The Ultimate Guide to Engaging Your Employees in Onboarding and Training
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You’ve seen all the signs.

In many industries, companies are competing for qualified candidates because there aren’t enough of them to go around.

The skills your employees need to stay ahead of the game may shift more quickly than ever before -- what was cutting edge four years ago may be inadequate today.
The youngest segment of the workforce -- Millennials and their younger siblings, Gen Z -- list career development as one of their top priorities. In two recent surveys, 87% of Millennials said that professional development was very important to them and Gen Z employees cited development opportunities as the most important factor in their job searches, alongside pay.

The evidence is in: learning and development is more important than ever before. In an extensive study of more than 2,500 companies, The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) found that companies that offer comprehensive training have a 24% higher profit margin than those who don’t.

But not just any training will do.

With a war for talent raging, if you don’t keep your employees engaged, they will defect to other organizations. Disengaged employees are dragging down the workforce, costing billions in turnover, slowing productivity, and impacting morale. A big cause of employee disengagement? You guessed it: 46% of employees cite a lack of new learning opportunities and professional growth as a reason for their disengagement.

Here’s how to engage your employees in your onboarding and training.
The single biggest driver of business impact is the strength of an organization’s learning culture. —Josh Bersin

You may be thinking that creating a culture of learning is about providing the best educational resources, holding lots of training, or offering employees funding for external training. While these are great steps, a culture of learning starts with your organizational mindset.

Do you praise talent, achievement, and perfection? Or do you reward growth, development, and progress? Carol Dweck, Stanford psychologist and author of Mindset: The New Philosophy of Success, categorizes these as two different ways of interacting with challenges and achievements. An organization focused on unerring excellence may be grounded in what she calls a fixed mindset.
A fixed mindset is based on the belief that core qualities, such as intelligence, leadership, and talent, are carved in stone. You are born a winner ... or not so much.

Dweck says, “I’ve seen so many people with this one consuming goal of proving themselves — in the classroom, in their careers, and in their relationships. Every situation calls for a confirmation of their intelligence, personality, or character. Every situation is evaluated: **Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?**”

A **growth mindset**, on the other hand, is based on the belief that your core qualities can be cultivated through effort, passion, and hard work. Dweck says that people with a growth mindset “believe that a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it’s impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training.”

**How to encourage a growth mindset**

- Acknowledge hard work. While praising accomplishments is great, don’t forget to honor effort, even if it doesn’t result in big wins.

- Celebrate successes as a team. Instead of encouraging the me-first competitive thinking that can shut down growth, stress that every employee’s accomplishments are opportunities to learn and be inspired.

- Clearly tie feedback to learning opportunities. If you discuss an employee's struggle with time management, for example, you might introduce them to a time-tracking tool like RescueTime or a focus-boosting app like Forest. You might share your favorite time management articles with them or get their feedback on what kind of time management mini-lessons would be helpful for them at the next staff meeting.

- Look for resources that will help your employees get stronger in the aspects of their work that challenge them the most.

- Encourage your team to dedicate time to learning. This is about more than deciding to be open to learning -- put it on the calendar so it’ll really happen. Noah Kagan, founder of SumoMe and employee #30 at Facebook, stresses the importance of scheduling time just for reading and learning every week.

- Hold informal team learning sessions over lunch or happy hour.
• Organize your team into smaller learning groups who can tackle eLearning modules together.

• Discuss and establish learning goals with new employees and stress that they are as important as other performance goals.

• Tailor your interview questions to identify growth-oriented new employees. Dweck gives examples of interview questions you can use.
Tailor training to your employees’ needs.

Growth comes at the point of resistance. We learn by pushing ourselves and finding what really lies at the outer reaches of our abilities. —Josh Waitzkin, The Art of Learning: A Journey in the Pursuit of Excellence

Pop quiz. What’s the best way to get someone’s attention?

A. Talk about a familiar event.
B. Read them a list of rules.
C. Talk about yourself.
D. Tell them how they should do something.
E. Tell them a story they star in.

Though the first four options are common teaching methods, (E) is going to knock the others out of the park.
People pay attention to, relate to, and remember stories that are about them. They perk up when they know something relates to them personally -- it’s why your own name uniquely captures your attention and why Amazon shows you products based on what you’ve liked in the past. We are drawn to information about ourselves that speaks directly to what we want and need.

To create and sustain buy-in for your training initiatives, customize them to your employees’ needs.

**How to give your employees the training they want**

- Ask your employees what training they would like and what areas they think their team needs to improve on.

- Ask new employees what training they wish they had received in previous positions.

- Solicit feedback on how effective previous trainings were and what would’ve made them more useful.

- Tie every training to the business need it fulfills. Whenever you communicate about an upcoming training, highlight its benefits and impacts.

- Stay on the pulse of what your employees value, how they’re struggling, and what currently impedes their success, as it may change often. Your team will need a different training when they’re focused on sales goals than when they’re prioritizing team cohesion.

- Prioritize education that will improve upon and expand the skills that help each employee do their job better. Be sure to consider:
  - Functional skills (such as advanced Excel functions or how to create memorable graphics)
  - Interpersonal skills (such as emotional intelligence or effective business communication on social media)
  - Leadership skills (such as how to provide motivational feedback or how to run powerful meetings)
It's always about timing. If it's too soon, no one understands. If it's too late, everyone's forgotten. —Anna Wintour

Timing affects everything. Whether your employees are receptive to a new piece of information or able to engage analytically with a problem can vary based on where they are in their workflow, their current priorities, and even the time of day. You can put every piece of advice in this guide into practice, but if your timing is off, things are likely to go south.
What to consider when scheduling your trainings

- Is your team ready to learn the material?

- Is this the most relevant training you could offer right now?

- What time of day will your team learn best? Does your team have any duties that might be distracting them during a training?

- Does the training align with current business priorities?

- Are onboarding trainings scheduled in the most logical order? Which trainings build off of each other or are dependent on each other to be useful?

- How much time does the training need? Are any eLearning modules unrealistically long for a single sitting?

- How much time do employees need to reflect, refresh, and apply materials before they need to implement the training material?

- Will the training coincide with any high-pressure times, such as peak sales seasons or holiday rushes?
Help your team feel safe enough to take risks.


There’s a reason that a passage about failure from an avant-garde Irish writer has become a motto of many of today’s most successful people, across myriad industries.

Tennis pro Stanislas Wawrinka has the quote above tattooed on his forearm.

Mindfulness rockstar and Tibetan monk Pema Chodron titled her book of wisdom Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better: Wise Advice for Leaning into the Unknown.

Silicon Valley has embraced a culture of failing better. Astro Teller, entrepreneur and scientist at X (formerly Google X) for example, encourages people to celebrate failure, calling it “accelerated learning.”
For your team to learn well, they need to feel safe enough to take risks that might not pan out, to suggest ideas that might be unpopular, and to try something that they might be bad at. Part of building a growth mindset is creating learning environments where trying hard and failing isn't just allowed, but encouraged.

What's more, when your employees are stressed or afraid of failure during a training, it impedes their ability to learn. In his foundational study of the impact of fear and stress on students, educational researcher Stephen Krashan found that stress and anxiety impede learning, rendering learners less capable of storing new information.

Dr. Judy Willis, neurologist and teacher, says, "Students' comfort level has critical impact on information transmission and storage in the brain." The factors that impact that comfort level, such as self-confidence, trust in instructor, and a supportive classroom and community, "are directly related to the state of mind compatible with the most successful learning, remembering, and higher-order thinking."

**How to keep trainings safe**

- Encourage trials, risks, and experimentation.
- Lead by example. Share stories of your own learning failures, missteps, and mistakes.
- Build up team interactions by using training methods that encourage interaction (see below).
- Spark dialogue, encourage questions, and stage hands-on demonstrations.
- Stress that no question is stupid or too basic. All learners may come from different levels of comfort with a topic at hand. And sometimes the most basic questions can yield new insight.
- Leave competition at the door. Collaborative training spaces will help learners feel open and engaged.
- Avoid directly linking training performance to compensation or promotions.
Set learning free from the classroom environment.

You and most of your employees have probably gone through many traditional educational environments -- with some form of stand-and-deliver lectures. These involve a lot of sitting, a lot of information from the instructor, and often, a lot of boredom.

But, the sad news is that, in addition to being unengaging, lectures are ineffective. A recent study found that students in stand-and-deliver lectures were 1.5 times more likely to fail than students participating in classes that use more active learning methods.

And yet, more than 40% of business trainings are stand-and-deliver lectures in a classroom setting.
Freeing corporate learning from the classroom will help improve buy-in, increase engagement, and improve retention.

**How to leave the lecture behind:**

- Start with how you learned the material you’d like to teach your employees. What was the most effective method for you? Were you in a small seminar? Were you doing a hands-on e-practicum from your kitchen table? Were you sharing ideas and experiences with colleagues at a luncheon?

- Consider holding your trainings in the same environment where the knowledge will be applied.
  - Take employees to the sales floor to teach them handselling techniques.
  - Set up a mock call center to teach your team phone etiquette and call scripts.
  - Hold your ergonomics training in an office where employees can try out different chairs, desk arrangements, and technology.

- Take advantage of new employee tours as learning opportunities.
  - As you walk around the office, give micro-lessons in relevant spots. Demonstrate how to use the technology in the conference room. Teach them how to sign in meeting participants at the front desk.
  - Meet-and-greets can double as lessons specific to each colleague. For example, if a new employee will be sending purchasing orders to the shipping manager, pause in the tour to have that manager demonstrate how to file an order.

- If you would like to mix it up in a classroom setting, try varying any information delivery with the kinds of hands-on, active, and interactive techniques discussed throughout this guide.
People always ask me, “How do you come up with those wild advertising ideas?” And I always say something very mystical, like I had a flash in the shower or God appeared. The fact is that my brain goes out to play. That’s what creativity is — intelligence having fun.
—Joey Reiman

In our distraction-filled, information rich society, it takes more and more to get people's attention. When your employees aren’t at work, they can be constantly entertained. With smartphones, tablets, and e-readers, they have become expert boredom avoiders, reading articles in the elevator, watching video clips in their doctor’s office, or listening to podcasts while they’re waiting in line for coffee. As tolerance for boredom erodes, employees need more and more stimulation to stay engaged.
A dry recitation of facts, a text-heavy eLearning module, or a long lecture aren’t going to cut it. Many of the most popular sources of information -- such as *The Daily Show*, BuzzFeed, or news websites -- combine comedy, quizzes, visual stimulus, comment sections, and more to gain and sustain interaction. Take a page from these sites and include humor, games, and interaction to keep your employees engaged.

**How to make trainings more fun**

- Generate excitement about your trainings beforehand.
  - Send emails that let employees know what they’ll be learning and why.
  - Use casual, conversational language in your training announcements and materials.
  - Use your social media accounts to post questions, thought-starters, and info relevant to the training to get people engaged early.

- Be funny. Humor builds team cohesion, improves information retention, and keeps the atmosphere of a training positive.

- Use humorous examples, like this bad customer service montage, cringe-worthy sales pitch skit, or terrible cold call, to generate a discussion about how to do something right.

- Tap nostalgic associations and other familiar ideas to build new learning. A little nostalgia for the good old days can improve your mood, reduce stress, and encourage positive thoughts about the future.
  - Include snippets from old tv shows, popular songs from decades past, or Oscar-winners from yesteryear to jumpstart conversations.
  - Bring in some old ads to discuss popular trends or to provide your lesson’s historical framework.
  - Generate conversation about childhood experiences to get people thinking about how they might generate similar positive experiences for clients today.
• Draw on relevant popular culture references to get people's attention and make learning more memorable. Check out what's trending on Twitter or the year's most popular memes and see if you can tie them into an upcoming lesson.

• Allow employees to create with the information. They're more likely to remember a lesson. Interacting with material in new ways can generate insight, propel new discussions, and encourage new perspectives.
  ○ If they're discussing qualities of a great sales leader, for example, you might have them draw a lifesize image of an ideal leader.
  ○ Have employees put on skits to roleplay common workplace scenarios.
  ○ Creating training videos and other materials can be a training exercise for your team in and of itself. Who knows, your team's video might go viral, too.

• Make a game of it!
  ○ Turn the material into a rousing battle of the wits using this Powerpoint Jeopardy template.
  ○ Replace the traditional onboarding activities with a scavenger hunt for new employees to tackle as a team that will lead them to places they need to discover and people they need to meet.

• Encourage interaction.
  ○ Break larger group sessions into small group discussions.
  ○ Encourage pairs of employees to talk about training topics.
  ○ Tell stories and ask your team to share their own.
If you let your learning lead to knowledge, you become a fool. If you let your learning lead to action, you become wealthy. —Jim Rohn

You can create the most engaging, informative, knock-your-socks off training in the history of workplace trainings. But if you don’t connect the dots on how that info can be applied to your employees’ jobs, chances are, you won’t see valuable results. Each learning module, piece of info, and activity in a training should be tied explicitly to real-world applications.
How to encourage info application

- Use real-world examples during trainings so employees are primed to use new info right away.

- Design hands-on trainings and demos. Instead of showing employees how to do something, teach them as they try to do it.

- Rely on screen shares and screen recordings to make eLearning more hands-on.

- Give employees the tools they need to apply info while they are in the training. Instead of talking about baseball for 2 weeks and then putting a ball and glove in their hands, give them a ball and glove from day one.

- Encourage employees to talk through their problem-solving process while they’re trying out new materials.
Repeat information often to make it stick.

Repetition is the mother of learning, the father of action, which makes it the architect of accomplishment. —Zig Ziglar

Learning isn't a one-and-done sort of affair. It takes many repetitions to make learning stick. In studying optimal learning, performance consultant and research psychologist Will Thalheimer found that:

1. Repetitions—if well designed—are very effective in supporting learning.
2. Spaced repetitions are generally more effective than non-spaced repetitions.
3. Spacing is particularly beneficial if long-term retention is the goal—as is true of most training situations. Spacing helps minimize forgetting.

When designing your training, don't limit your plans to the material you'll cover the first time you introduce it to your employees. Consider how you'll use spaced repetitions as the backbone of an ongoing learning experience.
Repetition tips:

- During the training, have employees draft postcards to themselves, reminding them of key lessons or experiences during the training. Mail the postcards at intervals in the coming months.

- Encourage employees to set informative reminders for themselves in their calendar, with notes that re-ask essential questions or prompt employees to revisit training ideas.

- Ask team members to schedule one-on-one learning sessions with each other in the months after the initial training ends. They can ask each other relevant questions, problem solve, and discuss how the training has impacted both their day-to-day operations and their big-picture thinking.

- Set up a follow-up email course that walks employees through additional refreshers, offers reminders, and expands on previous lessons.
Looking for a hand in creating memorable, fun trainings?

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