

COACHING

7 Ways to Improve Employee Development Programs

by Keith Ferrazzi

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Making the right investments in learning and development programs has never been more important - or more of a challenge - for business leaders.

Unfortunately, despite spending approximately \$164.2 billion dollars on learning and development programs, many executives still grapple with how to improve and enhance their effectiveness. As research shows, the need to revamp and improve learning programs is an important concern among HR executives.

To better understand this problem, my consulting firm did a thorough review of recent research into learning and development programs, followed by a structured survey with top training executives at 16 major corporations in a diverse set of industries, ranging in size from \$1 billion to \$55 billion in annual revenues. To understand how providers of training and development view these challenges, we also interviewed leaders of executive education programs at several leading universities.

From this research, we've observed seven challenges companies must meet to create development programs that really work:

1. Ignite managers' passion to coach their employees. Historically, managers passed on knowledge, skills, and insights through coaching and mentoring. But in our more global, complex, and competitive world, the role of the manager has eroded. Managers are now overburdened with responsibilities. They can barely handle what they're directly measured on, let alone offer coaching and mentoring. Organizations need to support and incentivize managers to perform this work.

2. Deal with the short-shelf life of learning and development needs. It used to be that what you learned was valuable for years, but now, knowledge and skills can become obsolete within months. This makes the need to learn rapidly and regularly more important than ever. This requires organizations to rethink how learning and development happens from a once-in-a-while activity, to a more continuous, ongoing campaign. As Annette Thompson, Senior Vice President & Chief Learning Officer at Farmers Insurance pointed out in an interview, avoiding information overload is vital, so organizations must strike a balance between giving the right information versus giving too much.

3. Teach employees to own their career development. Highly-structured, one-size-fits-all learning programs don't work anymore. Individuals must own, self-direct, and control their learning futures. Yet they can't do it alone, nor do you want them to. The development and growth of your talent is vital to your ongoing success, ability to innovate, and overall productivity. It's a delicate balance, one Don Jones, former Vice President, Learning at Natixis Global Asset Management summarized like this: "We need to have 'customized' solutions for individuals, while simultaneously providing scale and cost efficiencies across the organization," he said.

4. Provide flexible learning options. Telling employees they need to engage in more learning and development activities with their already heavy workload often leaves them feeling overwhelmed and consumed by the question, "When and how will I find the time?" Companies must respond by adopting on-demand and mobile solutions that make learning opportunities more readily accessible for your people.

5. Serve the learning needs of more virtual teams. While most organizations have more people working remotely and virtually, it does require more thought and creativity in how to train this segment of your workforce. This includes formal types of learning through courses, but also the informal mentoring and coaching channels. Just because employees are out of sight doesn't mean they get to be out-of-mind when it comes to learning and development.

6. Build trust in organizational leadership. People crave transparency, openness, and honesty from their leaders. Unfortunately, business leaders continue to face issues of trust. According to a survey by the American Psychological Association, one in four workers say they don't trust their employer, and only about half believe their employer is open and upfront with them. If leaders disengage or refuse to share their own ongoing learning journeys, how can they expect their people to enthusiastically pursue theirs? It's the old

adage of “lead by example.” If managers want employees to engage in learning and development, then they need to show that they are actively pursuing their own personal learning journeys as well.

7. Match different learning options to different learning styles. With five generations actively in the workforce, organizations must restructure the way employees learn and the tools and activities they use to correctly match the different styles, preferences, and expectations of employees. For example, Millennials came of age using cell phones, computers, and video game consoles, so they expect to use these technologies to support their learning activities.

As leaders, we know the value our learning and development programs bring to our organizations. But we also want to ensure we’re receiving a high return on investment. By clearly understanding the trends emerging in our learning and development programs, we’ll better position our companies to select the right targeted solutions to drive results, increase employee engagement, and increase innovation and productivity.

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