BEYOND LEADERSHIP LIP SERVICE
Gaining Management Support for Learning Initiatives

It's never been more exciting – nor more challenging – to develop and deploy learning and development initiatives. The landscape changes by the day. Business strategies, employee needs, and available technology are in constant flux. And organizations recognize that rapid upskills and reskilling may be the key to surviving.

That's why we launched a recent survey to better understand the state of learning today. More than 100 professionals in the learning and development and human resources fields generously shared their perspectives, offering a snapshot of practices designed to derive more value from development efforts.

While the survey cast a wide net initially to understand the broad range of issues and impacts, we'll also narrow the focus to look at management support, which has long been recognized as an essential ingredient to the success of learning and development initiatives.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

When asked what's most important to achieving learning outcomes, three key elements emerged as paramount. First, the design of engaging learning experiences stands out as the most crucial factor. This suggests that learners must find the content stimulating and relevant, which can significantly enhance retention and practical application of knowledge. Secondly, the choice of delivery method or platform is also vital. With the plethora of digital tools available today, selecting a method that is accessible, user-friendly, and conducive to the learning style of the audience is critical. Lastly, promoting the application of skills on the job was identified as a top priority. This underscores the necessity of bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, ensuring that learners can immediately utilize what they've learned in their work environment. Such application not only reinforces their new skills but also contributes to their professional growth and the organization's development.

1 Design engaging learning experiences

2 Choose the best delivery method/platform

3 Promote the application of skills on the job

WHAT'S CHALLENGING

Achieving learning outcomes is not necessarily easy in today's environment.

Topping the list, based upon those who responded, is the challenge of designing engaging learning experiences. Crafting sessions that captivate and retain the attention of learners in an era of constant digital distractions has become increasingly complex.

Nearly as challenging is the selection of high-impact content. In a world awash with information, curating content that resonates with learners and supports the learning objectives is no small feat.

1 Design engaging learning experiences

2 Select high-impact content

3 Choose the best delivery method/platform

And the third most popular challenge highlights the difficulty of choosing the best delivery method or platform. With a myriad of options available, from traditional in-person workshops to cutting-edge digital platforms, finding the optimal medium that aligns with the learners' needs and organizational resources is a daunting task.

Interestingly, two of the greatest challenges are also the two most important strategies for success.

WHAT'S GETTING IN THE WAY OF LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Survey participants illuminate the persistent challenges faced when seeking to engage leadership in their initiatives. Not surprisingly, the most common barrier is the perceived lack of time among leaders and managers, which often translates into limited engagement with L&D programs. Additionally, a lack of familiarity with the content is cited, suggesting opportunities for greater or more effective communication between L&D professionals and leaders.

More troubling is the skepticism some leaders have when it comes to the content itself, which understandably undermines support. This is a disconnect that needs further exploration.

Finally, there appear to be leaders who may be willing to support the learning efforts but simply don't know what steps they can take to help their employees get the most from the development opportunity.

1. Not enough time
2. Not sufficiently familiar with the content
3. Don't believe in the content
4. Don't know what to do

WHAT ARE CURRENT PRACTICES

The practices currently employed by survey respondents to gain leadership support for L&D initiatives are pragmatic and focused on alignment with organizational goals. Many report prioritizing communication, a clear connection between the learning content and business outcomes, making it easier for leaders to understand the value of investing in L&D. This is the most popular practice.

Actively briefing managers on the specifics of the content and the methodologies employed was next in terms of its adoption by this group. Many appreciate the value of ensuring that those in supervisory roles are well-informed and can relay the significance of these initiatives to their teams.

1. Communicate the line of sight between the content and business outcomes
2. Brief managers on content, methods, etc.
3. Involve managers in the development process itself

The third most common practice focuses on involving managers in the development process, which not only secures their buy-in but also enriches the learning material with their insights and practical experience.

As illuminating as these insights are, it might be those items at the bottom of this list that offer the greatest potential for garnering greater support. Survey respondents indicate that they less frequently offer conversation templates or share coaching/feedback cues that managers should watch for – both of which are low-cost ways to address the 'time' and 'I don't know what to do' pushback from leaders (as noted in the previous question). It's also less frequent that they measure or spotlight learning results (which may help to turn around leaders who don't believe in the content).

Survey participants amplify many of the possible practices in their response to, "What else do you do to effectively secure the support required for optimal learning results?"

Themes from their write-in comments include the need for:

1. **Strategic Alignment:** Several responses emphasize the importance of aligning learning and development (L&D) initiatives with organizational priorities and strategies. This includes never undertaking training that isn't connected to the strategy, aligning L&D efforts explicitly with organizational goals, and connecting training to strategic departmental goals.

2. **Value Proposition:** There's an emphasis on demonstrating the value of training, including the cost-effectiveness of conversations about training implementation and the benefits to the company in terms of talent attraction, development, and retention.

3. **Senior Leadership Engagement:** Responses highlight the necessity of involving senior leaders, including securing their sponsorship and recognition for participants, to ensure the success of learning initiatives.

4. **Ongoing Communication:** Consistent communication with leaders is mentioned as key to success, as well as sharing the impact and results of training to ensure transparency and buy-in.

Survey Participants

These results are gleaned from the responses of professionals who work day-in and day-out to make change happen in their organizations through learning. Survey participants include:

21	CLO/CHRO/Learning Executive
26	Manager or Director of Learning & Development (or related discipline)
7	Human Resources Business Partner
11	Training Specialist/Consultant/Lead
16	Instructional Designer
11	Independent Consultant
20	Other

5. **Customization and Relevance:** Tailoring content to address specific pain points of teams, accommodating various learning styles, and making training relevant to the learner's role and personal aspirations are considered important.

6. **Feedback and Measurement:** Regular feedback and the sharing of relevant metrics and business outcomes are key to ongoing support of learning and development efforts.

7. **Practical Application:** Ensuring that training has immediate applicability ("same day skill application"), making it easy to put ideas into action, and discussing next steps after learning are all strategies aimed at reinforcing effectiveness while gaining management support.

8. **L&D Modeling:** When those in L&D demonstrate congruence with the content, model key behaviors, and share their own positive experiences, it enhances credibility and can garner greater support for the learning efforts.
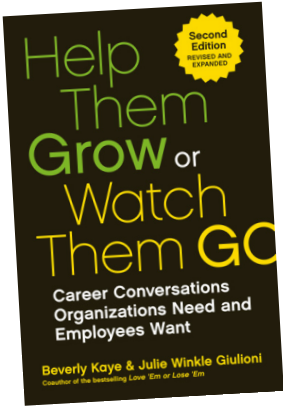
IN CONCLUSION

In the quest to go beyond mere lip service and actively gain leadership support for learning initiatives, this survey has revealed that while the landscape for learning and development is rapidly evolving, there are tried and true practices that consistently yield results.

Strategic alignment, a strong value proposition, practical application, and ongoing communication are non-negotiable priorities when planning, designing, and implementing learning – and they're key to moving beyond lip service and gaining the leadership support that's needed for potent and sustainable results.

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CAREER CONVERSATIONS

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