# Learning Culture Needs a Strong Foundation

By Diane Law

Curious, self-directed, lifelong learners. A spirit of collaboration. People keeping pace with the rate of change. Alignment of learning to organizational ambitions. An inventive and open-minded workplace, where people spark new ideas and explore alternatives.

As learning professionals, that is our ideal. It's what is known as a culture of learning, where curious employees continuously pursue, share, and apply new capabilities, ideas, and knowledge to improve their individual and organizational performance.

The importance of having a strong learning culture is well recognized. More than 10 years ago, a report published by Bersin by Deloitte examined 100+ practices, processes, and systems to determine which had the most business impact. The top result was a learning culture. With our businesses facing new challenges, technology, and disruptors in the marketplace, this is as true today as it was then.

Nurturing a learning culture brings numerous benefits, such as increased productivity and engagement, higher retention, and a workforce that is fit for the future. But we can't assume that merely providing the best processes, resources, courses, coaching, and on-the-job support fosters a learning culture. Although these aspects are important, they will not be effective if the right foundations are not in place—an environment in which the culture of learning will thrive and survive. If certain fundamentals are not in place, it is like trying to build a house on sand.

## Build your culture on a strong base

The strength of a building lies in its foundation. The foundation holds the structure above it and transforms the load to make it stable and firm. Without strong foundations, structures eventually collapse.

It's the same with implementing a learning culture. If solid foundations in the organizational environment have not been built, there is little hope for long-term success. And the more ambitious your goals, the stronger the foundation you'll have to build.

## Building blocks

What needs to be put into place to ensure that you effectively implement and sustain a learning culture? The foundation for success should be based upon

• people feeling they have the ability to learn (mindset)

• employees knowing that the opportunities to learn are relevant to them and can be applied to their current or future roles (relevance)

• managers, teams, and the organization providing a safe environment to experiment, fail, and learn from mistakes (psychological safety).

## Mindset

The first building block is individuals believing that their skills and behaviors can be developed rather than being immutably engrained traits. Carol Dweck's research explains that in a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, such as their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. A "growth mindset," on the other hand, thrives on challenge, seeks out situations in which to experiment, and sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a springboard for growth and stretching existing abilities. A growth mindset gives freedom for pushing the boundaries. It creates a passion for lifelong learning. It enables a learning culture to be embraced, since people in the organization feel they can expand and grow and engage fully in the process.

## Relevance and context

A learning culture must meet the needs of the organization as well as the individual. There must be a why, benefit, and purpose. Learning experiences must be either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or experiences of learners (personal relevance) or connected in some way to real-world issues, problems, and contexts (organizational relevance).

By establishing both personal and real-world relevance, learners are provided with an important opportunity to relate subject matter to the world around them and to assimilate it in accordance with their previously held

assumptions and beliefs. People may have a growth mindset, but to be motivated to learn at work, it is key for them to understand how that learning fits into their organization's ambitions and their own personal wider growth at work.

## Psychological safety

The third crucial building block to establishing a learning culture is a supportive and non-threatening organizational environment. This involves appreciating and celebrating the differences between individuals. It also provides a climate that tolerates mistakes and lets people take chances.

Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. William A. Kahn defines is as "being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career." In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected.

People who feel psychologically safe tend to be more innovative and learn from their mistakes. For an organization, this means allowing people to speak up without being criticized, providing constructive feedback based on learning, being inclusive, and encouraging a curious, inquisitive workforce.

## Building from the foundation up

Building your foundation does not mean that you stop all your learning initiatives until it is complete. It will be an ongoing process and just beginning to put it in place is a good start. Keep doing your good work, engage the business and your learners in the process, and work in parallel at creating your organizational learning environment.

Creating this strong, solid learning foundation will not happen overnight. It will take effort, but it will be worth it when you have established a sustained culture of learning.

## References

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