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Deliberately Developmental Learning Cultures

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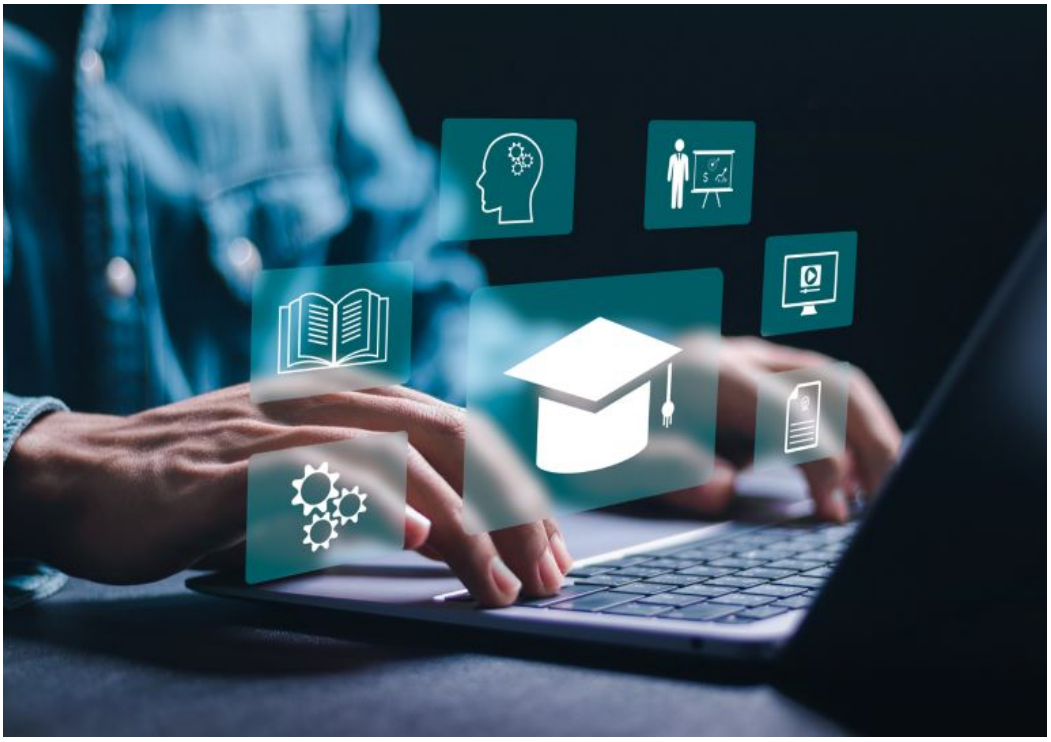


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Have you ever thought that you'd love to take part in a professional development program at work, but the constant push to deliver makes it impossible to take time off? Do you feel like you're expected to choose between your personal growth and keeping up with the workload?

Well, imagine a workplace where every individual's growth is not just encouraged but seamlessly integrated into the fabric of the organisation. This is the vision of a Deliberately Developmental Organisation.

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But, unfortunately, it isn't the norm – and there are a variety of reasons for that.

So, why aren't all organisations deliberately developmental?

For instance, we know that companies face:

- Challenges in proving the direct impact of learning and development on business outcomes.
- Immediate business needs that often overshadow long-term development goals.
- Short-term costs and time investments that often outweigh long-term benefits.

While their employees are subject to:

- Time constraints and high workloads
- A perceived lack of relevance in training options
- Cursory support from leadership for learning and development activities

(HBR1, HBR2, HBR3)

Nonetheless, long-term competitiveness and success increasingly require organisations to recognise development programs as valuable investments, rather than viewing them as an unnecessary cost. So how do we reconcile these pressures with the challenges many senior executives and employees face?

We can begin by asking… what environments contribute to these pressures?

Arguably the most salient contributing factor is current business model incentives. Organisational focus on short-term gains and financial performance can result in underinvestment in areas perceived as non-essential to immediate financial performance, such as learning and development? (S&P Global

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)?. Operational priorities often take precedence, leading to the deprioritisation of learning programs that do not provide measurable financial returns? (S&P Global)?. And real development takes time and commitment.

Organisations may view these initiatives as costs rather than investments with long-term benefits? (S&P Global)?? (SpringerLink)? and explicit or not, team members sense this, and tend to disengage or pass on opportunities when they present themselves.

We understand the pressures that come with balancing immediate business needs with long-term development goals. **However, creating a culture that prioritises individual development and growth can lead to remarkable transformations in both employee satisfaction and organisational success.**

In contrast, imagine this:

Your business knows that investing in your development will mean the direct impact of your development on the business's success. Everyone's personal growth is integrated into the company's core operations. You know they value development because your calendar has been freed up, your teams are resourced with the expectation that development is a part of project and strategic success, and the executive leadership team regularly participate in their own continual development, both on the job and occasional off-sites. They walk their talk.

The program provides a safe space for experimenting with novel approaches to your current workplace challenges. It offers uniquely tailored, scenario-based learning experiences that are directly applicable to your and your team's roles. As part of the experience, you stretch your thinking and skillset on collaborative scenarios designed with current projects in mind, in a stimulating and interactive venue that leaves you energised and filled with new ideas and capabilities to take

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back to the office.

This may sound idealistic, yet there are real examples of highly successful businesses that see organisational success and individual growth as mutually reinforcing. Personal development of their people is embedded into the structures and daily operations of the business. These businesses are being described as Deliberately Developmental Organisations (DDO's) (Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

Success stories of DDOs

Next Jump, a tech company, integrates personal growth into its core operations. The company encourages employees to participate in "Practice Teams," which focus on developing both professional skills and personal well-being. Next Jump's approach includes regular feedback sessions, mentorship programs, and a strong emphasis on psychological safety, enabling employees to discuss their development openly. The result is a highly engaged workforce, improved performance, and reduced turnover rates. Next Jump's culture of continuous development has also led to innovative solutions and a stronger alignment between personal and organisational goals.

Bridgewater Associates, a global investment firm, is another prime example of a DDO. The company fosters a culture of radical transparency and continuous learning. Employees at Bridgewater are encouraged to give and receive honest feedback, and all meetings are recorded and made available for review. This approach ensures that employees are constantly learning from each other and from their mistakes. The emphasis on personal growth and accountability has contributed to Bridgewater's success, making it one of the largest and most successful hedge funds in the world.

Could a world exist where we balance financial and employee development goals so that deliberately developmental learning cultures are commonplace?

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Some researchers and business leaders argue that this is the way of the future. Where focusing solely on shareholder value can be detrimental in the long run, sustainable business practices and investments in employee development can enhance long-term profitability and stability? (McKinsey & Company)?? (SpringerLink).

"The low levels of [engagement] in workplaces globally are in part because too many organisations ask people to work in challenging, stressful, high-pressure environments – often with little-to-no let-up – without the crucial ingredient of personal growth. Adopting a deliberately developmental mentality and approach can help transform these conditions into an incubator for growth rather than a prescription for burnout. That alone is a compelling reason to explore becoming a deliberately developmental leader." (Putter, 2019)

Ok, great, but a top-to-bottom transformation in how we work feels insurmountable. So, without having to transform our whole business overnight, what lessons and actionable experiments can we take from DDOs?

Even if your whole organisation is not yet ready to shift to a deliberatively developmental learning culture, consistently executing **these four practices** in your team can catalyse broader change:

1. **Make feedback part of everyday work:** You don't need to overhaul the whole company to start. Just build a habit of regular, honest feedback in your team. By showing people their strengths and areas to grow, you help them get better and more confident. Lead by example—when they see you giving and receiving feedback openly, they'll follow suit.
2. **Create a judgment-free zone:** Encourage your team to speak up and share their thoughts without worrying about being judged. When people feel safe to be themselves, it sparks more collaboration and creative ideas. Building this trust starts with you.

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3. **Tie growth to the big picture:** Help your team see how their personal development is linked to the company's goals. When people understand that their growth contributes to the bigger picture, they're more motivated and engaged in both their work and development.
4. **Develop leaders at every level:** Great leadership fuels a growth culture. Invest time in mentoring your team and helping them become better leaders themselves. The more you support their growth, the more they'll spread that mindset across the whole team.

Making the case: how can learning programs ensure they deliver something worth investing in?

It's critical that they are designed to meet specific business objectives to ensure they contribute to financial performance with scenarios and experiences requiring participants to address real business challenges. Alongside relevant content, organisations should measure program impacts on key performance indicators? as well as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics (S&P Global)? so that progress is ethical, tangible and reportable.

Senior leaders in the development and roll out of training programs can enhance their relevance and effectiveness by acting as mentors and advocates and themselves attending, reinforcing the importance of these programs and ensuring they align with the company's strategic goals (Harvard Business Publishing)?? (Harvard Business Publishing)?.

The environment in which a learning program is delivered is as important as the content itself and is often overlooked. We believe it pays in the immediate and long term to invest in service providers who are strong advocates for high quality environments that elevate the development experience.

According to Susan Hrach in her book 'Minding Bodies,' the neuroscience behind embodied, integrated, and experiential

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learning highlights the significance of the physical space for effective learning. Hrach's six principles of embodied cognition emphasise the importance of light, ample space, and movement, which strengthen our brains' ability to learn and adapt both as individuals and as teams.

By creating learning environments that are well-lit, spacious, and conducive to movement, we can significantly enhance the learning experience. These elements not only support cognitive functions but also promote engagement and retention of information. Thus, investing in both the content and the quality of the learning environment is crucial for developing effective and inspiring development programs.

Leadership and team development programs that creatively leverage novel experiences and technologies to bring adult learning principles to life increase the potential for greater return on investment of your people's time and engagement. For example, the Australasian College of Paramedicine and Woolworths Group have ventured into this emerging future by employing virtual reality experiences. When integrated as part of a full learning pathway that includes real human interaction, augmented and virtual reality scenario-based decision-making experiences are one facet emerging in the future of adult learning.

It is exciting and humbling to recognise that as leaders and facilitators we all have a part to play in moving into a business world where learning cultures are purposeful and deliberate in developing our people. And we cannot afford to be passive recipients of that new culture.

As program providers and organisations, we can enhance leadership development by customising programs to address specific business challenges, integrating learning into daily workflows, and involving senior leaders as mentors. We can capture clear, relevant metrics to measure program impact to demonstrate value and secure ongoing support.

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Which brings us back around to the tension many leaders and employees hold, feeling they need to choose between personal growth and keeping up with the workload. We can start by shifting the culture, which means having new conversations.

We are emboldened to tell the story that investing in the development of our people is not a distraction from the ‘real work’; it is essential for the success and achievement of the whole organisation. We can point to real case examples of highly successful global businesses that make deliberately developmental learning cultures part of their DNA and are increasingly showing that companies must invest in their employees’ growth to enhance overall productivity and performance.

What can you do as a leader?

A lot actually! With leaders accounting for up to 70 percent of the imbalance in team engagement (Gallup State of the Global Workplace report), the moment is ripe for leaders like you to step into your agency and shift business culture one step and conversation at a time.

Armed with tangible practices such as the four we shared; we’ll leave you with an invitation. Lean into more regular and meaningful learning development conversations with your team members and make a habit of asking yourself high quality questions to test and shift the culture in your teams.

Here are a few to get you started:

- How can we incentivise a developmental culture?
- How are we disincentivising time spent on development?
- How can I advocate for and protect development time for our leaders and employees?
- Do I model a value of continuous learning by attending programs myself? Do I walk my talk?

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And we would be thrilled to partner with you as you shape your next development program. Just reach out!

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