Book Developing Employees Who Love to Learn

Tools, Strategies, and Programs for Promoting Learning at Work

Linda Honold
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Recommendation

Linda Honold describes a system for helping everyone in your company learn to become more creative, responsive, efficient and team-oriented. She describes various techniques, including methods for developing an interest in learning and self-knowledge. Her book covers individual learning tools, mentoring, coaching, group learning and peer learning. She pays particular attention to learning styles, drawing on the system set out by the Myers-Briggs personality test. Honold's book speaks primarily to corporate managers who are trying to create serendipitous learning systems. Some may find the book dry and overly concerned with the details of systematizing supposedly informal learning, but *BooksInShort* recommends it to HR practitioners and to knowledge management professionals who will find it productive. They will gain a lot from this theoretical – and practical – look at how people in companies actually learn.

Take-Aways

- Formal training usually dominates workplace learning, but actually people learn better informally.
- Individualized, spontaneous learning increases productivity.
- Learners move through several stages, from tentative and unsure to self-directed and competent.
- Learning can take four different shapes: "cognitive or knowledge learning," "attitude and values learning," "skill development" and "aspiration learning."
- People have four different learning styles: "activist, pragmatist, reflector and theorist."
- When you set up employee education programs, use the learners' preferred styles (not yours).
- People learn in four contexts: formal learning in a classroom, semi-formal learning in a group, nonformal learning in out of the classroom and informal learning from daily life.
- The first three stages of establishing a new learning system are exploration, envisioning and planning.
- The fourth phase is incubation and development.
- The fifth phase is implementation and improvement, which is ongoing.

Summary

A Learning Atmosphere

While formalized training programs usually dominate workplace learning, individuals learn better informally, through daily activities, than they do in a formal classroom. To encourage your employees to learn more, promote everyday learning. A few key concepts should shape the way people learn at work:

- Learners should be responsible for self-directed learning.
- Self-knowledge provides a beginning point for further learning. Use tools like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to learn about yourself and how you relate to others.
- A flexible setting will promote your effort to create opportunities for people to learn.
- Learning can occur through reading, reflecting, experimenting or engaging in activities. Often unusual activities are very educational.
- You can't know all the issues that may come up in a rapidly changing environment.
- Employees should be able to apply their current tools to be able to devise solutions in unfamiliar situations.
- Learning should be conscious. Accidental learning is inefficient.
- People learn better when they are aware of the learning process and actively choose to participate.
- Integrate learning into daily activities and let it happen as employees work.
- To experience new learning, people sometimes must "unlearn" what they already know to look at things in new ways.
- You may find that a past axiom no longer holds true. For instance, a directive management style, which was the old standard, might not work as well in a learning environment as encouraging people to ask questions and be independent.

Spontaneous Learning

Individualized spontaneous learning offers your company many benefits, including:

- **Increased productivity and quality** – Employees who know more can do better work.
- **Increased innovation** – Employees who are in the process of learning are more responsive to the needs of other people, including your customers.
- **Increased adaptability to change** – Learning is virtually synonymous with personal change, so it makes employees more flexible.
- **A competitive advantage** – You have more knowledgeable people in your workforce.
- **Fewer communication barriers** – Managers can act more like mentors as they help employees understand what they are learning and how it contributes to their performance.
- **Increased employee motivation, attraction and retention** – Employees who are in the midst of learning usually like their jobs. This makes your firm a better place to work and it draws new talent. Your employees feel motivated to do their best and to stay with your company.
- **Lower costs** – Informal teaching is cheaper than traditional educational methods.

  "As the world keeps changing, knowledge workers must add to what they know in order to stay current or ahead of the competition."

The organizational advantages of increased learning are clear, but you will need to show your employees that they also reap benefits. Whether they are goal-oriented, activity-oriented or learning-oriented, individuals who are adding to their education find that their work becomes more interesting. They have a strong sense of their own value and they obtain more satisfaction and joy from their achievements. Knowledgeable workers are more employable, more secure and better paid, since they know how to do superior work. Your HR staffers also will enjoy filling a new, positive role as they help their co-workers by facilitating their learning.

Learning Styles and Practices

To help employees become self-directed, informal learners, recognize their individual learning styles and match the learning methods you use to those styles. As you design your workplace learning system, consider these factors:

- **How much do the learners know about how to learn?** – Are they prepared?
- **How do they learn best?** – Do they absorb and retain information better by reflecting, experimenting, listening to a speaker or discussing the subject matter. Good learners know what methods suit their learning styles. Some learners prefer reading instead of experimenting with new ideas. They want to become fairly knowledgeable before they talk to other people about a new set of information. Conversely, others people may want to discuss subjects first to get grounded, and then apply what they've learned from the discussion as they move into new material.
- **What context is best for learning various subjects?** – Teachers find that some information is easier to convey in a classroom, but may prefer to teach other sorts of data or hands-on skills in a semiformal facilitated arrangement or in an informal setting.

> "Employees who are learning are more inclined to innovate, particularly when encouraged by the organization."

Consider, too, that each learner is in a different stage of learning:

- **Stage-One learners are unsure of their learning skills** – They are just beginning to learn and may not even know how to start.
- **Stage-Two learners still need some assistance** – They are motivated, but they don't know much about the subject and may only be somewhat self-directed. They generally need someone to indicate what is important to absorb and to suggest how to manage it.
- **Stage-Three learners are already in the "learning mode"** – They feel ready to explore new subjects on their own if they have a good guide to help them when needed.
- **Stage-Four learners are very self-directed** – They are willing and able to plan, execute and evaluate their own learning. Though they may occasionally need help, they mostly can manage their own educational experiences.

> "Research shows that most learning does not take place in a formalized classroom setting, but informally, often as a matter of course, in daily events."

Your goal is to help employees become Stage-Four learners. At that point, they are able to learn from any kind of activity because they can engage in the seven components of learning: "self-direction, creativity, expression, feeling, learning while working, continuous learning and reflexive learning," in which they learn about their own learning processes. At this stage, a person learns effectively, and knows where and how to find information, and how to analyze, capture, store and retrieve it.

> "Informal learning is less costly than traditional training. Employees do not necessarily have to leave their work sites, there is no tuition and expenses for supplies are minimal or non-existent."

Learning also has four possible results:

1. "Cognitive or knowledge learning" develops understanding.
2. "Attitude and values learning" leads to a change in perception.
3. "Skill development" results in new physical, mental or social capabilities.
4. "Aspiration learning" produces changes in a person's goals.

> "Goal-oriented learners use learning to achieve a goal. Activity-oriented learners are interested in the activity of learning. Learning-oriented learners are those who seek knowledge for its own sake."

When you plan curricula and learning activities, strategize about how you are going to handle individuals' different learning styles. The four major learning styles, according to leading educational theorists, are:

1. **"Activist"** – This open-minded, enthusiastic person learns by testing alternatives.
2. **"Pragmatist"** – This problem solver learns through concrete experience.
3. **"Reflector"** – This cautious, observant learner uses reflective observation.
4. **"Theorist"** – This logical, analytical student learns through abstract concepts.

"All employees must work to meet organizational objectives and must change in one way or another – therefore, all employees must be learning."

When you set up a learning situation for employees, use their preferred learning styles (not yours). Arrange the appropriate context for learning, be it formal learning in a classroom, informal group learning, conference-style group learning, non-formal learning outside a classroom, with or without a facilitator, and informal learning based on experiences.

Assessing Learning Tools

Whatever system you establish, you can draw on numerous types of learning tools, strategies and resources. At each step, consider the style and ability of the learner, the context of the material, and the results you want. These techniques are strong learning tools:

- Clarifying essential personal values.
- Creating a learning lifeline, which depicts how people learn.
- Using instruments that help you (and the learners themselves) determine individuals' learning styles, stages, motivations, perceptions and tendencies.
- Making an inventory of the person's current skills.
- Offering a comprehensive personal development workshop.
- Facilitating personal development self-studies.

Building a Learning System

Follow these five phases when you set up a system to support learning in your company:

1. **"Exploration"** – Begin with planning. Name a learning-system planning chair and create a planning team. Decide who will work on creating the system and define their authority. Make sure each person understands the purpose and goals.
2. **"Envisioning"** – Think about how to make learning relevant to your organization's mission. Identify underlying principles to guide your learning system and define its mission in writing, perhaps including such principles as: "Continuous lifelong learning must become a standard feature of the workplace," "The organization must encourage and enable learning" or "Learners must be responsible for learning."
3. **"Planning"** – Plan the components of a learning system that is tailored to your organization. Determine your staffing needs and budget. Evaluate a variety of learning activities in terms of your resources, staff, space and time, so you can decide what to offer and what personnel you will need. Create a grid showing different learning options so you can analyze them by the type of learning (individual, peer, group), the employees' stages and styles of learning, the context (formal, semi-formal, non-formal, informal), and the desired outcome (promote knowledge, teach attitude or values, convey skills or define aspirations).
4. **"Incubation and development"** – Develop your offerings and prepare the space, materials and equipment you will use. Determine what kind of schedule best meets your employees' needs. Plan and implement your internal marketing strategy to build organizational support and "buy-in." Create a pilot group or trial run to test new learning approaches. Inform the workforce about the new learning system as effectively as you can, using announcements, newsletters, online notices, speakers and other avenues available within your company. Consider using financial incentives to encourage people to learn, such as providing an employee development fund offering a certain amount of money each year per employee that workers can access by contributing a minimum number of hours of learning or service. A reward system works especially well for early phase learners. For instance, Buckman Laboratories offered its 150 best "knowledge sharers" resort vacations, new laptops and invitations to a Tom Peters presentation.
5. **"Implementation and improvement"** – Start with a kickoff event and programming. As part of your opening, invite people to fill out a checklist about their learning styles. Offer a door prize related to learning. Once the system is up, start measuring, documenting and improving.

   "In a world that is constantly changing, there is not one subject or set of subjects that will serve you for the foreseeable future, let alone for the rest of your life. The most important skill to acquire now is learning how to learn." [– John Naisbitt]

Tell your employees about various individual learning tools, like tape recording themselves to practice public speaking, observing an

unfamiliar meeting and shadowing another employee. To demonstrate effective ways individuals can learn better by working in groups, set up a learning network. This provides opportunities for people to tell stories that share the organization's culture and to foster dialogue groups to help employees work with and listen to each other.

About the Author

Linda Honold, Ph.D., president and founder of Empowerment Systems, is a human resource development and organization consultant focusing on employee learning and organizational transformation.