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Creating a High-Performing Workplace Culture: Where Leadership and Learning Intersect

Creating a high-performing workplace culture can bridge the gap between a company's strategic vision and the people delivering it. Organizations need to build this high-performing brand by developing capable leaders and delivering learning experiences that empower their people through quality connection, knowledge, and opportunity. These efforts can lead to higher engagement, greater advocacy, increased retention, and improved performance.



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The Intersection of Leadership and Learning

Building a brand of high performance is not just about how customers perceive your organization. It's about your employee and leadership experience, and how, when both are optimized, your business itself can transform and support your strategic vision and brand experience.

Organizations invest a lot of money in new technologies and processes but don't always invest in building structured programs to empower and develop their people or to create a high-performing culture, which results in a less-than-ideal outcome for organizations and the individuals within them.

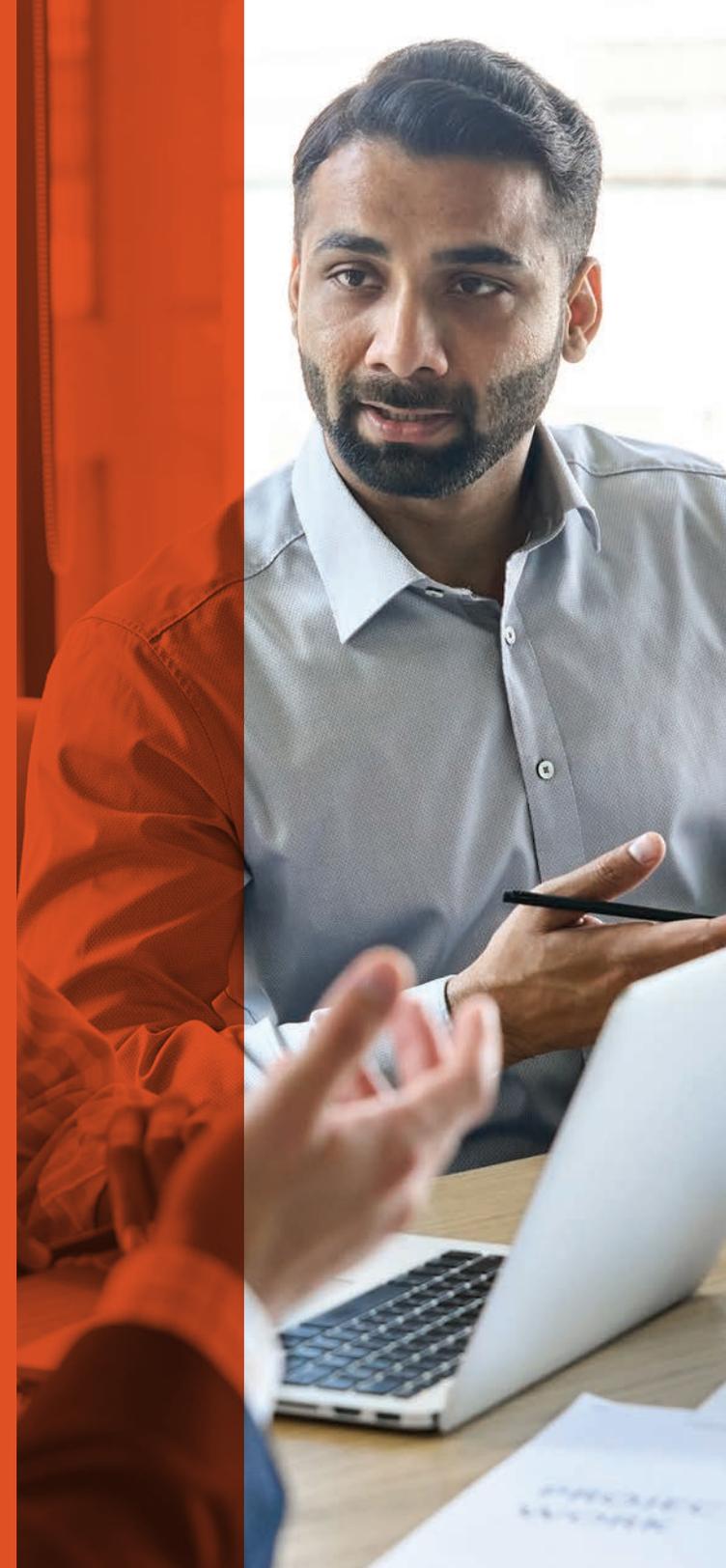
Every negative employee experience can create a series of negative events, from poor customer engagement—resulting in revenue losses—to employees leaving and taking with them knowledge, skills, and company culture developed from years of investment. Following this is the cost of recruiting, onboarding, and long-term upskilling of the resulting new-hire employees.

Now especially, in the throes of the Great Resignation, organizations are throwing a lot of perks at their employees, from unlimited or flexible PTO packages to more competitive salaries to in-office perks. While these “extras” and nice-to-haves may fleetingly attract talent, they will not suffice as retaining strategies in the long term as more businesses begin to offer similar benefits.

Our recommendation to this perplexing problem? Creating a high-performing workplace culture.

While creating a high-performing culture in your organization may not fully mitigate the issue of recruiting and retaining top talent, it will build the conditions in which these issues can be resolved. When employees are given what they need to flourish and leaders are cultivated with care, your workplace environment will succeed in turn.

The goal of all effective leadership is to understand and translate business strategies, missions, and definitions of success for individual people and teams. A culture of learning and having great leadership feed into each other; each fuels the other with what is needed for individual, team, and organization-wide success. Working toward a high-performing culture in your workplace will help attract, hire, and retain the people you need for your business to thrive.



Creating a Learning Culture to Empower Employees

A learning culture is an environment that encourages and exhibits both individual and organizational learning. In a learning culture, both the distribution and procurement of knowledge is a priority for everyone. This becomes so systemic in an organization that learning becomes part of an ecosystem in which everyone interacts, collaborates, and achieves performance goals together.

A learning culture involves more than just setting up occasional professional development days or providing access to learning content—that approach lacks the individualization and intention required to make a real impact. What is needed is a focus on setting individual performance goals and strategies that align with your business' goals and strategies. When individual employees have milestones to work toward and understand why a certain personal goal is in place and how it ties into larger, organization-wide goals, your people will be more motivated to perform well, which will propel your business forward.

A high-performing culture involves a deep-rooted, learner-centric culture. You cannot perform at your highest capacity without thoughtful processes in place for learning and a strong learning and development team in your organization.

Building a learning culture in your workplace begins with understanding that learning and development should be involved in the planning of all major business goals and organizational changes.

Building Your Learning Culture

Because learning leaders must analyze and maintain a deep understanding of the organization, alignment with business partners is critical. Learning leaders need to outline how to get insights from the business, how to acquire and justify funding, and how decisions are made to get more buy-in and articulate value.

How can learning teams create a consistently great experience for employees? Your whole organization should strive to empower every member inside and outside of the learning team to work together, and there are eleven elements in particular that need to be in place to enable your organization to deliver on the promise of creating a learning culture that will inevitably feed into a high-performing culture.



Governance

- What is your organization's **mission** and **vision**?
- Who is driving forward the mission and vision of your organization?
- What are your key performance indicators?

Organizational Effectiveness

- What is your existing workplace **culture**?
- What are your existing **change management** strategies?

Operational

- What is the **structure** of your organization and your teams?
- How well are your infrastructure, managed learning services, delivery, administration, design and development processes, trainer selection, and preparation programs operating?

Business and Partner Alignment

- How closely **aligned** to learning are your business partners?
- Is the business a centralized or decentralized model?
- How are learning teams getting insights from the business for decision-making, program goals, and the budget?

Learning

- What does the learning team know about the organization's learners?
- What are your learner profiles, learner experience, **learning strategy**, learning architecture, and knowledge management systems?

Leadership Development

- What is the **leadership learner experience**?
- How is your leadership learning experience aligned with your organization's goals?
- How is learning, coaching, and development different for executives and front-line leaders?

Technology

- What are the enterprise technologies (LMS, CMS, etc.) that support learning?
- How can learning create a technology stack to provide a **frictionless employee experience**?

Innovation

- What is your organization doing to productively and **proactively pivot** to new technologies, methodologies, or market changes?
- How can design thinking, sustainable innovation processes, or effective communication support innovation?

Talent Management Alignment

- How does your organization integrate **talent mobility** for workplace culture issues, future skills, and career-culture mindsets?
- How does your organization build your talent mobility strategy into onboarding, coaching, mentoring, career development, and competency models?

Organizational

- What is your **service model**, funding, and sourcing strategy?

Measurement and Analytics:

- How is your **data** captured, organized, and communicated to demonstrate the impact of programs?

To begin building your own learning culture, take the time to consider and analyze how each one of the above works within your organization. Where are things working well, where are there gaps, and what already exists but could be improved?

Every Learning Moment through an Orchestration of Journeys

As you consider building a new learning framework or rework an existing one, think about the learning journey you are creating for your employees. A [learning journey](#) refers to all the experiences and touchpoints a learner has when discovering new information or honing a new skill.

In every diagnostic, course, assessment, platform, or other touchpoint learners have throughout their journey, there needs to be a consistent voice emanating from the dynamic learning and development vision your company created. Every point of contact should be considered a learning brand moment of truth because a consistent experience will promote further engagement.

By providing a learning culture that promotes connection, knowledge, and opportunity, leadership in your organization will likewise thrive, and employees and customers alike will experience the power of a high-performing culture.



Download our **Learner Experience eBook** for 6 elements of designing modern learning experiences.

Get the eBook

High-Performing Learning Cultures Create Leaders

When employees are empowered and are enveloped in a culture of learning, individuals who are inclined to lead will find themselves in the perfect storm for leadership development. Establishing a learning culture fuels the next wave of leaders through its very focus on future development and performance.

Further, if your people are coached well and often, feel a sense of resilience and agility from their leaders, and can experience the psychological safety that can manifest from a well-constructed learning culture, great new leaders are bound to emerge.



Developing Capable Leaders to Facilitate High Performance

Deeply connected with developing a learning culture is the development of capable leaders—one of the most critical business objectives of every organization.

Leaders provide the direction and alignment for employees and their teams; foster the relationships employees have with the organization; and help identify, map, and develop skills employees need to deliver an organization's mission. With a vibrant learning environment and significant, fruitful leadership development, you will be well on your way to developing a culture of high performance.

GP Strategies research has identified three tools to help develop capable leaders at all levels:

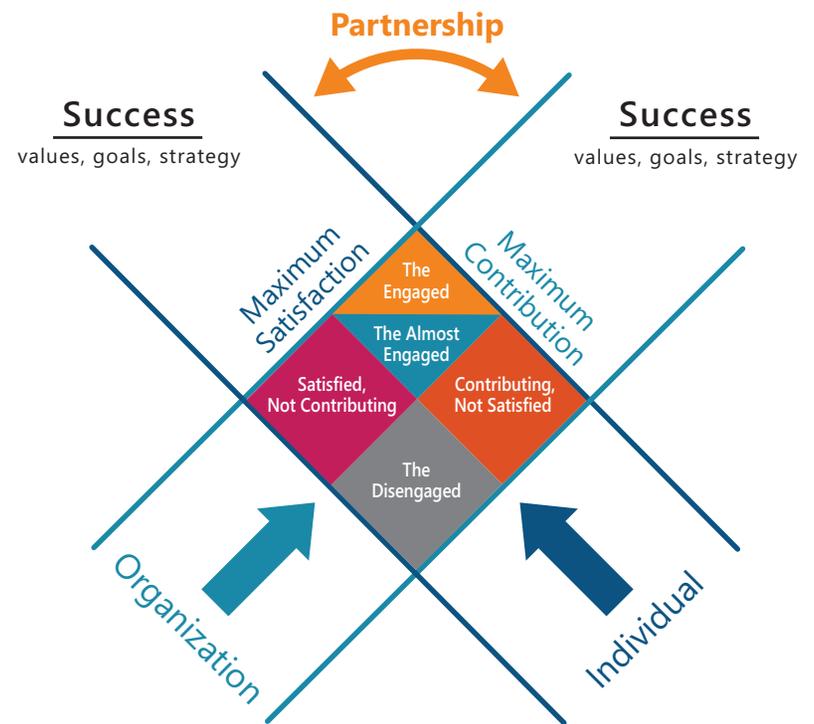
1. Gauging the employee experience with the X Model of Engagement
2. Developing the four core mindsets of a leader
3. Improving competence and connection as leadership skills

Define High Performance with the X Model of Engagement

The X Model, developed by GP Strategies, is a fantastic way for leaders to identify what high engagement looks like. The X Model can be used as the guiding force for the programs that organizations deliver, and defining what engagement actually is—beyond buzzwords—is a critical first step for organizations.

Organizations need employees to be contributing and satisfied to achieve goals for success. And success in even one area can have ripple effects in others. At the same time, organizations must keep in mind that everyone is on their own path to success—their own journey—and may define what success looks like independently. This individual success is defined by a person's own values and goals; when those goals and values are attained, the person will experience maximum satisfaction. [Regular coaching conversations](#) with team members on these topics will help inform a good leader's management approach for everyone.

In the figure to the right, we see that the most engaged employees experience both maximum satisfaction and contribution. This can only occur when there is a synergy and alignment between personal values, goals, and strategies and organizational values, goals, and strategies.



It is the goal of leaders to create and maximize the conditions to reach the orange apex of engagement. In terms of engagement, employees inevitably move around in the center area of the chart, even daily. Although a leader cannot own the engagement of their people, it is the leader's job to create the conditions that help an individual get to this apex as much as possible.

Some ways to create the conditions for both maximum satisfaction and contribution include giving feedback to employees so they understand what good outcomes look like for them and coaching them through thoughtful conversations that allow employees to understand their unique value and goals. These discussions will help them identify their personal drivers that will maximize satisfaction and, therefore, maximum contribution.

While there's no shortage of tactics or techniques available, the key to a leader's results in terms of employee satisfaction and contribution is their [intentionality](#)—not just the awareness to recognize a team member's values but the will to actively support their success.

Develop the Four Core Mindsets of a Leader

A critical aspect of effective leadership is fostering four key mindsets. Leaders need to adopt this group of mindsets to create a mental attitude that informs and shapes the actions they take. When they are connected to expectations and an organization's competencies, these four mindsets create a clear path for leaders and their teams to reach the orange apex of engagement.

Growth Mindset | The belief that skills and behaviors can be cultivated through effort. With this perspective, we see challenges, obstacles, and feedback become an opportunity to learn and grow.

Inclusive Mindset | The belief that contribution and performance are unleashed in an inclusive environment. With this perspective, we see differences in how others think and behave as advantages to be respected and explored.

Enterprise Mindset | The belief that success is maximized when we prioritize the needs of the larger organization. With this perspective, all decisions in the team or business unit are made for the greater good of the company.

Agile Mindset | The belief that success in a complex and volatile world requires flexibility, adaptation, innovation, and resilience. With this perspective, people achieve success by being nimble in the way they think, learn, and act.

Ultimately, when these mindsets are present and leaders perform the actions associated with them, they work together to create an environment that fuels innovation, pushes the boundaries of what is possible, encourages people to seek diverse opinions and approaches, and empowers people to make decisions—all of which are necessary to power a high-performing learning culture and a thriving business.



Improve Competence and Connection as Leadership Skills

Leader success is a balance of factors, including communication, trustworthiness, [competence](#), and industry knowledge. In recent [GP Strategies research](#), more than half of our respondents identified poor communication as the most significant leader stumble, followed by arrogance and then poor decision-making. A single issue, such as poor communication, can sink a leader, and it takes a careful blend of factors to make a leader successful.

Success indicators reinforce what we know are the biggest factors in leadership—competence and connection. Employees want to be led by competent leaders who have the requisite knowledge to help them be successful in reaching their goals.

Competence	Connection
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Job-related technical expertise• Self-awareness• Clear communication• Task management• Outcome-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building trust• Emotional intelligence• Developing talent• Inspirational communication• Influencing

At the same time, our historical and current research shows that it is the leaders who forge connection through communication and trust who truly engage and inspire employees. Investing in the improvement of competence and connection skills for your leaders is intimately related to building a learning culture for your employees.

Both elements discussed thus far—creating a learning culture to empower employees and developing capable leaders to facilitate high performance—can be leveraged to enable your high-performing culture.





Using Leadership and Learning to Support and Enable a High-Performing Culture

There are unlimited ways great leadership can be fostered—cultivating deeper competence and connection, developing the four core mindsets of a leader, and utilizing the X Model of Engagement are starting points and lenses through which to think about performance and leadership. And there are likewise multiple ways a learning culture can be developed for your organization. Strengthening both a leadership and a learning culture helps two key areas to manifest: psychological safety and individualization.

Elements of a High-Performing Culture

Leaders are constantly observed by those they lead, and their actions and attitudes cascade down at every level, creating and forming an invisible but very real culture that employees experience. When leaders exhibit a win-win mentality for their people, employees understand they are supported and listened to, and high performance can only occur in conditions where trust and confidence abounds.

Psychological Safety

Each one of the concepts that has been discussed to create a high-performing culture can help create a [psychologically safe environment](#) where employees thrive. This type of environment creates the circumstances that will maximize employee satisfaction and meet organizational goals.

Creating psychological safety through effective leadership practices and behaviors—like [authentic communication](#) and relationship building—can help envelope your employees in a learning culture that will inevitably drive your business forward. That's because, in this type of workplace, your people feel comfortable not only providing their unique input but also the safety needed to try new things and potentially make a mistake in the process.

In a psychologically safe environment, leaders see these mistakes as growth opportunities that can be used to sharpen and inform future innovation, now and in the future.

Individualization

Clear expectations are another essential element to this equation. Leaders know what high performance looks, feels, and sounds like, but the best leaders take the time to acknowledge and recognize it. Great leaders also recognize that two people in the same department can complete the same task, but individual skills and experiences determine what the outcome is for both employees.

Creating an individualized experience for each person, dependent upon that person's needs, creates an environment of collaboration and agility, which will [unleash innovation](#). Providing growth opportunities for all levels of understanding, experience, and ability will likewise build a high-performing culture in your organization.

Conclusion

For many, focusing extensive time and resources on leadership and learning development can feel like a nice-to-have, an extra, but whether these steps are worth taking and investing in is not the question. The question is whether you can afford not to invest in these facets of your organization and people.

The consistent development of great leadership requires a learning culture to already be in motion. And when leaders develop growth, inclusive, enterprise, and agile mindsets, teams work more smoothly.

Leaders will never have direct control over individual performance—but we do know how to influence it. We can create the conditions under which all these moving parts can work in harmony. So, where is your organization? What is your vision? And what frameworks are you creating, developing, or perfecting to achieve that vision?

Build a high-performing culture into your organization through the cultivation of both leadership and learning and watch your potential innovation unlock and your people thrive.

About the Authors

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