

How to Help Your Employees Learn From Each Other

When your team wants to learn a new skill, where do they turn first? Google? YouTube? Their corporate training programs? No. According to a [study](#) conducted by our company, Degreed, more workers first turn to their peers (55%)—second only to asking their bosses. Peer-to-peer learning can be a powerful development tool that breaks through some common barriers to skill-building — and it has other benefits as well.

Yet many organizations have yet to create a formal structure for peer-to-peer learning. In a McKinsey [survey](#), Learning & Development officers report that while classroom training, experiential learning, and on-the-job application of skills are now in regular use as learning mechanisms, less than half of organizations have instituted any kind of formal peer-to-peer learning. One in three respondents said their organizations don't even have any systems in place to share learning among employees.

In the research for our book *The Expertise Economy*, we found that managers are often reluctant to establish formal peer-to-peer learning primarily because of a perception that experts outside the company are more valuable as teachers than those inside it, and because peer-to-peer programs are spaced out over numerous sessions. In this context, sending employees to a single day of intense training from an outside expert is assumed to be more fruitful.

It isn't. First, peer-to-peer learning taps into the expertise that already exists in your organization. Think of all the smart people that you hire and surround yourself with every day, and how much could be gained if peers shared their expertise with each other to learn and build new skills.

Peer-to-peer learning is also uniquely well suited to the way we learn. People gain new skills best in any situation that includes all four stages of what we call the "Learning Loop": gain knowledge; practice by applying that knowledge; get feedback; and reflect on what has been learned. Peer-to-peer learning encompasses all of these.

For example, when Kelly was in charge of learning at LinkedIn, her team created a peer-to-peer learning program designed around the company's key corporate values. One section of the program focused on difficult conversations; each participant was asked to identify a real-life difficult conversation they needed to have at work (especially one they might be avoiding). They were first taught about difficult conversations (stage 1); next they practiced with each other before holding the conversations in real life (stage 2). One of the participants, John, confronted his employee Mark about his missed deadlines, a pattern which had been negatively affecting the team. The conversation did not go well — John felt awkward, and Mark got defensive. When John shared this experience with his peers in the learning group, they openly shared their views and ideas, and their own experiences of similar situations (stage 3). As everyone in the group — not just John — reflected on what they had learned, they concluded that they had all become more confident and armed with ideas about how to better handle a similar situation in the future (stage 4). Later group members indicated that their real-world difficult conversations indeed had become more productive.

A learner's development is dependent on a willingness to make mistakes, challenge ideas, and speak up about concerns — as John and his colleagues did in their group. Unlike some learning methods — like tests or exams, or high-pressure demonstrations of skills — peer-to-peer learning creates a space where the learner can feel safe taking these risks without a sense that their boss is evaluating their performance while they are learning. You're more likely to have candid conversations about areas you need to develop with a peer than with someone who has power over your career and income. In peer-to-peer learning, the dynamics of hierarchy disappear. And unlike other methods — like classroom lectures or online compliance training — peer-to-peer learning provides a structured opportunity to have these discussions to begin with.

A secondary benefit of peer-to-peer learning is that the format itself helps employees develop management and leadership skills. Group reflection conversations help employees master the difficult skills of giving and accepting honest, constructive feedback. Because feedback

flows in both directions, participants in peer-to-peer learning tend to put more time and energy into making sure the feedback they provide is meaningful. They think from the perspective of their peer, consider where each is coming from, and try to get specific about what will be most helpful and constructive. This doesn't happen as often when a boss delivers one-way feedback to employees. Similarly, peer learning gives employees experience in leadership, handling different points of view, and developing skills such as empathy.

Setting Up a Peer Learning Program

Formal peer-to-peer learning programs can take many forms. As a manager, you can hold your program online or in person. Your program could pair participants in one-to-one sessions, create cohorts working together on real work problems over a few months, or involve weekly sessions in which individuals share the latest knowledge they've gained with their peers with plenty of time for discussion and reflection.

To make any peer-to-peer learning program successful for your team, we recommend a few best practices:

Appoint a facilitator. Although the structure of peer learning is horizontal rather than hierarchical, it's important to have a neutral party who is not the team's manager facilitate the program to keep in on track. This person — ideally a skilled facilitator — should organize sessions, keep everyone on topic, keep conversations moving forward, and maintain a positive atmosphere for participants to learn, experiment, and ask questions.

Build a safe environment. Peer learning only works when participants feel safe enough to share their thoughts, experiences, and questions. They need to be open and vulnerable enough to accept constructive input, and also have the courage to give honest feedback rather than telling people what they want to hear.

To build a safe environment, set ground rules. Some suggestions: confidentiality must be honored; feedback should be perceived as a generous gesture that should always be met with gratitude; participants

should practice empathy, putting themselves in others' shoes; and participants should never be mocked or embarrassed for expressing themselves in front of their peers.

Focus on real-world situations. Whenever possible, these sessions should focus on genuine problems to solve. People are more likely to participate, learn, and remember new skills if they are learned in the course of addressing a real-life challenge.

Encourage networking. It helps to set up online social networks around learning, organize networking events for people to discuss their area of expertise, and establish learning groups that meet regularly to discuss ideas. Some organizations build company-wide campaigns in an effort to get everyone involved.

With a well-built peer-to-peer learning program in place as a complement to more traditional learning programs, your team will build lasting skills and relationships that will allow them to bring the skills they learn in those programs into their daily work.



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