Getting Buy-in for Cafeteria Learning

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So you’re thinking about implementing Cafeteria Learning within your organization, but first you need to get approval from your company’s stakeholders and executives. What are some of the best ways to do that? How have others done it? Could it really work for your organization?

Answering these questions starts with obtaining a deep understanding of the unique benefits Cafeteria Learning provides to the learner, the organization, and the learning professional. Let’s explore each one of these in turn. Then we’ll discuss common obstacles that often stand in the way of adopting a Cafeteria Learning approach, along with advice for overcoming them and getting buy-in from executives and organizational stakeholders.

Benefits to the Learner

Chapter 1 discussed how learners’ brains construct and retain knowledge best. The resulting benefits of applying this research are clear: learners become deeply engaged in the learning process, finding it fun and enjoyable rather than tedious or unpleasant. Of course, they actually learn in ways that meaningfully influence their work:

“I went into this morning’s workshop wondering how I would sit still for two hours straight . . . and to my delight, the time flew by. The material was spot-on relevant, in my opinion. I loved how the scenarios were tailor-made for our company. The exercises were fun and engaging, and it was nice to work with colleagues from outside my department. I feel like I got takeaways on some sensitive subjects.”—Cafeteria Learning workshop participant

They also build relationships with their colleagues that may not have occurred otherwise.

“One [of the benefits] is the interaction with colleagues. Even if it’s just ‘I now know your name and where you work,’ we have people who know each other now who didn’t know each other before, whereas if we’d had a traditional training class and just sat down, they wouldn’t necessarily know that person any better. There’s a relationship and a camaraderie effect to this approach that is really a side benefit that you get by using it.”—Training and development manager

But what other implications does this hold for learners? Let’s dig a little deeper. What do learners really want from their jobs?

Daniel H. Pink, author of the *New York Times* bestselling book Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us, argues that salary, benefits, and other similar perks (that is, extrinsic motivators) can only go so far in motivating employees. What they really want is the rich satisfaction of working in an environment that supports their deeper needs for autonomy, mastery, and purpose, allowing the joy of intrinsic motivation to surface.

Autonomy means that workers have control and choice over how they reach a goal or complete a task. “Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement,” writes Pink (2009, 110).

Pink defines mastery as “The desire to get better and better at something that matters” (111). The drive toward mastery is innate within each one of us, but often lies dormant. “Only engagement can produce mastery,” Pink explains (109).

Purpose is a growing desire in today’s workforce, exhibited by Baby Boomers and Millennials alike. Workers want to feel connected to a larger purpose and mission. They want to feel as if their work has meaning and as if what they do matters. As Pink says (223), “Within organizations, people need to have purpose: In goals that use profit to reach purpose; in words that emphasize more than self-interest; and in policies that allow people to pursue purpose on their own terms.”

Cafeteria Learning supports each of Pink’s elements of intrinsic human motivation: When learners are in charge of their own learning and have the freedom to make their own choices (that is, experiencing a greater sense of autonomy), it means that not only can they do their jobs better (gaining competency and moving toward mastery), but they also have the opportunity to discover the intimate connection between their everyday tasks and the company’s larger sense of purpose, mission, and values (fostering a deeper sense of purpose). This makes for a rich and satisfying workplace environment that benefits learners.

Cafeteria Learning is designed to grab learners’ attention from the moment they enter the workshop and continue throughout the learning experience. As learners decide for themselves the activities to explore, their sense of autonomy builds along with their level of engagement with the content. The environment is set to develop mastery and purpose—learners make their own, meaningful connections to the content in real, purposeful ways.

“[Cafeteria Learning] is about finding the knowledge inside of you, asking your peers, and working together.”—Cafeteria Learning workshop participant

Benefits to the Organization

In the article “Great Employees Make a Great Business,” Michelle Nichols (2006) writes, “Which people are more valuable—good employees or good customers? While some might think this is a rhetorical “chicken-or-egg” question, it isn't. The answer is—envelope please—good employees. This may surprise you . . . but a successful business starts with good employees who then attract good customers, not the other way around.”

If the benefits of Cafeteria Learning to learners are great, wouldn’t the benefits to the organization be equally as great?

“This approach is exciting and engages individuals at all levels and functional areas of the company. It has been very well received in our retail environment where learners are used to being active and involved with others on the job. The autonomy this type of learning environment provides is appealing to our diverse workforce and takes into account differences in knowledge, experience, and educational background.”—Director of staffing and development

Think of it this way: what kind of employees do you want to attract and retain in your organization*—*those who are intrinsically motivated toward performance and achievement, or those who need to be nudged, poked, and prodded to do their jobs?

With this in mind, it makes business sense to cultivate a company culture that attracts, supports, and encourages those who are self-motivated toward mastery and achievement. If you do this well, talented workers will flock to your organization. And cultivating the type of culture and environment that attracts and retains truly engaged employees begins with learning.

As part of its State of the Global Workforce,released in 2013, the Gallup Organization asked more than 25 million employees 12 questions, forming the Gallup Q12, a measure of employee engagement. One of these questions is: “At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?”Learning professionals can take this one step further and ask the employees they’re creating learning for: “At work, do you have the opportunity to learn the way you learn best?”

Cafeteria Learning leverages both intrinsic motivation and individualization. Participants often report ah-ha moments that were never anticipated because they’re learning from each other, and not just from the sage on the stage. By providing opportunities for employees to do what they do best and learn from each other, businesses can develop good employees who attract good customers.

Benefits to the Learning Professional

Having spent more than a combined 40 years in the learning and development industry, we’ve heard many stories about learning professionals who were ready to pack their bags and call it quits. A friend of ours was one such person. She had grown tired of presenting information that inevitably fell on deaf ears, trying and failing to get through to learners who squirmed in their seats for hours on end, and knowingly perpetuating painfully ineffective training methods simply because “that’s the way we’ve always done things.” She had grown tired of the high tolerance for cutting corners and putting the benefit of stakeholders before learners. What was the point of staying in her job if she was only perpetuating frustration for the learners and herself?

“I was seriously considering switching careers,” she said. “That is, until things began to change.” Mind you, it wasn’t as if her environment shifted, at least not at first: She was motivated to change her perspective, which in turn changed her belief in herself. She started to realize that things didn’t have to be the way they were and that she actually had the power to make a real impact with her work. Bit by bit, she developed the courage to pitch active learning activities to stakeholders and implement them into her curriculum programs—and from that point on, her experience at work began to transform. Today, she is the curriculum development manager at a large organization, and her sense of passion, purpose, and ambition for her job and the industry at large is contagious.

Imagine the benefits you can experience when you make this kind of a shift, too: Instead of perhaps grumbling, learners will actually look forward to coming to your workshops. You’ll see their faces light up at the sight of your interactive learning stations, as they share and engage with one another, and as they make meaningful connections between the content and their jobs. You’ll delight in knowing that the learning experiences that you implement produce tangible, measurable organizational results (and so will management). And you’ll begin to feel accomplished, empowered, and congruent in your role rather than stale, dissatisfied, and stuck.

Can Cafeteria Learning Really Work for Your Organization?

We often meet learning professionals who are excited about Cafeteria Learning and other progressive approaches, yet they confide in us that they just haven’t been able to make the switch.

“The thought of it gets me all jazzed up,” said one industry peer. “But you know, it could never work in our organization.”

She presented a couple of reasons why her organization must be different from other companies who’ve successfully implemented the approach:

“Our stakeholders would never buy into this. They’re so stuck on doing things the way they’ve always been done.”

“I catch our learners staring out the window during compliance training. . . . I just don’t think it’ll work for them.”

Well, this actually makes them no different from anyone else. Contrary to what you might think, many of the companies and individuals who implement Cafeteria Learning faced these same questions, doubts, and challenges. Many of them worked for risk-averse organizations in which traditional training practices were not only accepted, but expected, and where management followed tradition like a script. Some operated as one-person training departments for their companies and faced obvious constraints in both budget and time. Many wondered how their learners would take to the new approach.

What’s more, before implementing Cafeteria Learning, most of these learning professionals hadn’t thought of themselves as particularly bold, risky, or progressive. Sure, they wanted to make changes and lead their learners in a new direction, but they weren’t necessarily used to stepping outside their comfort zones or proposing new ideas. Doing so felt a little unnerving.

It doesn’t take a big budget to make Cafeteria Learning work for your company. It doesn’t take a miracle or a Herculean effort, either. Consider this chapter the ultimate guide to socializing Cafeteria Learning into your organizational culture and attracting unwavering support from stakeholders—even if you think you don’t have the time or resources to make it happen.

“Cafeteria Learning takes you back to the days when learning was fun and exciting. There’s individual reflection, paired discussion, some game techniques and the overarching choice which makes you the master of your learning. I didn’t want it to end! Every learning professional should know about Cafeteria Learning and how to rekindle the excitement of learning in a business environment while meeting clear performance objectives.”—Cafeteria Learning workshop participant

Consider these responses to the two reasons above for why Cafeteria Learning couldn’t work in your organization.

“Stakeholders Would Never Buy Into This”

It can be difficult to implement new ways of doing things into your organization. Your stakeholders are so dead set on doing things the way they’ve always been done. You’re sure that they’d never even consider implementing something like Cafeteria Learning. It’s far too progressive, too different. It’s just not their style.

These beliefs are understandable. If leadership has always done things a certain way, what reason is there to believe they’d be willing to do things any differently?

In reality, however, it can be easier than you’d think to get leadership on board with—and even excited about—something new. It just takes an understanding of how best to present the idea.

A great example comes from a manager of training and development for a large service corporation. Of the several companies she’d worked for in the past, she told us, her current company was the most conservative. Nevertheless, she’d managed to get executive leadership not just tentatively on board, but fully behind her Cafeteria Learning efforts.

And her story is not unique.

How did she do it? Despite their initial skepticism of the idea, she secured the stakeholders’ support by speaking their language, starting small, and presenting the idea as an experiment:

Speak the Stakeholders’ Language

Imagine coming up with a plan that could increase achievement and desired results, and have a meaningful impact on the company’s bottom line. But when you present the plan to the stakeholders, they stare back at you and say, “Sorry, we’re not interested.” Would this ever happen?

The mistake most people make when presenting new ideas is that they focus too much on matter-of-fact details, such as logistics and the nuts-and-bolts of how the program works, at the expense of what stakeholders actually care about most—results and tangible benefits to the organization.

Learn to speak in terms of the benefits Cafeteria Learning will bring to the organization (for example, increased engagement and effectiveness, and higher return on investment) and you’ll have the stakeholders nodding “yes” before you know it.

Start Small

Imagine that a few people come to your door one day with an unusual request: they want to place a large, ugly sign in your yard that reads, “Drive Carefully.”

“We work for a nonprofit that promotes safe driving,” they tell you.

If you’re anything like us, you’d probably laugh loudly in their faces and exclaim, “Fat chance!” and politely tell them “No, thank you.” You’re not alone. When Jonathan Freedman and Scott Fraser (1966) carried out such an experiment, only 17 percent of people said “Yes” to the request.

If someone were to ring your doorbell and ask to place a small “Drive Carefully” sticker on your window, however, you’d be more likely to comply. In fact, when they asked a second group of homeowners to do so, virtually all of them agreed to the request.

The same applies when presenting new ideas to stakeholders. It’s easy to say “No” to large requests, but often equally easy to say “Yes” to small ones, so don’t be afraid to start small. Instead of asking to roll out Cafeteria Learning companywide, begin by asking to roll it out as a pilot for one department or group. Instead of presenting it as a huge overhaul of your existing methods, present it as one small piece of a blended approach that can help stakeholders become more comfortable over time. In his book Revolutionize Learning and Development (2014), Clark Quinn advises readers not to try and “boil the ocean.”

We agree. Not only is this a reasonable approach for getting your foot in the door, but starting small also sets the stage for incorporating bigger changes over time. When Freedman and Fraser went back to the “window sticker” group a few weeks later and asked if they’d be willing to put the large, ugly signs in their yard, they found that this time an incredible 76 percent of homeowners said “Yes.”

What researchers call the “foot in the door technique” may be applied to requests to achieve higher compliance (Burger 1999). With the right attitude toward a reasonable request, people are not only more likely to say “yes” to a small request than a large one, but they are also more likely to say “yes” to a larger request down the line if they’ve already agreed to a smaller one (Ahluwalia and Burnkrant 1993). Sweeping change doesn’t often happen all at once; instead, it starts small and builds from there.

Present It as an Experiment

“Let’s just try it once and see what happens.”

These are the kind of words that might have gotten you into trouble in high school, but they can actually be beneficial in the context of introducing more progressive approaches into a traditional organization.

Much the same as starting small helps scale down the risk factor in the eyes of the stakeholders, presenting it as an experiment helps remove even more risk. Stakeholders don’t have to commit to Cafeteria Learning for the rest of their lives; they don’t even have to commit for every quarter of the next fiscal year. They just have to be willing to let you try it out once and see what happens.

This is where proper evaluation becomes key. The proof is in the pudding, so be sure to provide leadership with a measurement plan ahead of time and an evaluation report after the trial run so they can see the results for themselves, including quantitative before-and-after measurements of the intended performance outcomes (see chapter 8). A colleague noted that leaders were fully on board and wanted to continue and expand upon the “experiment” once they saw the positive feedback and results.

So there you have it: Three effective methods for getting your stakeholders on board with Cafeteria Learning or any other progressive learning approach. Getting management to buy into a new approach might seem like a difficult task to accomplish, but like many of the clients we’ve worked with, you’ll be surprised at how easy it can be once you actually utilize these suggestions. Most of the time, the biggest impediment is simply your waiting to ask to try new approaches.

“How Do We Know It Will Work For Learners?”

You might be concerned that your learners will be unresponsive or reluctant and that getting them engaged in the process will be too difficult. Sure, it can take some learners a bit of time to ease into a more active form of learning, but can you blame them? After all, they’ve been conditioned from an early age to sit back in their chairs and be spoon fed information.

That said, even the most timid and reluctant learners have transformed from closed off and hesitant to open and engaged, in a Cafeteria Learning session. By the end of the workshop, the participant who cautiously started off with a solo activity might be laughing and smiling with several of her colleagues as they play a board game together. The participant who entered the room reluctantly with hands in pockets might now be intent on building the perfect building block structure to demonstrate his perspective on the topic at hand. The magic of Cafeteria Learning is that there’s something for everyone. By giving learners a choice in activities, they don’t feel put on the spot or forced to participate in any one activity. As learners complete activities, they can choose to do so independently, in a pair, or with a small group. Cafeteria Learning removes the fear of “being called on” to provide the correct answer in front of the class.

Learners are innately curious and driven to learn, and giving them autonomy helps unlock this innate desire. Learners who might appear disengaged in one setting can suddenly become engaged and engrossed when placed in an environment that supports their learning needs.

Let’s take a look at the approach a major northwest retailer took to gain acceptance for Cafeteria Learning in a conservative culture.

In 2013, the client’s training and development department was in the process of developing a brand-new development program for an audience of managers whom they hadn’t provided structured training for in the past. The overarching goals of their program were threefold:

To ensure supervisors and managers had the skills needed to grow their staff.

To prepare supervisors and managers for future opportunities.

To demonstrate commitment to the management team through investment in training them.

In partnership with a group of senior leaders, their learning and development team had the vision to create a blended learning approach that included several weeks of self-study via online courses, followed by a workshop component that helped learners take the basic principles and concepts they’d learned online and apply them to their specific workplace situations.

“We didn’t want to just hand our managers a generic training and say, ‘Translate it yourself as to how it applies to your job’; we wanted to help them make that translation,” said the training and development manager. “How could we take the concepts that were being taught in the online learning and then customize them for our particular audience?”

Based on their goals for the new program, a Cafeteria Learning-based approach was proposed that would help learners demonstrate the concepts they’d learned online in an interactive, customized, and hands-on way.

“It was a different type of approach than I had seen used before, but immediately we were very interested in it because we wanted the focus of our workshops to be interactive,” said the training and development manager. “We wanted them to be as practical and as hands-on as we could get them, because the first piece of our program involved self-study, sitting at your desk, and having somebody talk at you. We really wanted people to be able to leave the workshop and do something different. We wanted to give them skills, not just impart information.”

As the new program kicked off, she observed that while some learners were initially timid and unsure what to expect, they quickly grew comfortable with the approach and began stepping outside their comfort zones.

“People started off by gravitating toward the way of learning that they’re most comfortable with,” she explained. “And what we found is that over time, as we kept going back to Cafeteria Learning over and over again, people who originally gravitated toward one type of learning became increasingly brave. They would start off timid and wouldn’t go to a station where they had to talk to somebody else, but by the time they had done it a couple of times, that’s where the biggest learning occurred, and that’s where people started to go because they felt more comfortable and confident that it was a safe place, and they could be wrong and it would be OK.”

Feedback from learners was overwhelmingly positive. “I had people who came up to me the day after the first workshop and said, ‘I did not want to come, I can’t tell you what a relief it was because it was fun!’ So people enjoyed it and they learned something. It’s a very approachable and easy approach for people who might not be comfortable in a formal learning situation,” she recounted.

Unprompted, several learners even sent her emails praising the workshop and its delivery:

“Nice job . . . I look forward to more workshops with a similar structure.”

“Everyone was excited and impressed. The collaborative approach was a hit and the topics were very thought provoking.”

“I really appreciated the ‘no pressure’ approach. It was really a comfortable setting and I think you get the most out of people when they don’t feel put on the spot.”

“I like the fact that there’s really a focus on people exploring and finding the answers themselves as opposed to you feeding them the information.”

Chapter Summary

Getting approval to implement Cafeteria Learning in your organization begins with understanding the benefits to the learner, to the organization, and to the learning professional. Learners benefit as they learn in ways that meaningfully influence their work; experience autonomy, mastery, and purpose; and build new relationships with colleagues. Organizations benefit by attracting and retaining top performers who are intrinsically motivated toward performance and achievement, which inherently improves the company’s levels of production and employee retention. Learning professionals benefit as they begin to have a meaningful impact on learners and the organization, increasing their feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction.

But to see these benefits, you first need to attain buy-in from stakeholders. Recommended best practices for securing stakeholder support include speaking the stakeholders’ language in terms of benefits to the organization, starting with small requests for change as opposed to large, sweeping changes, and presenting a new learning approach as a temporary experiment rather than a permanent change.

Doubting that your learners will engage with a Cafeteria Learning approach, lacking the time or budget to implement a new approach, or feeling uncomfortable with change are often poor excuses not to implement progressive learning approaches such as Cafeteria Learning. Because Cafeteria Learning offers a variety of ways to engage with content, learners readily take to it and become more comfortable with the progressive approach the more they are exposed to it. Lastly, if you want to make a meaningful impact within your organization, it’s necessary to take risks and step outside your own comfort zone.