

# 5 KEYS TO BUILDING A LEARNING CULTURE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

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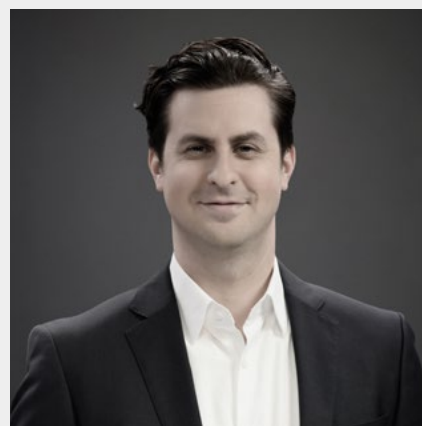
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Organizations know learning and development (L&D) is crucial to retaining talent, so much so that they cited providing learning opportunities as the top retention strategy in 2023.<sup>1</sup> When employers don't get the results they want from L&D initiatives, it may be because they offer learning opportunities without enabling a learning culture.

Fostering an environment where people feel encouraged, enabled and empowered to learn is essential. For L&D to be impactful, learning cannot feel like an interruption. Instead, it must become a part of everything an organization does, says Adam Panucci, director of culture & change at California Resources Corporation, an energy and carbon management company. But transitioning to this kind of culture isn't instantaneous—and time is not on your side.

“You must devote the time to this now because standing still allows the world to pass you by,” says Panucci, who likens keeping up with learning to keeping up with inflation. Organizations must decide now to promote L&D to keep up with today's information overload, or they risk getting stuck with outdated methods as new problems arise.



ADAM PANUCCI  
Director of culture & change at  
California Resources Corporation

***Start today by learning the five building blocks required to set the foundation of your learning culture.***

## 5 Building Blocks of a Learning Culture

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Make the most of this guide by taking notes on how to put these building blocks to work in your organization. Then, share those ideas with someone in your organization who will champion learning with you to help you stay accountable. As Panucci says, “You can't say it's important and then never do it.”



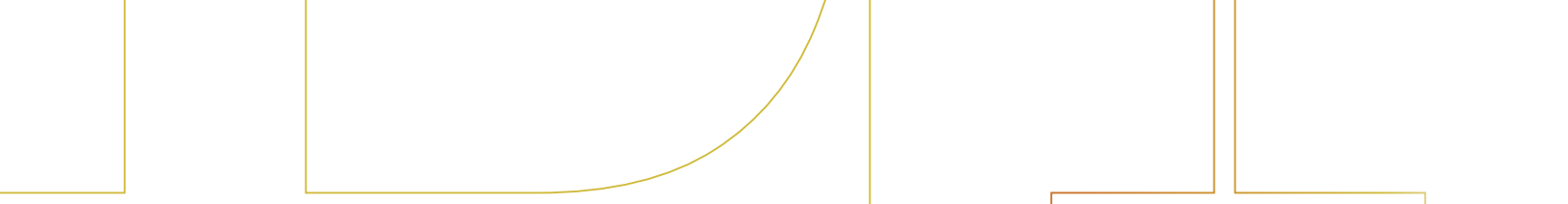
# #1 Time

**Your employees want to learn. More than three-quarters of employees (76%) say they are likelier to stay with a company that offers continuous training.<sup>2</sup> Yet finding time at work for learning remains the most significant barrier to developing their skills.<sup>3</sup>**

How do you help employees make time for learning? “Solve for the stuff that’s getting in the way,” says Lori Bishop, the chief people officer at PCI, a higher education fundraising and engagement company. Bishop suggests creating clear roles and responsibilities that are reviewed quarterly to minimize, automate or eliminate unnecessary tasks. If you don’t know if a task is adding value, she advocates stopping until someone else in the organization sounds the alarm. Only by finding out what work people do and do not notice can you determine which tasks are necessary.



**LORI BISHOP**  
Chief people officer at PCI



“If you clean up the roles and responsibilities and the waste that’s found there, you will find you have time for development, likely every day,” says Bishop. Eliminating nonessential work enabled Bishop and her team to have “Do Not Disturb” on their calendars every Friday from 8 a.m. to noon for development work instead. The following week, her team shares what they learned during their development time.

Consider showing how you prioritize time for learning during the onboarding process. Bishop notes how new hires at her company don’t get any job-related goals in their first 90 days. “Their only job is to learn their job,” she says.

Additionally, find opportunities for teammates to share their learning with others. “If you have a standing meeting with your team every week, don’t add another hour, but say you’ll do a five-minute piece of learning at the beginning,” says Panucci, who’s keen on the positive impacts of knowledge sharing.

Panucci says internally led training promotes a learning culture, recognizes subject matter experts within the organization, and usually saves money, which is sure to earn leadership’s approval. You could also tap clients and/or vendors to speak at lunch and learn sessions (while requesting staff avoid scheduling meetings during these sessions to encourage participation).

## Q: How often do employees want training?

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**A:** Create the expectation that training will occur at regular intervals. A SHRM report found just 12% of employees want training on an ad-hoc basis. Those training goals don’t need to be overly ambitious—the same report found that 1 in 3 employees prefer training every three months, compared with 1 in 4 who want it monthly.<sup>4</sup>



# #2 Mobility

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**After keeping employees engaged, executives' second-highest priority in 2023 was "giving employees opportunities to move into different roles within the business."<sup>5</sup> That means giving them hands-on learning experiences in the company.**



One way to do this is through formal job rotations, in which an employee works on a different team or role for a pre-set period. Three months (90 days) is a common length of time for these rotations. Bishop likes that approach, and she notes that if you teach someone a new skill or expose them to a new role for less than 90 days, “you risk them evaluating the role based on the discomfort of the learning curve, but 90 days is enough time to really know if they like it and feel the work aligns most with their strengths.”

Rotations give employees a chance to learn about other areas of the business. Even if a rotation doesn't lead to an upward promotion, it does promote an environment of continuous learning and offers “job enrichment before you start moving up,” says Panucci.

He saw this principle in action at his company when an engineer moved onto the talent team and is now moving on to yet another part of the business. While that worker's stints exceeded the average 90-day rotations, “he's now well equipped to make big strides in the organization,” notes Panucci, who firmly believes in the power of lateral rotations.

“All experience is valuable, especially with high-potentials who can connect the dots,” says Panucci. “They're no doubt going to make better decisions, be more engaged and, ultimately, stick around.”

Internal rotations can also alleviate what Bishop sees as an obsession with candidates' experience that's "crushing American businesses." She notes that employers tend to prioritize experienced external candidates for open positions, thinking those external hires will require less training when they likely have internal candidates with the necessary skills (or are fully capable of learning them) who can take on the role.

To systemize mobility, use behavioral assessments to identify peoples' strengths and see what roles best suit them or what skills they're missing that they can learn by stepping into another position.



# #3 Advancement

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**Your employees are ambitious. More than half of employees (57%) pursue learning opportunities outside of the workplace, and 54% of these learners say they do so to enhance their opportunities for career development.<sup>6</sup>**

A learning culture creates opportunities for advancement outside of climbing the corporate ladder—or, as Panucci calls it, a jungle gym, with options to move up, across or even diagonally within an organization.

Advancement could also involve informal leadership opportunities, like representing the organization at a conference and sharing learnings with the company, suggests Panucci. It could entail receiving stretch assignments, getting a direct report or an intern, or earning a financial bonus upon reaching a certain skill level. It could also be part of a formal growth plan that leads to a promotion. “If you’re just backfilling, you’re not advancing,” says Bishop.



Communication across the organization is critical to employees discovering those opportunities. Ensure employees (and candidates) know what their avenues for advancement look like at your organization and what skills and experiences are required to advance. This process could involve an internal job board with learning paths, hosting companywide knowledge sharing after events, or announcing those who received learning-related bonuses to inspire others to participate.

Clear communication makes it easier for employees to opt into learning, get excited about creating a personalized learning path, and, most importantly, want to stay at the company to put their new skills to use. A learning culture also creates opportunities for advancement for a broader range of people. It is easier for an organization to be inclusive if they're willing to teach skills to people who don't yet possess them.

## Q: How do employees like to learn?

A: Employees prefer online, self-paced learning (70%) followed by online, instructor-led learning (63%), learning in person with an instructor (63%), hybrid learning (62%), and offline self-paced learning (59%), SHRM data shows, and 32% want training to have a social element.<sup>7</sup>





# #4 Encouragement

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**Your employees want to be challenged. But only 26% of employees say their organization challenged them to learn a new skill in the last six months.<sup>8</sup>**

Encourage employees to challenge themselves by systemizing learning. Include learning performance in annual reviews and ask leaders to have quarterly check-ins on their reports' learning progress. Consider creating a record to track their progress, like a team scorecard.



Once employees hit their learning goals, keep the encouragement rolling with a system for recognizing their success. This could be a shout-out in a team or all-hands meeting, an internal newsletter that celebrates learning achievements, or one of the incentives mentioned in this report.

Another idea is hosting a yearly competition where teams or departments compete on a specific learning path. That competition could include learning the functions of other teams to incentivize mobility. If you host lunch and learn sessions, have employees compete to be guest speakers.

Involve executives in your organizational learning. Make sure those leaders are also on their own learning paths so they can set an example by stretching themselves. They can also help serve as educators. Panucci recalls a time when his company's CEO (previously the CFO) wanted employees to engage with internal earnings calls. Realizing people didn't engage because they didn't grasp the material, the CEO shared videos highlighting terminology and graphics so employees could better understand the content of an earnings call.

Create a system to foster and formalize encouragement, but be mindful of mandating training (unless it's safety- or compliance-related). Instead, consider mandating time (the first building block) to train rather than requiring specific training.<sup>9</sup> To create a true culture of learning, promote encouragement rather than enforcement.

## Q: How do you find funding for education?

**A:** Knowledge sharing and stretch assignments are low-cost ways to foster a learning culture. Use data to make the business case for these programs. For example, 70% of employees would leave their current company for one that invests in employee learning and development.<sup>10</sup> From there, set KPIs to track L&D's impact on your organization to earn more budget to put toward these goals.



## #5 Incentives

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**A third of employees say they find it hard to stay motivated with training at work—but incentives can help.<sup>11</sup>**

No matter how intriguing training sounds, when emails accumulate and deadlines lurk, training will inevitably get put on the back burner, even for high-achieving employees. What helps keep the flame burning? Incentives.

Low-stakes incentives can include offering to pay for books to help employees perform or lead better, a practice Bishop's CEO uses. Another approach is giving the organization a day off from regular work so employees can increase their skill sets outside the office. At PCI, where Bishop is a leader, the company offers sabbaticals every five years where employees get an extra week of vacation to do something life-enriching. Upon return, employees share a short presentation with the entire company about their adventures during the sabbatical, reinforcing the support for learning.

Higher-stakes incentives may also make sense for some roles. For example, some certifications mean employers can charge more for an employee's billable hours, which could result in a raise for that employee. The same goes for pursuing higher education, which could lead to a raise and a reimbursement if your budget allows.

If you already have an L&D platform, you could gamify it by offering year-end bonuses based on reaching a certain number of learning hours and giving extra points for specific training needed in the business. You could also create specialized learning paths that give employees informal awards for reaching certain levels.

For external training or certifications, offer employees reimbursement rather than billing the cost of the training directly to the company. Employees will be more likely to engage with training when they have to make the initial outlay, and your program could require them to prove completion to receive reimbursement.

Be careful when using incentives, however. Research shows that “if incentives are leveraged too strongly, they may create excessive risk” by casting out those who feel averse to risk or, on the flip side, incentivizing excessive behavior. Based on a meta-analysis from CIPD, “the size of incentives should be commensurate with what employees can reasonably do to increase their performance.”<sup>12</sup>



## ***Communication is vital throughout this process.***

Ensure it's well understood throughout the organization what incentives are available, especially if they involve monetary awards. Consider who participates and who has access to your incentive programs to ensure any learning incentives are inclusive.



# The Final Piece

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As a leader, you have a significant role in shaping your organization's learning culture.

“How the leader behaves is how the organization will behave,” says Panucci, who recalls hearing about how a C-suite executive at a major health care institution walked into a training event and said, “I have a lot to do, but I am here so they can see I carved out time to do this.”

Use these building blocks to build a learning culture in your organization—and to build your skill set, too. The best thing you can do once you set up learning opportunities is to set an example.



# End Notes

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