BLOG POST

How to Create a
Learning Culture

BY SARA SADDINGTON APRIL 2017

Gone are the days when an education will last a whole career. The world of work is changing rapidly, and organizations can't expect to rely on outdated work activities, hierarchies, and processes to keep up. Technology and automation are disrupting entire industries, and changing the scope and pace of individual roles. Employees are feeling the effects of these shifts—looking for ways to upgrade their skills to stay relevant within their organizations, or move into new roles. To keep employees engaged, and to develop the agility they need to keep up, organizations need to embrace a learning culture that engages team members at every level of the org chart.

As with all elements of organizational culture, learning needs to be embedded in day-to-day; it cannot be achieved with a directive from senior leadership or a one-day training event. Team leaders play an instrumental role in creating a learning culture within their teams—they can identify skill gaps, outcomes that need improvement, and provide the accountability team members need to implement their learning.

## Education and Workforce Trends Are Driving a Learning Shift

Skills acquired during formal education are rapidly out of date, with estimates that nearly 50% of subject knowledge obtained during the first year of a four-year technical degree will become outdated by the time students graduate. The World Economic Forum also reports that by 2020, more than a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will be comprised of skills that are not yet considered crucial to their job today. Simply put, it's unrealistic to expect that you'll be able to complete a degree, hang it on your wall, and say goodbye to learning, while maintaining a successful career.

This is one explanation for the prevalence of intergenerational tension, with baby-boomers often maligning millennials, as we no longer live in a world where an education results in guaranteed job stability, in a progressive career that lasts a lifetime. Now, an education may stay relevant for as little as 5-10 years. As Deloitte indicates:

"With the accelerating pace of change, the relevance and validity of the ability to 'know' a stable stock of knowledge is diminished while other abilities, such as creativity, empathy, and the ability to read context, become more important. Our children will truly have to take lifelong learning seriously, continuously upgrading their skills."

It's no wonder that millennials are concerned about learning and development opportunities—87% claim that development opportunities are important in a job—learning is not a luxury or bonus, it is essential to their career. Despite the importance placed on learning, only 39% of millennials strongly agree that they learned something new in the past 30 days that they can use to do their jobs better. Slightly less than one in two millennials strongly agree that they have had opportunities to learn and grow in the past year. Given this data, it should come as no surprise that 60% of millennials say they are open to a different job opportunity.

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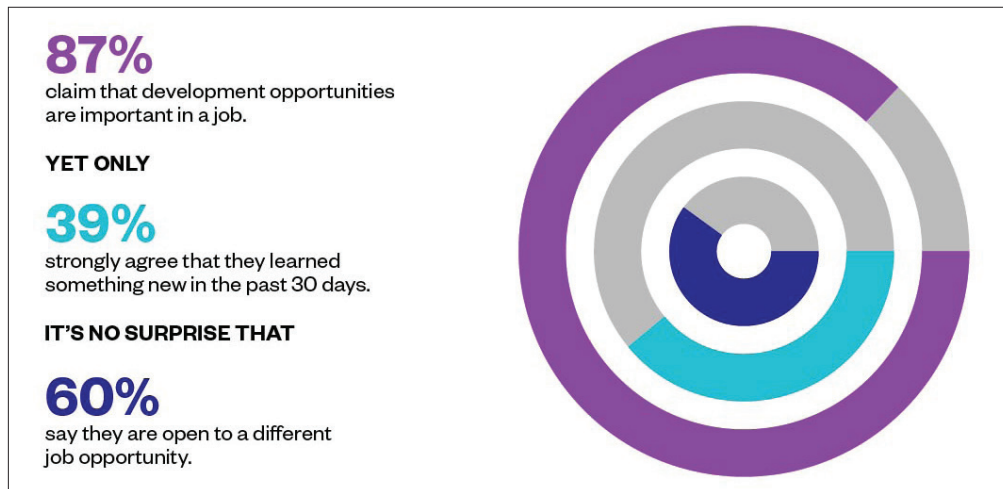
Source: Gallup, 2016

In general, I'm not a big fan of generational labels, and I use the word "millennial" sparingly. I believe it's dangerous to label entire groups of people, as those labels generally shut down further consideration of other factors—it's very easy to put people into the same millennial category, and presume that all of their actions are a result of their birth date, and comparatively difficult to consider the multitude of factors that create these trends. In this case, I think it's important to note that the data above reflects a set of challenges that are particularly felt by the millennial cohort—not as a result of generational laziness (or expectations of workplaces full of bean bag chairs and ping pong tournaments), but rather as a feature of the way the world of work is shifting overall.

Organizations are failing to keep up with these shifts, relying on hierarchical structures and business models that don't reflect the pace of change, and suffering as a result.

Low Agility and Engagement Add to the Challenge

According to Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends Report for 2017, 90% of CEOs believe their company is facing disruptive change driven by digital technologies, and yet 70% say that their organization is lacking the skills required to adapt. The source of this doubt stems from the fact that skills are becoming obsolete at an accelerating rate—software engineers must now redevelop their skills every 12-18 months, and other industries are facing similar demands.

On technology

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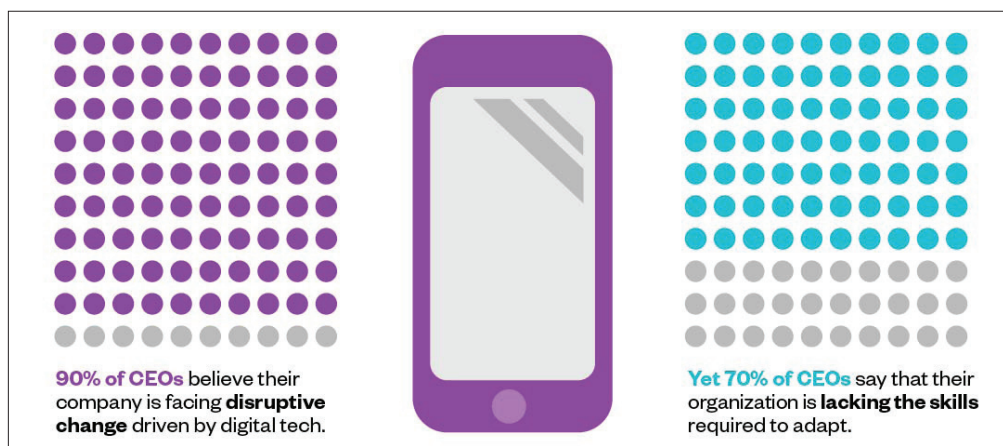
Source: Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report, 2017

Combine this with detachment and disinterest inherent in today's typically disengaged workforce, organizations are facing an uphill battle, with teams ill-equipped to dive in and solve the issue. From a cost perspective, actively disengaged employees can cost an estimated $3,400 for every $10,000 of their salary, and even those who are somewhere in the middle between being engaged or not, costs can add up. The middle manager who is passively looking for new opportunities, lost productivity due to the stress of urgently facing a complex problem without adequate support, or absorbing the costs of a preventable error, are all likely to impact the bottom line.

Employee engagement and agility are difficult to measure, and thus difficult to influence. An annual employee survey to measure engagement is at best a lagging indicator of how employees are feeling, and in the worst case an ineffective waste of time and money. Agility is even more elusive—you may know that you have it while your team is deep in the weeds on a fast-moving project, or find out that you're lacking agility when you need it most.
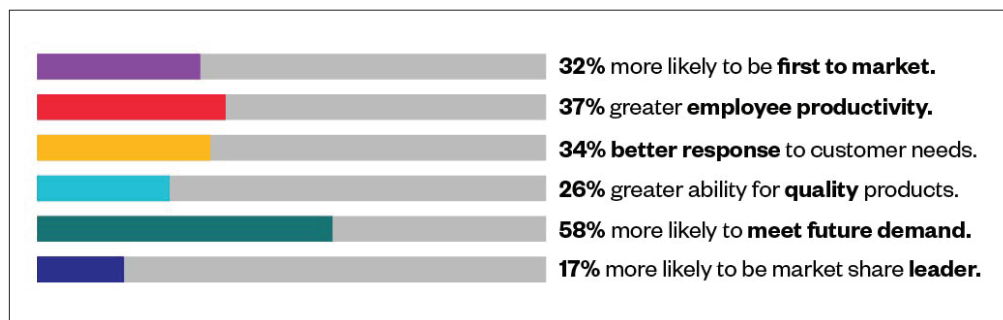
Organizations need to address the skill gaps *and* do this in a way that reconnects people to the pace and passion needed in a rapidly changing environment.

Learning Culture As A Competitive Advantage

If we accept that teams need to be engaged and ready to adapt to changes as they rapidly occur, and that their knowledge and skills face a continual decline towards obsoletion, then learning becomes the obvious answer to how organizations can keep their teams competitive.

Leaders should not think of learning as a one-off event, and instead work toward creating a learning culture—an environment that continually focuses on evaluating knowledge gaps and provides support for acquiring new skills, provides a safe space to try (and occasionally fail) new skills on-the-job, and embeds learning at the team level where employees and leaders are engaged in pulling new knowledge into their work—these are the elements that will create the conditions required for engagement and agility. And most importantly, embedding learning in daily operations will improve business outcomes.

High-Impact Learning Organizations

32% more likely to be **first to market.**

37% greater **employee productivity.**

34% better response to customer needs.

26% greater ability for **quality** products.

58% more likely to **meet future demand.**

**17%** more likely to be market share **leader.**

Source: Oracle, 2013

Organizations with a strong learning culture are simply better equipped to navigate the shifting business landscape. As skills requirements for roles continue to evolve at a rapid pace, organizations must either help their teams learn, or allow them to get left behind.

The Three Elements of a Learning Culture

CEB provides the following model for creating a productive learning culture, which requires that employees have access to the right learning opportunity, capability, and environment.

CEB's model of a productive learning culture
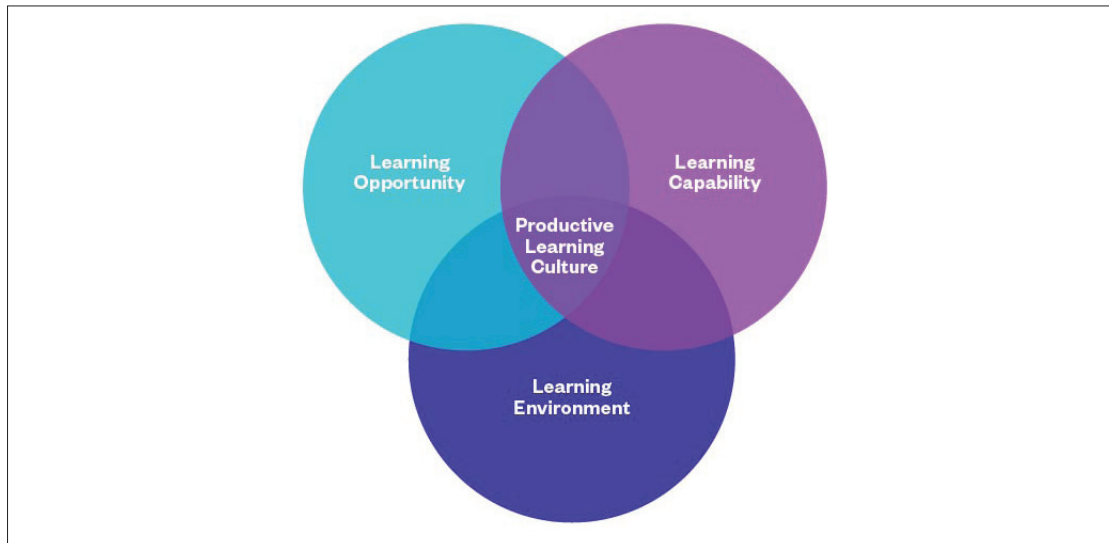
Source: Oracle, 2013

Opportunity refers to resources and materials. In our digital age, content is ubiquitous. A quick search will reveal a myriad of online courses, articles, YouTube tutorials, and resources to teach just about any skill you'd care to learn. The role of organizations in creating learning opportunities thus becomes about curation and prioritization. Handing over the login information to a database of online courses does not count as providing opportunity—if the content is uncurated, employees will struggle to apply it to the context of their day-to-day. They might spend a bit of time poking around (likely while they're distracted on their lunch break), but will be very unlikely to retain much. To create opportunities, organizations must curate the content and resources that are highly relevant to their employees, and create a culture in which learning is viewed as a priority, not a bonus.

Capability is related to the ability to learn effectively. We know that formal, classroom style education is generally ineffective. Only 10% of learning occurs in this setting, while 20% occurs in peer to peer interactions, and a staggering 70% happens through practice and application. The role of organizations in creating this capability then becomes less about providing content, and more about creating the conditions in which employees are able to learn by doing.

"*Learning, we argue, is something you do for yourself. Education is something done to you.***" – Whiplash, page 32**

Which brings us to learning environment. Are employees able to practice new skills, in situations where mistakes are allowed and experimentation is encouraged? Does your culture allow people to ask others for help, to take the extra time required to look up answers online, or brainstorm solutions in a group? To create a learning environment, it is essential that employees feel safe to work through challenges. Are team members supported by their managers in pursuit of new skills? Leaders at all levels of the organization should be modelling learning to their teams.

L&D and Leaders Need To Work Together to Create a Learning Culture

Learning and Development groups are struggling to keep up with the demands of creating the three conditions that CEB identifies as necessary for a robust learning culture. Traditionally, L&D provides the content for a learning program—they book a speaker, order copies of the latest business book, provide access to the database of online courses, and take an annual survey to see if people like what they've provided, generating a "tick the box" on the 10% of learning that can be provided this way.

They provide the framework required for *education*, but fall short of creating the conditions needed for *learning*. Learning is a habit—it occurs when education is activated and put into practice.

To keep up with this shift, L&D needs to create the conditions required for a learning culture—the opportunity, capability, and environment. Team leaders are best positioned to understand the context of the learning needs of their employees, and the business outcomes that learning can influence.

For this process to be successful, it is essential for leaders and organizations to identify the outcomes that learning will produce. Too often, organizations decide that their training budget is in place for the sake of employee recognition and reward—employees ask for development opportunities, so organizations provide them as a retention strategy, but fail to link learning to outcomes. This is where team leaders need to be working with L&D to identify skills gaps, metrics and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that need improvement, and providing systems analysis for their teams. If one team member increases speed, will it create a bottleneck for others? How does learning align with team priorities?

Teams Need a Learning Culture

Maybe you're thinking, my team is perfect as it is, we don't need to learn anything new. We're hitting or exceeding targets, engagement is strong, and besides, we don't have time to think about learning anyway. This is a dangerous thought, that may result in your team getting left behind as the future of work rapidly arrives.

All organizations and teams need learning embedded in their operations. You can be a technically brilliant employee but unless your organization invests the time needed to fill you in on the features and quirks of your role, you're bound to miss something. Unfortunately, even this simple function is ineffective: Gallup reports that only 12% of employees strongly agree their organization does a great job of onboarding new employees.

Prioritize onboarding

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"Employees make judgments and form opinions about their organization every single day—from the first day."

Source: Gallup, 2017

It's time to shift our thinking—yes we need to create learning cultures, and the correct conditions to develop a learning habit, but it certainly doesn't need to be dry or boring. Like most things in life, learning is much more enjoyable when it is shared with others. Make time with your team to chat about what you're reading, the podcast you're currently obsessed with, the half-baked idea that popped into your head on the treadmill or in the shower. Extend learning outside of work too, whether learning how to cook Thai food, trying rock climbing, or starting a vegetable garden—get out of your comfort zone, and share those results with the people around you. Ask questions and learn what others are passionate about. Embedding pockets of learning into each day will help develop the habit of learning into your life, and your organization.

Teams should be building the skills they need to face change as it arrives. Organizations need engaged, agile employees who can think strategically, collaborate effectively, and engage with change. We know that an effective learning culture will be a differentiating factor between the organizations that thrive, and those that get left behind.