are still the exception rather than the norm. Recent research found that only 10% of organizations have managed to create them, with just 20% of employees demonstrating effective learning behaviors at work. Research by Bersin examined the issue of learning culture in great detail and found that companies who

effectively nurture their workforce's desire to learn are at least 30% more likely to be market leaders in their industries over an extended period of time.

Here are four science-based recommendations to help you create a learning culture on your team or in your organization:

Reward continuous learning. It is impossible to trigger deliberate changes in your team's or organization's culture unless you actually put in place formal reward systems to entice them — and even then there is no guarantee you will achieve change

unless the rewards are effective. Sadly, even when managers understand the importance of learning — at least in theory — they are often more interested in boosting short-term results and performance, which can be an enemy of learning. By definition, performance is highest when we are not learning. Equally, it is hard for employees to find the necessary time and space to learn when they are asked to maximize results, efficiency, and productivity. A report by Bersin found that among the more than 700 organizations studied, the average employee had only 24 minutes a week for formal learning. Note that rewarding curiosity is not just about praising and promoting those who display an effort to learn and develop; it's also about creating a climate that nurtures critical thinking, where challenging authority and speaking up are encouraged, even if it means creating discord. This is particularly important if you want your team to produce something innovative.

Give meaningful and constructive feedback. In an age where many organizations focus their developmental interventions on “strengths,” and feel-good approaches to management have substituted “flaws” and “weaknesses” with the popular euphemism of “opportunities,” it is easy to forget the value of negative feedback. However, it is hard to improve on anything when you are unaware of your limitations, fully satisfied with your potential, or unjustifiably pleased with yourself. Although one of the best ways to improve employees' performance is to tell them what they are doing wrong, managers often avoid difficult conversations, so they end up providing more positive than negative feedback. This is particularly problematic when it comes to curiosity and learning, since the best way to trigger curiosity is to highlight a knowledge gap — that is, making people aware of what they don't know, especially if that makes them feel uncomfortable. Note that people are generally unaware of their ignorance and limitations, especially when they are not very competent, so guidance and feedback from others is critical to helping them improve. However, negative feedback must be provided in a constructive and delicate way — it is a true art — as

people are generally less receptive of it than of praise and appreciation, especially in individualistic (aka narcissistic) cultures.

Lead by example. Another critical driver of employee learning is what you, as a manager or leader, actually do. As illustrated by the leadership value chain model, leaders' behaviors — particularly what they routinely do — have a strong influence on the behavior and performance of their teams. And the more senior that leaders are, the more impactful their behaviors will be on the rest of the organization. Accordingly, if you want to nurture your team's curiosity or unlock learning in your organization, you should practice what you preach. Start by displaying some learning and unlocking your own curiosity. It is a sort of Kantian imperative: Don't ask your employees to do what you don't do yourself. If you want people to read more, then read — and make others aware of your voracious reading habits (share your favorite books or most recent learnings with them). If you want them to take on novel and challenging tasks, then take on novel and challenging tasks yourself. For example, learn a new skill, volunteer to work on something unrelated to your main job, or take on tasks outside your comfort zone even if you are not good at it — you will be able to show that with a bit of curiosity and discipline you can get better, and this should inspire others. And if you want them to question the status quo and be critical and nonconformist, then don't be a sucker for order and rules!

Hire curious people. Too often with big management problems, we focus on training and development while undermining the importance of proper selection. But the reality is that it's easier to prevent and predict than to fix and change. When selection works, there's far less need for training and development, and good selection makes training and development much more effective because it is easier to augment potential than to go against someone's nature. Learning and curiosity are no exception: If you hire people who are naturally curious, and maximize the fit between their interests and the role they are in, you will not have to worry so much about their willingness to

learn or be on their case to unlock their curiosity. Fortunately, meta-analytic studies provide a detailed catalogue of traits — and their corresponding measures — that increase an individual’s propensity to learn and develop intellectually, even after adulthood. And there is a well-established science to predicting people’s probability of displaying such traits (for example, personality assessments measuring openness to new experience, tolerance for ambiguity, critical thinking, and inquisitiveness). Likewise, decades of research into vocational interests show that aligning people’s drive and interests to the characteristics of the job and culture of the organization tends to increase not just their motivation to learn but also their performance.

In sum, if you want to nurture curiosity and learning in your employees, there’s no need to rely on your organization’s formal learning and development programs. Reinforcing positive learning behaviors, giving constructive and critical feedback to align employees’ efforts with the right learning goals, showcasing your own curiosity, and hiring people with high learnability and a hungry mind are all likely to create a stronger learning culture within your team and your organization.

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