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Leading Teams

Effective Employee Development Starts with Managers

by Anand Chopra-McGowan

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Summary.   Employee surveys show that workers will stay if companies invest in their development. Managers are in a unique position to drive employee retention and engagement, and companies should ensure that they have a more active role in employee training and development. These five steps can help: 1) Let managers tell you what they need; 2) Create dedicated time and space for learning; 3) Give managers a specific role in training; 4) Help managers turn training into action; and 5) Collect feedback on the training from managers as well as employees.   **close**

As the costs of the Great Resignation continue to grow, companies need more ways to attract and retain employees. One clear approach is to offer more training and development — according to a 2019 LinkedIn study, 94% of employees said they would stay with their employer if it invested in their development.

However, the rise of remote work complicates things. In *Training Magazine's* 2021 Training Industry Report, respondents said their biggest challenge was "getting people engaged in remote training."

Some companies are trying to solve this through better technology. New delivery formats, like cohort-based courses and technologies like virtual reality can significantly enhance the effectiveness of remote training.

But another solution to engaging employees may lie closer to home: involving managers. A recent Gallup survey found that "at least 70% of the variance in team engagement is explained by the

quality of the manager or team leader." It would seem that this solution is often overlooked — most managers express a dim view of the effectiveness of their Learning and Development (L&D) function.

Companies should correct this. Below are five simple but effective steps to create a more active role for managers in training and developing employees:

Let managers tell you what they need.

Managers have a keen sense of the skills their team members need to build, and research shows that they are more likely to initiate training than an HR or training professional.

Companies should establish a process to discover and quantify training needs directly from managers. This could be in the form of a regular survey, supplemented by in-depth discussions with a selected group of managers who can give feedback and guidance on training initiatives as they're designed.

Ørsted, the global green energy company headquartered in Denmark, has adopted this approach. In 2020, the company launched a training program for all employees called "Power Your Career." "Our goal was to improve employee retention and career mobility," explains Terese Korsgaard Christensen, lead HR consultant at Ørsted.

To design an effective program, Christensen and her colleagues needed to learn what was causing staff to feel stuck in their careers. The team conducted 15 in-depth interviews with managers across multiple levels in the company, followed by four focus groups. The resulting program focused on addressing specific issues that managers said were holding back employee development, like how to give more constructive feedback and how to have more effective one-on-one meetings with employees. It also included a mandatory component for managers called "Power Your Team."

"It was a lot more work to spend all that time initially with so many managers, but our impact studies after the program confirmed that having managers involved at multiple points was critical to success. We've seen a marked improvement in the quality of manager and employee interaction and a greater focus on continuous development", says Christensen.

Create targets and structure for learning.

It can be hard for managers to encourage busy and overworked team members to learn something new. One solution is to have designated space and time for learning, thereby giving managers cover when encouraging their team members to participate.

In his book *The Curious Advantage,* Novartis chief learning officer Simon Brown describes his company's aspiration of providing 100 hours per year for learning. Coupled with vocal support from CEO

Vas Narasimhan, the company has seen employees spend more than double the amount of time on learning per year over the past three years compared to the previous period. Having the support of the CEO as well as a quantified aspiration makes it far easier for managers to encourage their team members to participate.

Moreover, employees prefer clear targets and structure as well. At Emeritus (where I work) our research found that workers generally prefer guided learning experiences, where training content and assignments are released on a schedule with clear milestones, as compared to self-paced learning, where all the content is available at once. A key feature of these guided learning experiences, often called cohort-based courses, is that employees progress through the course against a fixed schedule and alongside a group of peers. The sense of structure and community helps employees complete the course, remember what they learn, and apply it in their roles, writes Wes Kao, founder of cohort-based learning platform Maven.

Give managers a specific role.

Too few training and skill-building programs create explicit roles for managers. This is a mistake. Managers have much more visibility and control over employees' priorities than a central HR or L&D team.

Training programs should harness this power to achieve greater participation. For example, instead of having a training initiative be announced by an L&D person, consider having the announcement come from managers directly to their team members, after which human resources and L&D professionals can reinforce and remind.

The French retail giant Carrefour's internal "Carrefour University" gives managers a key role to play. "All participants that have been selected to a training session are informed by their managers, who are aware of the development goals of this particular session, therefore facilitating the integration of the new skills acquired in the job," says Adilson Borges, the company's chief learning officer. The line managers also encourage the participants to share their learnings with others once they finish their training.

Help managers turn training into action.

Another role is for managers to help team members apply what they learn.

Aegon, a financial services company headquartered in the Netherlands, uses this approach as part of a companywide "Analytics for Leaders" program. Run by Chief Data and Analytics Officer Hiek Van der Scheer, part of the program involves developing concrete ideas for how analytics can be used in various parts of the business. The participants' managers play a

role in the program themselves and are responsible for approving and "owning" these ideas. "That ownership was important for me as 'excellent ideas' without an owner won't get traction," Van der Scheer says. One month after the program, the organizers follow up with managers to assess the state of each idea, and to work through any problems in its way. This process is repeated regularly, and the company's senior management receives a regular report on the concrete actions that come out of the training.

Collect feedback from managers.

Most training initiatives only collect feedback from the participants themselves. In addition, companies should collect feedback from the participants' managers. The timing of this collection will need to be different. Instead of asking for feedback immediately after the training session, time it for just before the training, when managers can give input about what they expect, and then 30 to 60 days after.

The questions will also be different. Instead of asking about the quality of the training, ask about the impact. How should team members apply what they learn? How did they? What blockers might be in the way of them applying it more effectively?

AstraZeneca, the British-Swedish global pharmaceutical and biotechnology company has incorporated this approach into its talent development and retention strategy. For example, in the

company's "Leader as Coach" program, a six-month hands-on development experience, participants are assessed by the people they manage as well as by their own managers. These assessments take place before, during, and after the program, and cover 20 different criteria, including the extent to which participants "acknowledge and celebrate team accomplishments" and "create an environment that encourages others to maximize their potential."

"This is a highly experiential program incorporating a 'practice and apply' approach so we want to assess impact in the real work," says Brian Murphy, global head of learning & enterprise capabilities at AstraZeneca. "The feedback from managers helps the learner and the L&D team understand real impact and progress."

As employers grapple with a profound shift in the labor market, the burden of retaining and developing employees doesn't have to rest with HR and training teams alone. Managers are in a unique position to drive employee retention and engagement — companies should give them the structure and tools to do so.

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Anand Chopra-McGowan is general manager, UK & Europe for Emeritus, a fast growing ed-tech company that partners with the world's best universities to make professional education accessible and affordable. Prior to that, he was part of the founding team of General Assembly, which was acquired by the Adecco Group. He grew up in India, attended university and worked in the U.S., and currently lives and works in London.

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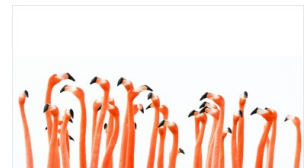
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