

# **Building Learning Culture**

A primer for learning professionals

NIGEL PAINE & MICHELLE OCKERS

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# Introduction – Why We've Produced This Resource

Building a learning culture could well be the one indisputable characteristic of organizations that will thrive in the 21st century. It is the key to creating flourishing workplaces that wholly engage people, give them a sense of purpose and unleash their full human potential. We both believe in this passionately and want to help organisations all over the world take their next steps on this vitally important journey - and it will never be truly 'done'. It is not straightforward. It will take time and commitment. It won't always be easy, but it will be extraordinarily impactful and rewarding and it will help your move the needle inside your company.

This primer is a collection of some of our key articles that we hope will inspire and inform you, and help you take your next steps on the route to building a learning culture. Use it to start conversations in your organization. And to plan what you need to do. Reach out to either of us to share your progress and discuss your challenges. We really want to hear from you.

Yours in Learning,



Nigel Paine



Michelle Ockers

**Book a call with Michelle to explore how she can help you and your team to build learning culture in your organisation.**

**Book a chat**

<https://calendly.com/michelleockers/learning-strategy-chat>

# Learning at the Pace of Disruption



The concept of the learning organisation is making a resurgence. This time around you'll hear the term 'learning culture.' Perhaps you've noticed it popping up in leadership publications and events. It may feel like a fad. If you've been around long enough you've seen it before. It had a flash of popularity in the 1980s thanks largely to the work of Peter Senge. However, it never really took root. It was fuzzy, complex and difficult to implement. The promised innovation and performance benefits were rarely achieved.

Now things are different compared to the 1980s. The world is more complex and changing rapidly. Massive change is occurring on multiple fronts – technology, globalisation, mobility, social structures, consumer and workforce expectations. This demands an unprecedented level of sensitivity and responsiveness to the environment. Adapt quickly or die.

Adaptation demands creativity. New knowledge must be created; new skills developed. CEOs see technological change as an opportunity. The smart ones are adopting it to disrupt their industry. Data analytics, automation and Artificial Intelligence are creating new tasks and jobs. The labour market cannot meet the demand for new skills. Recruitment and training are too slow to respond to disruption. Experimentation, sense-making, collaboration and fluid knowledge-sharing are essential.

My own philosophy and practices have changed radically since leaving the military twenty years ago. As I moved into corporate roles my structured approach to training was initially effective. Then the speed of business increased. Courses were too slow to keep up. I turned to the online world to discover and create solutions. I connected with people, research and practices at the cutting edge of my field. I brought the outside into the organisations I worked with.

My mindset shifted from controlling training to sharing responsibility. I no longer see workers as recipients of training. They are connected contributors who co-create and innovate. I now seek to unleash the power of discovery and adaptation.

I'm inspired by others I speak to and work with who are building learning culture. A national airline with an internal marketplace connecting people with problems to innovators. A government department developing their next generation of leaders by inviting them to solve complex business problems together. A marketing organisation with a ritual around learning from failure. A global retailer that has embedded growth mindset in their leadership and people management practices.

Satya Nadella gets this. Since becoming Microsoft CEO in 2014 he's created a culture-led business renewal. He encourages his people to be curious and open and to learn. He calls this being a 'learn-it-all' rather than a 'know-it-all.' In three and a half years Microsoft's market value has grown by more than US\$250bn.

The evidence is clear. Learning culture positively impacts organisational success. It enables you to identify and fix problems quickly. It creates the conditions required to sense and adapt to environmental shifts. It keeps you ahead of your competitors. Learning culture is a business strategy that deserves your attention as a leader.

Building learning culture is a bold play that helps organisations become adaptable. As a leader your actions set the conditions that make or break it. The degree of exploration and risk-taking you encourage either unleashes or constrains organisational agility. Learning culture is not fuzzy and soft, it's a competitive advantage.

Adaptation at the pace of disruption is about empowerment. Empowerment gives people the authority to make decisions, act autonomously and move quickly. It gives them permission to connect with others across and outside of your organisation. It encourages them to look up and look out – to stay abreast of change and discover what others are doing. It sets them up to identify business opportunities and find better ways to do things.

Trust is also critical. Make no mistake about trust being fuzzy. A solid research base attests to its hard business value. Trust gives people the confidence to try new things and experiment. It gives them the courage to openly admit to and learn from mistakes. It makes it okay to bring their whole self to work. Counterintuitively, when people feel safe they take the kind of risks you want them to take. The risk of being seen and heard. The risk of failing.

Establishing trust and empowerment at scale, right across an organisation, creates agility.

I'm excited to work with leaders and organisations who embrace learning culture and lean into disruption. If you're ready to put learning at the heart of how things are done in your organisation, reach out to me.

*This article appeared on Michelle's blog on 8 July 2019. <https://michelleockers.com/2019/07/08/learning-at-the-pace-of-disruption/>*

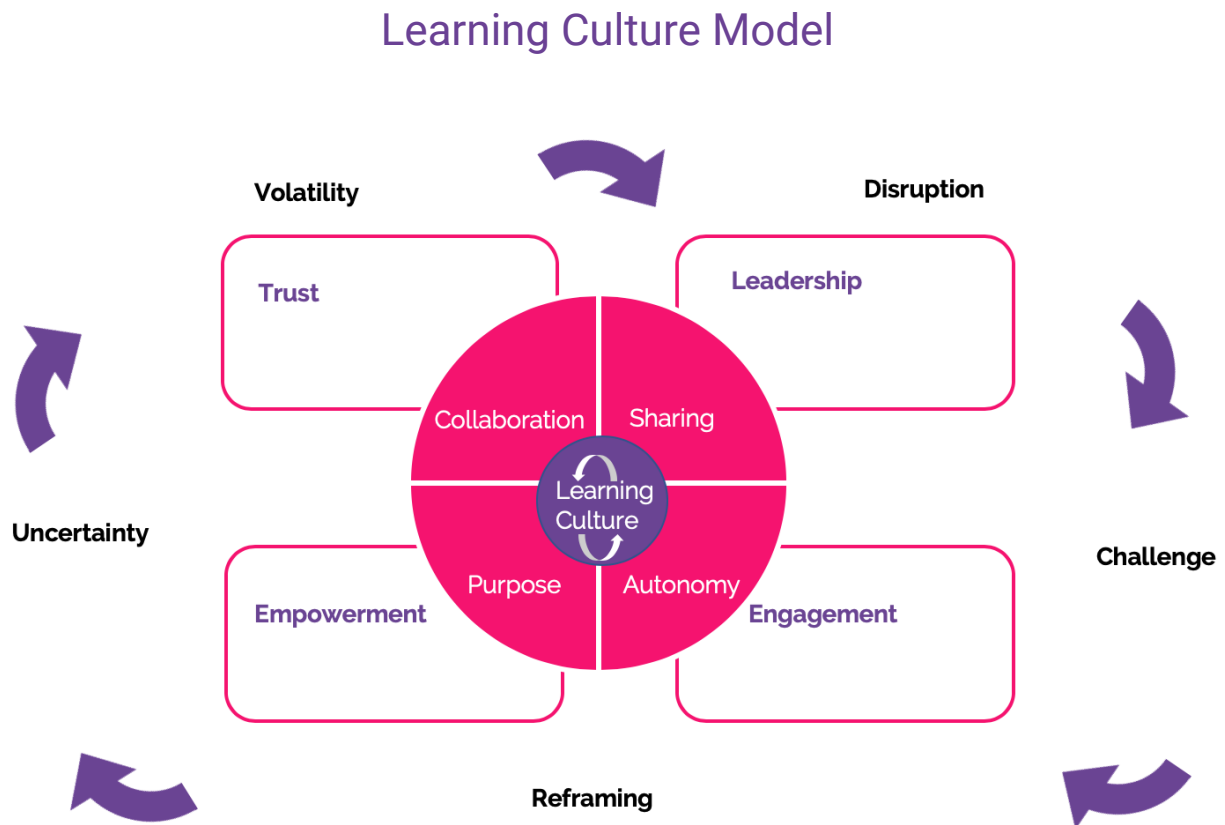
# How Do You Build A Learning Culture?



A learning culture enables an organisation to learn fast, rapidly adjust to changes in the outside environment and constantly evolve, as its staff continues to grow and accept new challenges. It may sound unattainable. I'd like to share some of the approaches and examples that emerged from research for my recent book to demonstrate that, while challenging, it is entirely feasible to build a learning culture.

The central metaphor in the book is that a learning culture is an organisational gyroscope - in the same way that a gyroscope in the cockpit of an aeroplane constantly reminds the pilot where the horizon is, even when there is no outside visibility and the plane is flying in turbulence. That gyroscope stops the plane flying upside down or into a mountain, and helps the pilot retain balance and equilibrium. Perhaps the only way that organisations in this age can master the volatile and uncertain environment they now inhabit is by building a learning culture and thereby avoid the shock of disruption.

How do you do that? By paying attention to and developing the four key characteristics of all the learning cultures that I explored.



## Trust

The first and most important condition is **trust**. An organisation where staff do not trust their managers or even each other is simply incapable of the generosity needed to share insights and build learning across the organisation! Lack of trust is like a virus inside the organisation. Even if some people start out willing to trust, and perhaps even extend trust to their colleagues, they are soon infected with the prevailing disease. It only takes one white lie or one incident where blame is neatly deflected, for individuals to reconsider their early naivety, and to dig deep into the hard ground of cynicism and betrayal. I am using highly emotional words because work is an emotional experience, however much you pretend otherwise. And a learning culture is both a process and an emotional commitment. It is attracted by trust and repelled by distrust.



A strong trust environment is a powerful binding agent that connects staff. It helps them feel part of something bigger than themselves and encourages them to be helpful and to focus on the needs of the organisation as a whole, rather than simply on themselves. It, of course, allows individuals to admit mistakes, and for the organisation as a whole to celebrate the opportunity to learn and improve.

You could, of course, argue that a learning culture will build trust rather than the other way round, but in my experience, and as the case studies I discovered demonstrate, trust comes first in every instance. Those organisations that encourage people to admit mistakes, select appropriate roles at appropriate times in their career and build the skills necessary to progress are, in fact, building a base on top of which a learning culture eventually emerges.

## Purpose

The second discovery was that **purpose** drives learning organisations. Learning organisations emerge out of passion and meaning. If you get to work in the morning wanting to make a difference, knowing that your organisation is, in some way, helping people, and making the world a better place, you will go to work with a spring in your step. If people share a common purpose which is bigger than them, often, help and support for colleagues, is generously extended and everyone has a sense of purpose.

## Places to Share Insight

The third condition is having places to share insight, resolve problems and build new knowledge. This can be a physical space, online space or a combination of both. According to Ed Catmull Pixar's CEO, one of the huge contributions to Pixar's innovation and groundbreaking creativity, was the shared physical atrium at the heart of the Pixar building. This feature was insisted upon by Steve Jobs (as Pixar Chairman) as an integral part of the new HQ which the company built, and it became a defining feature of the organisation. It was the place where staff had to come for refreshments, access small meeting room, or simply meet socially. This meant people in the organisation got to know one another. From those apparently random discussions, problems were solved by diverse groups coming up with brilliant ideas by drawing on their different insights. The belief was that Pixar - the organisation - rather than the individual units that made up Pixar, was the prime focus.

And if you talk to Garry Ridge, CEO of WD-40 company, he will tell you about the online repository where all of their ideas, campaigns and technical data are stored. This is freely accessible to all staff. It is almost like the organisation's brain. Staff are expected to draw from it and contribute to it on a regular basis. Year-on-year, it gets better and better and is acknowledged as part of the company's competitive edge and success.

## Collaboration

The final element is built around collaboration. Organisations that collaborate widely and draw inspiration from diversity create a strong condition for a learning culture. If you hide within your division or department, and you associate only with people who think like you, you end up with silos and a lack of knowledge sharing. Both of these are deeply ingrained enemies of a learning culture. Collaboration across the business should be second nature, not an afterthought. Only when insight is shared fast and comprehensively can learning make a difference.

Trust leads to honesty and experimentation. A strong sense of purpose develops passion in and for the organisation. Places to share those insights leads to collaboration, and this leads directly to innovation and problem-solving on an extensive scale.

If you can develop all four of these conditions a learning culture bubbles up inside the organisation with a minimum of intervention, apart from the facilitation and support from those in L&D. If you attempt to shoehorn a learning culture into an organisation where none of these conditions exist, it is a never ending, almost futile endeavour.

If you seriously want to build a learning culture for all the benefits that accrue, you will be better off focusing on ensuring that these four conditions exist rather than simply offering more learning. The choice is yours.

*This article originally appeared in Training and Development magazine June 2019 Vol 45, No 2, published by the Australian Institute of Training and Development.*

# It Is Never Too Early To Be Thinking About Learning Culture



Learning culture has become a big deal. From being a phrase barely mentioned for over 20 years, it seems to be on the lips of everyone involved in talent development and learning. This is very gratifying. Seeing that trend emerging was one of the motivations for writing my book on learning culture called: *Workplace Learning: How to Build a Culture of Continuous Employee Development*. That doesn't mean, though, that it is all plain sailing from now on. I have heard a number of people make statements that make me anxious.

**Statement 1:** We are building a corporate university. That will be the embodiment of our learning culture.

**Statement 2:** We are quite an unsophisticated L&D operation right now, so even thinking about building learning culture at this stage is far too early. This is aspirational and a long way off.

**Statement 3:** I keep saying that we need a learning culture in our organization and that means, obviously, increasing my budget, please!

Each one of these statements incorporates a fundamental misunderstanding of what a learning culture is if you accept my definition that a learning culture emerges when learning is taken brought in from outside, rapidly shared throughout the organization and turned into action. For me, a learning culture is the organizational gyroscope which keeps the business on an even keel. This is critical for navigation during times of turbulence and during disruptive environments. It enables those running the organization to see where the horizon is at any given moment. It plays the same role of a gyroscope in an aeroplane. It tells the pilot which way is up!

**Statement One** equates something formal and structured with the achievement of something nebulous and unstructured. The corporate university is not a learning culture, although it can make a strong contribution to building that kind of culture depending on how it is executed. We need a mindset change to decouple more learning, or new learning models, as the direct correlatives of a learning culture. If you read my book, you will see that many of the components which go towards building a learning culture, such as widespread trust through an organization, have little to do directly with learning, but everything to do with creating an environment where people want to learn, want to share and want to help their organization thrive through disruption and turbulence.

**Statement Two** is in a sense even more worrying. The assumption behind this statement is that only an incredibly sophisticated, existing learning environment can possibly act as the diving board into a learning culture. The point I would strongly argue is that, regardless of where you begin, thinking deeply about the elements of a learning culture gives you an agenda for action going forward to improve and invigorate your learning organization and make it more effective. The truth is that a model of learning culture is a fantastic framework for beginning to analyse where you are now, and where you need to be. To put off that conversation is to postpone innovation, and hamper necessary changes across the organization as a whole.

**Statement Three** is very common. The idea that any kind of move towards a learning culture must be preceded by a rapid increase in the learning and development budget kills the conversation for a number of reasons. What this implies is that building a learning culture is the sole function of a well-funded learning department. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is about engaging the entire organization, particularly those heavily involved in day-to-day operations, and talking extensively to staff about the kind of cultural changes needed to make them feel that learning is worthwhile and that it will lead to a better work environment and a more effective business. The entire organization benefits and therefore the conversation is with the entire organization. This is about discussing what people want and defining the ideas going forward. It is not purely about the budget. You are much better doing the analysis, working out what you can do, and building partnerships across the organization to achieve those aims. This is one area where careful thought and analysis trumps throwing money at the problem.

If building a learning culture is an idea whose time has, once again, come then it should be approached as a complex holistic model which engages with the organization as a whole, and which defines a kind of workplace environment that allows the learning to emerge. The concept will never take root if you try to impose learning on the organization, or see it as a task dedicated and exclusive to those involved in talent or human resources. Every single learning culture that I looked at my book and beyond pointed to that organizational ownership rather than a lone crusade taken on by small part of the organization as a whole.

Therefore, get stuck in. Whatever your stage of development, the conversation around a learning culture is going to be one of the best and most important conversations that you ever have had, and could define your learning strategy and approach for many years to come.

# Learning Culture: The Wake Up Call We All Need



Developing what Towards Maturity refers to as the 'high-performance learning culture' is a long way off for most organisations. How can learning professionals take those first steps towards meaningful change while continuing with their day-to-day responsibilities?

I tried to argue in my recent book '[Workplace Learning: How to Build a Culture of Continuous Employee Development](#)' that the only possible way organisations can navigate the complexities and the disruptions of the current environment is to build a workforce that is confident in its ability to learn, wants to learn, and is proud of its agility and resilience.

You would not be surprised to learn that this process does not exist in a vacuum. Toxic organisations are guaranteed to bully their staff (and often their customers). They are places where no one ever confesses to having made a mistake, and the last thing anyone would consider doing is to share anything with a colleague at the next desk, let alone someone working in a different department or building.

These organisations have a mountain to climb in terms of building any kind of learning culture. Learning cultures flourish in happy workplaces, built around happy staff who are constantly sharing knowledge and insights, and listen to the opinions of their colleagues.

I am well aware that the majority of learning professionals face daunting problems with supplying just the very basic learning provision.

They often work in a hostile environment, where it is hard to argue for a budget and the idea of a learning culture, seems to be pie in the sky and jam tomorrow. Having to strive to be able to provide, even meagre, jam today is not necessarily the best place to focus on building a new and better workplace.

## How can transactional L&D feasibly transition towards a high-performing learning culture?

Towards Maturity produced a fascinating report last year ([The Transformation Curve – 2018 Benchmark Research](#)) that tracked the four distinct stages of maturity in learning organisations.

This started with transactional L&D and culminated in a high-performing learning culture. The report argues that this is not a linear progression, but a series of inflection points. So, for example, to move from transactional L&D at the bottom level to performing L&D – their second level – requires a huge effort and fundamental questioning about the purpose of learning inside an organisation.

Even when you have a proactive talent and performance strategy (the third stage) it is still a huge leap to move towards that high-performing learning culture. No wonder the notion of a learning culture appears lost in the clouds when sitting in a transactional L&D operation. It is glimpsed occasionally, but more often than not is completely invisible.

So where do you start? How do you move forward, even if you are sitting at that transactional L&D table?

## Four key staging points to help you on your journey

There are four key staging points that you can accomplish without stopping everything else on your plate. These stages will get you some way along the path towards a learning culture. This will be far enough along to be able to shape and define the next stage for your organisation, and begin a more profound and transformational journey.

This is an absolutely critical pathway to survival in the current complex and disruptive world.



## Stage one: What is reality?

Confronting reality is one of Stephen Covey's 13 behaviours, but I want to single it out as a valuable starting point as you move towards a learning culture.

The experience of getting out from behind closed doors and talking to the organisation about what day-to-day work is really like, and exploring the blockages that stop high performance, will reveal all the factors that build resentment, disempower and destroy performance.

You need a clear picture of what the organisation needs to do in order to move towards high performance. This is very important for your leadership team, as much as it is important for the L&D operation.

That reality is a starting point that will define the outcomes you need to achieve as you begin the journey of transformation. If you let the staff speak for themselves, and share case studies of working life inside your organisation the resulting shock can create a massive impetus for change.

This is not about being 'nice'. It is about performance. When everybody has a sense of the percentage points that can be gained in efficiency and effectiveness you would need to be shortsighted or belligerent to not get the point. This is your starting point.

## Stage two: How to build trust

Stephen M R Covey published his influential book 'The Speed of Trust' in 2006. It marks, for me, a watershed as it highlights the impact that a high trust or low trust culture makes on the effectiveness of an organisation.

In Covey's words: "High trust speeds up transactions and processes and lowers cost. Low trust increases cost and slows down effective action."

Covey notes 13 behaviours that are critical for a high trust organisation. He believes that demonstrating those behaviours from top to bottom in an organisation are the building blocks for trust.

You can judge your own organisation by examining these behaviours; regardless of how well you score, they will form a framework that you can use to both extend trust and begin a debate about the level of trust in your workplace.

I want to highlight six behaviours that are fundamental to a high trust organisation, and therefore the first point of development as you move towards a culture of continuous learning.

**The first behaviour is to demonstrate respect.** If you show you do not care, or that you only respect those with more power than you or those that can do something for you, no one will share knowledge or offer help without demanding something in return. In a learning culture, selfless sharing of expertise, knowledge and insight are fundamental and non-negotiable components.

**The second behaviour is to show loyalty.** This means correcting a culture of badmouthing people behind their backs, taking credit for others achievements or selling people out. Loyalty builds trust; disloyalty destroys it.

**The third is to create transparency.** Information should not be withheld, and there should not be a culture of secrets and deception in the organisation. Everybody should know where they stand, and everybody should know how the organisation is doing.

**The fourth behaviour is admitting mistakes.** If you cover up mistakes, try to blame other people and spend your time ensuring that nothing sticks to you, you have a full-time job of spreading deep mistrust and suspicion.

**The fifth behaviour, related to the fourth, is developing a culture of accountability.** People own issues, take responsibility and hold others accountable. "I've got that" means you do not have to worry, as that task will be actioned. In a low accountability organisation, those words are meaningless.

**The final behaviour is to listen first.** Organisations are full of people who simply don't listen. They do not want to know and impose their own views and values. High trust organisations listen before they speak, and listen to gain understanding.

There is a whole programme based around these behaviours. You have to begin a debate about them, and then extend those behaviours from exhortations to becoming quite simply 'the way we do things around here.' In other words, embedded in the organisational culture.

### **Stage three: Getting the leadership right**

There is no excuse or exclusion from demonstrating these behaviours from the top of the organisation to the bottom. They form a good basis for an excellent discussion with the leadership team.

The commitment to demonstrating these behaviours is a critical underpinning for the whole organisation. The difficult conversation has to be had. There is no learning culture without trust. There is no organisational trust without trusting and trusted leadership.

Strong endorsement from the leadership team allows a simple pause and the beginnings of a commitment to change. This is the moment to begin a process that will change the organisation for the better. There are building blocks that you can put in place without that endorsement, but there is a moment when you need it, in order to make further progress.

### **Stage four: Shifting the focus of learning and empowering staff**

The last stage is possibly the most difficult for the learning team. The message is quite simple: it has to get out of the way. Its job is to enable and empower and, therefore, largely hand over responsibility to both individuals and their operational units.

There is no learning culture that I have ever experienced that is controlled and directed by the L&D team. This is virtually a contradiction in terms. A learning culture is self-fulfilling and self-generating. It needs managing and tweaking constantly, but it doesn't need, and cannot ever be, controlled.

How you achieve this depends on the stage that L&D has reached inside your organisation. But one critical component is good, honest debate; frank and fair discussion; and agreement among the team about the direction they are headed and the critical staging points on the way.

You first need a plan. And then you need to implement that plan!

*This article appeared on Training Zone's blog on 5th Jun 2019.*

<https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/lead/culture/learning-culture-the-wake-up-call-we-all-need>

# Building Learning Culture – Do You Have What It Takes: Mindset



In her two-part series, Michelle Ockers helps you to explore what it takes for a learning professional to build learning culture. Part 1 examines mindset. This eBook will be updated with Part 2 in June 2020.



The vision and aspirations of learning professionals for learning culture in their organisation rarely goes far enough. Before you read any further do a quick check-in. Take a few moments to describe how you want learning to happen in your organisation. What signs will you use to determine whether real learning is happening – at an individual, team or organisational level? What behaviours are you looking for in regard to learning?

You don't need to share your answer with anyone. Be honest with yourself.

If you did this exercise your response probably included something along the lines of 'self-directed learning or 'self-initiated learning.' You may even have listed some of the behaviours of a self-directed learner. In a recent discussion with a learning leader, I was told that they have 77% adoption of self-initiated learning. I was surprised by the precision of this statistic and asked how it was measured. The data represented the unique users out of the workforce who took up at least one of the services offered by the learning team. These services included, amongst other things, courses, webinars, learning apps and resources available on a portal. Like me, you probably applaud this level of utilisation, especially if it was largely voluntary. It would surely be a relief to have this level of take-up of the programs and resources created by your learning team.

However, this falls well short of the level of dynamic learning that organisations require to thrive in today's world. In 2018 Nigel Paine and I ran a Building Learning Culture program for learning professionals. We sought to expand how participants defined learning culture and the tremendous benefits it brings. In his June 2019 Training & Development magazine article, Paine wrote that 'a learning culture enables an organisation to learn fast, rapidly adjust to changes in the outside environment and constantly evolve as its staff continues to grow and accept new challenges.'

This level of responsiveness is unattainable if learning relies on programs and resources created by a learning team. A true learning culture can only be built when the learning team collaborate with others to enable learning to happen continuously throughout an organisation, generally without dependence upon or control by the learning team.

## Start With Your Mindset

To embrace this vision of learning culture and take action to realise it requires certain attitudes or ideas about learning and the role of learning professionals – which may mean adjusting your mindset. (As an aside, the Oxford Dictionary defines mindset as “a set of attitudes or fixed ideas that someone has.”)

Attitudes are intangible. We can't see an attitude. However, our attitudes are reflected in what we say and do. Let's use actions as an indicator of your attitudes toward learning.

It's time for another check-in. Take a moment now to list up to five initiatives or activities you've worked on in the past three months to support others to learn in your organisation (or your clients' organisations). Choose the activities where most of your time has been allocated in this period. As you read the following description of the four learning culture mindset essentials compare your recent activities to the examples of actions that indicate a learning professional has adopted these attitudes. How consistent are your actions with the mindset required for you to build a learning culture?

## Learning Culture Mindset Essentials

### 1. Learning culture is part of organisational culture, not separate from it.

You have a single organisational culture which values or emphasises different things. Of course, there can be variations in different parts of your organisation such as functions, teams or regions. However, organisational culture is not like a pie assembled from wedges with different flavours – like safety, performance, diversity or learning. Your organisational culture will either promote or inhibit learning.

A learning professional equipped with this attitude will partner with others to build a culture where learning is valued. A key partner is a team whose remit includes culture-shaping initiatives. This is often Organisational Development or someone in your People and Culture / Human Resources function.

## 2. Most learning happens naturally as people work.

Humans are wired to learn. If you stopped delivering courses in your organisation and took all your eLearning offline people would continue to learn. They would solve problems, build skills through practice, share tips with each other, find resources to meet their performance needs and improve how things get done. Separation of work and learning is an artificial division created by learning professionals when designing formal learning interventions.

A learning professional who recognises that learning happens naturally as people work will identify and remove barriers to learning while working. They will provide accessible performance support resources and assist people to develop independent learning skills and practices. Importantly, they will use courses as a last resort rather than a default solution.

## 3. People are capable of driving their own learning.

Towards Maturity's 2019 research report [The Transformation Journey](#) found that many learning practitioners have an unduly negative view of the willingness and capability of people to drive their own learning. Their data indicates that 'the modern worker is more engaged with learning than their L&D colleagues think.' A common perspective is that people are conditioned through their experience of school to expect to be trained; that they equate training with learning. While people may have had a broken experience at school, this doesn't have to be perpetuated by continuing to view them as passive recipients waiting to be told what and how to learn.

Viewing people as capable learners and contributors to the team and organisational learning leads to the adoption of new approaches by learning professionals. More proactive listening and involving people in the design of learning solutions improves understanding of how they want to learn and what support they need. An excellent example is the human-centred design approach used to reinvent the learning blend at Reece, as described in [episode 39 of the Learning Uncut podcast](#).



#### 4. Learning is a shared responsibility

It follows from the previous three attitudes that the learning team does not own learning. Rather, in a learning culture responsibility for learning is shared with others – business leaders, managers and individuals. We have already addressed some of the ways in which learning professionals can support individuals. The role of managers in creating development opportunities and supporting learning is well documented. Equipping managers to develop their people is a high leverage learning culture activity.

More than any other group, senior leaders can make or break critical conditions for learning culture. During research for his 2018 book on Workplace Learning, Paine identified a high trust environment and a common purpose as essential for learning cultures. Are you trying to shoehorn a learning culture into an organisation where these conditions do not exist? While it may seem a real stretch to your view of the role of a learning professional, if you are serious about building learning culture you will need to engage your leadership team to ensure that these conditions exist.

#### WHAT NEXT?

How did you go with your check-in against your recent activities? Are your actions consistent with the four essential attitudes of a learning professional for building learning culture? If not, this may indicate an opportunity to shift your mindset. Alternately, it may suggest that something is constraining your confidence or freedom to act in a way that is consistent with your mindset.

Is your vision for learning culture set high enough and your motivation to rise to the challenge strong enough to achieve it? While very challenging work, the benefits to your organisation and people are enormous.

*(This article originally appeared in Training & Development magazine March 2020 Vol 47 No 1, published by the Australian Institute of Training and Development.)*

# Technology And Learning Culture: Eight Tips And One Model



In the explosion of articles and books about Learning Organizations and Building Learning Cultures, there is precious little I can find, that talks about the role of technology in that process. Does it help? Does it hinder? Is it important? Indeed if you go back to Senge's seminal book on the Learning Organization "The Fifth Discipline" published in 1990, it barely gets more than a vague but positive nod in its direction! But no direct comment or explanation as to why or how or what contribution technology could make to the success of a learning culture.

Our interaction with technology now is so profound and far-reaching, it is impossible to imagine any organization operating successfully that is not drenched in technology. But it is not that simple, as this quotation by University of Pennsylvania Academic Stephanie Dick shows. It was published in a recent edition of Penn Today (December 2019). She comments:

*"We make our machines, but then they constrain and shape and intervene in the course of our development, we accommodate them. We are always accommodating our technology. Everyone is asking, 'What can we get computers to do?' But we must also always ask, 'Who will we become in tandem?' and 'Who do we want to be?' "*

We can do much better than merely accommodating technology into a learning culture.

In this day and age, technology is a critical and non-negotiable element of any successful learning culture for these 4 reasons:

**1.** An organization and its people cannot share without recourse to some kind of technology facilitation if you want to bring the whole organization together across timezones and across locations, or even in a small organization, to unite people working on different floors.

Whatever the size of the organization, bringing people together is essential if you want to leverage the inherent knowledge and knowhow that is split over different teams and different locations.

**2.** Organizations need spaces to share and spaces to have informal contact. These spaces can be physical, and much has been written about how physical space can engender effective and continuous communication or the opposite, but they can be virtual too but need to be equally as welcoming. If there is nowhere to go to ask questions; nowhere to get the answer to standard information or specialist advice, you are miles away from a learning culture. Take a walk around your workplace and ask the simple dispassionate question: would this layout, design etc. encourage anyone to share? Then log-on and ask the same question about your online space. This is a partnership between people and their learning/sharing ecosystem.

**3.** Effective use of technology brings people together and makes the organization feel more intimate and more resilient. It creates a sense of organizational difference and effectiveness. It is how individuals can be empowered and confident and sense that they are surrounded by support. For adults to grow in knowledge, skills and confidence they need to feel secure and part of something bigger than they are.

**4.** Effective technology creates a 'can do' culture. If I do not know, I can find someone who does. The pressure is not on me to deliver but on the whole team to work out a solution and contribute that solution.

## Here are eight top tips for making effective use of technology in a learning culture.

1. Just as our private lives are infused with technology that helps us to communicate and to discover, it would be ludicrous to imagine we can go backwards when we are cementing together a learning culture.

**TIP ONE: Design a learning ecosystem that encourages sharing and debate.**

2. Technology is no magic pill. If you think that bringing in a piece of technology will deliver a result which is based on people and culture, you are naive. That is why some of the learning experience platforms that were installed on the premise that they, alone, could turn round an organization's engagement and learning culture are struggling because the lustre has worn off and they are simply not being used.

**TIP TWO: Never substitute deep thought about how and what with a quickly installed IT package. Do your homework about its effectiveness, do not believe everything you are told. Visit an organization where it is up and running.**

3. Technology gives us space to share, space to ask questions and space to build neighbours through time and distance. There is nothing that can replace that critical facilitation.

**TIP THREE: Make it one of your priorities to build this space and to take down barriers for access.**

4. There is probably no magic bullet out there although some vendors will tell you differently. Your particular solution may be a combination of existing technology which can be adapted, or even rebranded. There are new technologies that will work alongside what exists already, and deliver value at a low cost.

**TIP FOUR: Think ecosystem of connected IT, not a one-stop solution.**

5. The technology solution you employ should have ease of access.

**TIP FIVE:** Negotiate with your IT people and get the ease of access in place before anything else. Otherwise, it will kill enthusiasm and put a huge brake on sharing.

6. Technology is empowering and levelling for an organization but it can also be frustrating and a massive dissemination of the worst of hierarchy.

**TIP SIX:** Go for a democratic solution. Minimise barriers to entry and encourage anyone to ask questions or offer advice. This should model the future not the past.

7. You need an etiquette for using the online presence which is as open as possible and as self-policing as possible.

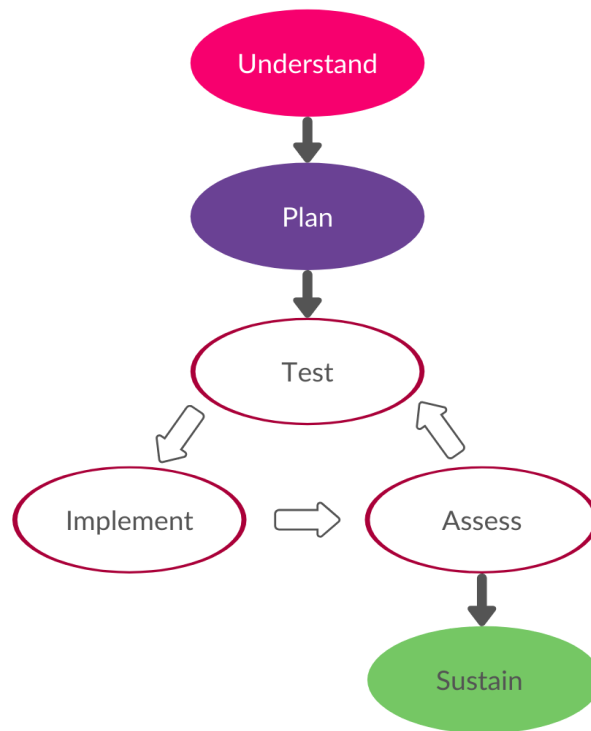
**TIP SEVEN:** Avoid as many censorship and permission rules as you can. A learning culture always grows trust, it does not remove trust.

8. However wonderful the technology solution is, it needs a person to manage it. Remember you are establishing some kind of online community or communities inside your organization. All communities have to be managed.

**TIP EIGHT:** Ensure that your community is carefully managed by an experienced facilitator or online community manager. This may appear expensive but the alternative is abject failure and frustration and success is almost priceless. The essence of learning culture is staff wishing to share insights and new knowledge and support each other to ensure that the organization moves forward with one level of expertise and at one pace. Have a clear strategy for measuring its impact time on productivity and attrition. It should deliver in spades.

## Conclusion

This is all summed up in the technology model from my “Learning Culture” book:



It is critically important to understand clearly what you want to achieve before you explore options and narrowing down potential software packages. Once you have gone round the circle of testing, implementing and assessing, spend a lot of time on working out how you will sustain the ecosystem you have built. This is about changing the culture of the organization permanently, not offering a quick fix that will fail in a year. Most technology solutions spend all their time on the test, implement and assess circle, running around the same issues again and again. There is huge value to be had debating the three shaded boxes: focus relentlessly on the issues, clarify what you understand the big picture looks like, and work out a long-term survival plan. None of this is perfect but it really does help!

*(This article originally appeared in Training & Development magazine March 2020 Vol 47 No 1, published by the Australian Institute of Training and Development.)*

## About Nigel Paine and Michelle Ockers

### Nigel Paine

With over 25 years of experience in corporate learning, Nigel is a regular speaker, writer and broadcaster on the topics of development, technology and leadership. Between 2002 and 2006 he headed up the BBC's Learning and Development operation. Following this, he started his own company [nigelpaine.com](http://nigelpaine.com) Ltd that is focused on building great workplaces. He has written three recent books, presents a monthly TV programme (Learning Now TV), and shares a weekly podcast with (Martin Couzins) called From Scratch.

Nigel's latest book: Workplace Learning can be bought from the Kogan Page website: [www.koganpage.com](http://www.koganpage.com). If you use the code **FRIENDSOFNIGEL** at checkout, you will receive free postage and packaging as well as a 20% discount.

### Michelle Ockers

Michelle is a leading contemporary practitioner and contributor to the learning community in Australia and New Zealand. Her extensive experience includes building a learning culture at Coca-Cola Amatil and strategic leadership on learning transformation at Qantas. She now works independently with client organisations to improve learning strategy, build learning culture and lift the capability of learning teams.

Michelle hosts the fortnightly Learning Uncut podcast where learning professionals talk about real solutions or initiatives they have implemented. She has also recently launched a research reading group for learning professionals which you can join on LinkedIn or Twitter using #LnDReads. It's not hard to see why Michelle was awarded the Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award 2019 for contribution to the field of informal learning and named L&D Professional of the Year 2019 by the Australian Institute of Training and Development.