LEVERAGING THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

To optimize your company’s capacity for growth, nurture your team’s capacity for learning and development.

Aligning Learning Goals with Your Mission and Priorities

When you think about what it takes to remain competitive in your industry and market, a theme emerges. You need to be agile in the face of unforeseen opportunities or challenges. Able to anticipate and respond quickly to emerging trends and shifting customer requirements. Capable of demonstrating value and building relationships that withstand pricing pressure.

For each of these qualities, the underlying theme is the capacity to keep pace with the latest business intelligence—to ensure that, throughout your organization, team members learn at work, and from work, every day. It’s a measure of performance that many companies fail to benchmark. But those that make a strong, sustained commitment to cultivating a learning organization develop a workforce that’s better informed, more capable of acting on opportunities, and better positioned to pursue individual and organization-wide growth.
While there’s no uniform definition of a learning organization, there are some common characteristics that you can adapt to your company’s business requirements and performance objectives. Above all, the executive team must actively encourage all employees to strengthen and share their knowledge and to seek opportunities to learn, coach, and mentor. You may find it helpful to adopt communication and information-sharing platforms that make it easier to disseminate learning across the organization, or you may find it more productive to accomplish that through small groups that meet in person. Best practices for your company will depend on how employees interact, which educational approaches are most productive for them, and how their learning goals align with your business mission, priorities, and objectives.

Building the Learning Organization

Investing in a learning organization represents a financial commitment, but technology has enabled such diverse learning opportunities, that your company has access to extensive free and low-cost resources. (See Back to School, page 4, for details on a variety of e-learning organizations, and also check with your industry’s professional associations for more sector-specific learning programs and platforms.)

As a general guideline, however, consider the findings of the 2015 State of the Industry report published by the Association for Talent Development and sponsored by Capella University. Based on a survey of 336 organizations, the report found that in 2014, organizations spent an average of $1,229 per employee on learning, and that those employees devoted an average of 32.4 hours to learning.

The return on that investment can be substantial for companies that forge strong ties between individual professional development and overall corporate performance. “The primary purpose of a learning function within
your organization should be to support the company’s goals,” says David L. Vance, executive director of the Center for Talent Reporting and author of *The Business of Learning: How to Manage Corporate Training to Improve Your Bottom Line*. “Learning almost always can help the company accomplish goals for sales, cost, quality, customer satisfaction, and productivity.” Making full use of that potential begins with defining a target—for example, increasing sales or reducing costs—and evaluating how learning can contribute to meeting specific objectives.

While the company should “frame training initiatives around larger business goals or strategies,” it’s equally important to “articulate to employees what’s in it for them,” says Courtney Vital Kriebs, senior director of education at the Association for Talent Development. “Doing this can help set the stage for the learners to be more engaged and self-directed” and helps them to see their role in achieving the larger goal. “What will learners be able to do differently on the job as a result of the learning experience? The organization, especially the trainees’ direct managers, can foster application and behavior change opportunities to support the transfer of the training to where the work is actually happening.”

Your company need not limit itself to task-oriented learning, says Dr. Lisa Lahey, a Harvard faculty member, co-founder of performance consultancy Minds at Work, and co-author, with Dr. Robert Kegan, of *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*. She makes a distinction between technical challenges, such as how to create a PowerPoint presentation, and adaptive challenges, like the ability to “truly engage with people around a set of ideas that you put into your PowerPoint. That requires much more of the human piece of the equation.”

**Culture and Collaboration**

Another key component of the learning organization is a workforce that’s motivated to learn. If your company values that characteristic in employees, make a practice of screening for that quality during the recruitment process. Lahey recommends using interview questions such as, “Can you tell me about a good example of you
While some of your growth targets may be best supported by having employees, managers, and even your executive team enroll in university courses, there are many learning opportunities that your team members can pursue without leaving their desks. These technologies also allow you to adapt to individual employees’ learning styles so that each member of the team can pursue professional development in the most productive manner.

To integrate class time into your workplace, explore the opportunities available for study with some of these online learning organizations:

**American Management Association (AMA).** The AMA’s management training and educational offerings include accreditation and certificate programs, live and on-demand online seminars, on-site seminars, webcasts and webinars, and programs through organizations such as the Women’s Leadership Center. With a variety of leadership development and management training options, the organization supports requirements such as blended learning opportunities, custom solutions, and independent learning through access to white papers and research.

**Association for Talent Development.** If your company needs support in training its trainers, this organization’s courses can help. Its skills development programs for learning professionals include such topics as designing learning, e-learning, and online learning, delivering training, organizational development, project management, human performance improvement, and management and leadership development.

**Coursera.** This online learning organization states its mission simply: to “provide universal access to the world’s best education.” Its platform gives you and your team access to online courses presented in partnership with global academic institutions like Brown, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale as well as thought leaders as diverse as the National Geographic Society, Museum of Modern Art, and the World Bank Group. Included among its top specializations are big data, business analytics, business and financial modeling, entrepreneurship, and leading people and teams.

**Lynda.com.** Founded in 1995 and acquired by LinkedIn in 2015, this company offers more than 3,500 online courses in business, software, technology, and creative skills. Its corporate courses are grouped by topic and by industry tier or sector, including small business, mid-market, Fortune 1000, and nonprofit. Subscribers are given unlimited access to the company’s library of 144,000 video tutorials, and a 10-day free trial is available. In keeping with your employees’ varied preferences for accessing information, Lynda is available on desktops as well as via apps for iPhone, iPad, Android, and Windows 8.

**SCORE.** A nonprofit association supported by the U.S. Small Business Administration, SCORE’s mission is to help small businesses launch, grow, and achieve their goals through education and mentorship. It oversees a nationwide network of 11,000 volunteers whose expertise spans 62 industries. SCORE’s online workshops fall under such categories as startups, running and growing a business, marketing, management, finance and money, and technology.

**Udemy.** With more than 10 million students and 40,000 online courses in more than 80 languages, Udemy says its mission is “to help anyone learn anything.” With its digital courses available on demand, the platform is designed to allow people to learn at their own pace. But its target students are not just individuals. Udemy offers a library of courses on business topics that are designed to provide your company’s training program with a “scalable learning platform.”
learning from your experience?” This will help you to identify candidates who seek growth and development opportunities in addition to a paycheck.

Once you have attracted people who exhibit enthusiasm for learning, be creative in looking for ways to reward high-performers. Those rewards can include a mix of salary increases, performance bonuses, and formal recognition programs at the departmental and company-wide levels. This strategy can be productive when the company wants to encourage professional development but cannot offer promotions to every learner.

That’s especially true when employees prove to have a great capacity for learning but less potential as leaders. Vance notes that those employees may be best suited for placement on an expert track, which creates a means of showing that the company values their performance. And it can be “very powerful” to use them as teachers, but the company needs to work with them to determine their most productive approach to educating their colleagues, whether that means running a formal classroom session or working one-on-one in a mentoring role.

In addition, all employees should understand the company’s approach to learning and the way its professional development system works. Kriebs recommends “creating processes, through individual development plans and other means, that make it okay for employees and managers to have conversations about the various opportunities that are available to them to support their career development.”

Learning initiatives will also help your company to identify future leaders—those who embrace continual learning by design and demonstrate a capacity for taking risks and learning from
both success and failure. Strategies for their professional development should reflect not only current learning needs, but also needs that are likely to emerge as the organization grows.

Some of that learning may not be directly aligned to immediate company goals but may, instead, relate to preparing those future leaders for challenges they'll face only once they've moved up to a new position. This gives the employees a sense that the company is investing in them, which can, in turn, contribute to meeting goals for increased employee engagement or retention of top talent.

It’s also productive to groom future leaders by placing them in positions of authority on a small scale. That can mean encouraging employees to take ownership of customer interactions or other situations that allow them to make and implement decisions. “And in many organizations, there’s an opportunity for them to lead a project or lead a committee, so they can begin to exhibit some actual leadership there,” Vance says. “Some of the characteristics that you look for in a leader can be exhibited by individual contributors as well, as that’s one of the ways you would know that they might be a good candidate to be promoted to a formal leadership position.”

**REQUIRED READING**

These online resources can help you establish the learning culture that’s right for your company.

Your company’s learning priorities are as individualized as its mission and performance targets. Refer to these online resources to obtain additional expert advice on how your organization can optimize its employees’ potential to learn and contribute to your sustained success:

- **If You’re Not Helping People Develop, You’re Not Management Material.** “Job seekers from entry-level to executive are more concerned with opportunities for learning and development than any other aspect of a prospective job,” notes this *Harvard Business Review* article. It argues that by playing “a vital role in talent management,” strong managers “attract candidates; drive performance, engagement, and retention; and play a key role in maximizing employees’ contributions to the firm.”

- **Does Your Company Make You a Better Person?** This *Harvard Business Review* article about “deliberately developmental organizations” makes the case that “the organization can prosper only if its culture is designed from the ground up to enable ongoing development for all of its people.”

- **Center for Talent Development Reporting.** The Resources tab on the Center’s website provides links to documents such as Introduction to Talent Development Reporting Principles for CEOs, white papers, statement templates, a self-assessment form, and more.

- **What is Organizational Learning?** Here, the Society for Organizational Learning, North America, presents The Five Disciplines for Building the Learning Organizations. Included on this page is a link to download “Leading Learning Organizations.”

- **Let the (Training) Games Begin.** The Thiagi Group was founded to “help people achieve more through performance-based training that is motivating and effective.” On this webpage, the company provides links to more than 400 ready-to-use training games and activities.
By approaching learning as a stepping stone to leadership development, the company also establishes a strategy for giving executives more time to focus on mission as the business grows. This can be a challenge for executives who have been accustomed to overseeing all aspects of business operations and management. But grooming new managers and executives is an essential step in preparing the company for expansion into new product and service lines, verticals, and geographic markets.

The competitive landscape is never static, and managing growth becomes a greater challenge as the company reaches new milestones in the size of its staff, its customer base, and its revenue. A strong learning culture allows the company to optimize employee productivity organization-wide and empowers all team members to contribute their best to the company’s performance. This, in turn, allows the company to grow in size and strength so that its executives can lead the organization to peak profitability and sustained success.
CASE STUDY

Scaling the Learning Curve

Being a learning organization has helped West Palm Animal Clinic streamline and improve everything from patient onboarding, to obtaining and retaining clients, and more.

Dr. Michelle Durkee, founder of the West Palm Animal Clinic in West Palm Beach, Florida, has learned a great deal during her more than three decades in business. And one key discovery is that learning never ends—for her, her staff, and her clients.

“Complete medical reports are now shared instantaneously with our clients via a personalized, free website portal,” Durkee notes. “We also educate them by using 3D anatomical animations, radiographs, and home care videos in the treatment rooms.”

In terms of her staff, Durkee has seen a wide range of benefits accrue from education. “The professional cross-training and mentoring has helped make everything we do smarter and more productive,” she says. “Because we’re so integrated, and the staff is so attuned to one another’s jobs, every patient interaction is maximized. For example, our in-depth training has often helped our receptionists catch things that they then pass on to the technicians. It means the doctor is up to speed and informed before they ever see an animal. In the end, it equals happier clients and better medicine.”

Supporting learning in a range of forms

Education is the core of the hospital’s operations in a number of ways, and learning takes place through several outlets. It starts with institutional, codified learning. Durkee has created a 19-page training manual outlining an array of key skillsets for every position, including receptionists, veterinary assistants and technicians, kennel attendants, and management. Each area of training is clearly mapped and accompanied by an average time of
duration. In the nearly 70 tasks listed under “Kennel Attendant” training, for instance, the “General Canine Behavioral Interpretation” lesson runs for 12 minutes, 41 seconds.

In addition to the general training guide, each position has its own “Phased Training Program” guide, highlighting the position’s key requirements—including ensuring that the new staffer understands his or her job description, OSHA requirements, and more—each of which has to be signed off on by a trainer.

In addition to codified job training, West Palm Animal Clinic offers employees several other educational opportunities. They include:

- **Cross training.** Once an employee is completely trained in their own position, they then spend time in key areas of a related position. “A veterinary technician will spend time learning about the appointment scheduler, typically part of a receptionist’s job,” illustrates Durkee. “It helps them understand who they’re seeing in the exam room,” says Durkee. “Having people take on key parts of the jobs they sometimes share supports our integrated approach.”

- **Mentoring.** Every new employee shadows a veteran employee for a week or two to learn about West Palm’s general workflow. “Every clinic does things differently. We want to teach employees right from the start how we want it done, because we know these people might be coming from a different clinic,” she says.

- **Working interviews.** In a unique take on a standard interview, prospective West Palm Animal Clinic employees interview for their jobs while working with the clinic’s clients. “We want to see how they interact with our clients and with the other staff members. It’s good learning for clients and us,” says Durkee.

- **Professional education.** West Palm Animal Clinic pays for courses employees take after hours, typically online. They simply need to submit the hours spent and costs of the courses for reimbursement. Durkee also makes professional conferences and events available to the entire staff. “Because we’re so integrated, and the staff is so attuned to one another’s jobs, every patient interaction is maximized. For example, our in-depth training has often helped our receptionists catch things that they then pass on to the technicians. It means the doctor is up to speed and informed before they ever see an animal. In the end, it equals happier clients and better medicine.”
we go to any conference, we break down the classes available, and each one of us decides which ones we'll attend. Once we get back, we debrief each other on what we’ve learned,” she adds.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of having a “smarter staff” can be seen in West Palm Animal Clinic’s client base. “We do some advertising online, but we’ve grown our client base almost exclusively by word-of-mouth,” Durkee asserts. “Our staff has become so well-known and respected in our area—clients know that they’ll have a seamless, positive experience with us every time—that we don’t need to do a lot of outreach. Having a learning organization in place has been huge in helping us gain, and retain, clients.”