Developing Future-Ready Skills With Peer Coaching

Peer coaching plays a foundational role in developing the human skills that technology cannot replace.

Aaron HurstMarch 10, 2021**READING TIME: 6 MIN**

Topics

The Future of Workplace Learning

To meet the needs of a rapidly evolving, skill-centered economy, organizations must shift their thinking when it comes to workplace learning. This *MIT SMR* Executive Guide explores how business leaders across functions can work together to make transformational learning a reality.

The forces of disruption reshaping the future of work moved at a faster pace than ever during the past year. With the pandemic making it unsafe for many people to work in person, companies around the globe turned to remote work and accelerated the use of automation technologies such as AI and robotics. COVID-19 brought about a reallocation shock, which economists at the University of Chicago estimate has caused three new hires for every 10 layoffs. They also predict that 32% to 42% of COVID-19-related layoffs will be permanent.

To avoid mass long-term unemployment, we must prioritize and pour efforts into preparing workers for the jobs of the future. Increasingly, these are the kinds of jobs that focus on uniquely human skills that current technologies cannot simulate — things like empathy, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. Increasing such skills not only helps workers

but also has real business implications: Human skills make companies stronger.

The World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report 2020" shows that workers recognize this. Topics like mindfulness, meditation, gratitude, kindness, and listening moved into the top 10 areas of focus among employed people, supplanting artificial neural networks, cloud computing, and general statistics.

Employers are also recognizing the need to increase their development initiatives for so-called soft skills, which are now also known as *power skills* or *human skills*. But businesses face a fundamental challenge: Most worker training was designed for teaching rote and technical skills. Traditional workplace learning programs were built to look like schools and universities, with teachers lecturing students. Even today this remains the case, with most programs following the same model.

Developing human skills is a completely different ballgame, where seminars and instructor-led workshops won't suffice. People develop skills like empathy, communication, listening, and the ability to provide constructive feedback by being put into situations where they have to put these skills to use.

This is a primary reason I focus on peer coaching, in which colleagues have guided one-on-one hourlong conversations, either in person or via video, on an ongoing basis. They ask each

other questions, listen intently, offer ideas, and make plans to take a concrete action before their next session.

These types of interactions — between true peers, with neither participant acting as the "teacher" — do the most to develop human skills. In my work helping companies address skill gaps with peer coaching, I've identified the fundamental learning differences between technical and human skills. (See "Technical Skills Versus Human Skills.") In this article, I examine what these differences mean for learning leaders and offer four ways peer coaching can enhance skill development.

Technical Skills Versus Human Skills

Technical skills and human skills differ across six core learning categories. Traditional learning and development approaches such as seminars and group workshops are less effective for human skills because of these key differences.

	TECHNICAL SKILLS	HUMAN SKILLS
Knowledge Source	External	Internal
Psychological	Not core	Core
Unlearning	Minimal	Significant
Practice	Can be solo	Social
Measurement	Easy to measure	Difficult to measure
Application	Consistent	Diverse; about people

Exploring Knowledge Within

Developing "hard" or technical skills requires the transference of knowledge from the expert, such as a trainer or course instructor, to the learner. Human skills, however, come largely from *within*. Individuals need to explore their own experiences and emotions and put them to use.

For example, to develop greater empathy, the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, recommends *radical listening*, which requires individuals to channel the "ability to be present to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing." For many people, if not most, the ability is already there, deep inside — it just needs to be tapped into. It means making yourself vulnerable as well and opening up about your feelings and challenges.

There's certainly a role for instructors, such as showing someone how to display empathy or presenting research about the benefits of effective communication. But to develop these skills, people need to look within and bring more of themselves to the surface in their interactions with others. In peer coaching sessions, that's exactly what they do.

Creating a Positive Flywheel Effect

Technical skills such as writing code or querying a database have foundational basics and best practices that translate both to self-paced learning and group settings. Lectures and large group workshops lean more toward a consistent, one-size-fits-all method for how to perform a technical skill. But human skills play out differently for each person based on individual psychology.

Also, unlike with coding, people can't practice human skills on their own. These skills are inherently social.

Peer coaching is designed for these different learning needs. In a one-hour session, participants talk and listen an equal amount of time. With no third person there, only the listener can respond empathetically and provide feedback — and each has to find his or her own way to do so.

This creates a positive flywheel effect. Peer coaches build relationships with each other around acceptance and openness. That, in turn, can increase the release of oxytocin, which "promotes feelings of devotion, trust, and bonding," as a psychologist explained to NPR. Such increased trust then leads colleagues to further explore and develop their human skills together.

Boosting the Process of Unlearning

When it comes to many technical skills and new competencies, people begin by learning the basics from scratch. But for social and emotional learning (SEL), that's impossible. As a set of guidelines for school educators on SEL explained, "Students rarely come to class having repeatedly practiced an incorrect version of the multiplication table, but they may have become well schooled in not waiting their turn or not listening carefully to others."

By adulthood, we've had decades to learn and ingrain negative thought patterns and behaviors that can block human skill development, such as making biased assumptions about other people or being quick to anger when presented with criticism.

As a peer coaching process progresses, people unlearn continuously. Feedback from a partner helps them discover flaws in their own thinking. A simple question from a peer coach, such as, "Have you considered looking at it this way?" can help someone realize that they've jumped to conclusions or made assumptions. Similarly, participants offering what they think is helpful feedback may receive a response, such as, "Well, that suggestion doesn't quite work for me, and here's why." Peer coaching triggers a process of reflection —
which <u>research</u> shows is crucial for learning and unlearning.

Measuring Through Feedback

I'm often asked how to measure peer coaches' development. While technical skills such as software design or data science often have objective metrics to benchmark against, human skill prowess is much more subjective.

Some employers use 360-degree assessments to help gauge their employees' development in these arenas. A group of World Bank economists recommends assessing soft skills through a <u>series of exercises</u> that take a full hour per person. But no matter what, managers won't be able to look for a number or grade to summarize, with adequate context, just how well their employees are doing.

What is clear is that the more people put these skills to use, the more they grow. Our team has seen people's feedback from managers, colleagues, and reports vastly improve the more they engage in peer coaching over time. Those one-on-one conversations — which take place with new people through different pairings every few months or so — help turn human

skills into daily habits. So do the commitments people make during each session to subsequently take action, such as having a tough conversation with a manager or apologizing to a colleague. Knowing that their peer coach will hold them accountable, 80% of participants in our peer coaching sessions follow through on their plans. Here, the learning-by-doing process extends beyond the sessions themselves.

The future of human skill development at work requires a new model. When peer coaching is part of this, it creates a drumbeat that keeps an organization, and the people vital to its success, moving forward.

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