

L&D  
Best Practice Guide

# Leadership and Learning

Their interdependence  
and what that means  
to you

“If your leadership development programmes are not quite getting the results you had hoped for, there could be a good reason for this. And the good news is that if it is due to the reason I outline here, it can be fixed.”

Paul  
Matthews



**PEOPLE ALCHEMY**



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# Leadership and Learning

## Their interdependence and what that means to you

Leadership is often seen as the answer to all sorts of problems. “We are in a crisis because of . . . (insert your favourite problem, such as economy, slow markets, reduced budgets, poor products, competition, low morale and so on), and we need leadership. It is the only way out of this mess”.

The cry goes up for leadership and for leaders who will swoop in with capes flying and save the day.

And yet leadership does not stand on its own as a panacea. Organisations are complex systems and there are dependencies that come into play. Despite the

fashion for leadership development, care must be taken that it is done with an eye to the entire system. For example, there is a strong link between leadership and learning, and the interesting thing is that it is a two way link.



It is quite possible you have not yet made this connection, in which case you may be throwing money and resources into leadership development, only to end up wondering why the results are not quite as good as you wanted, or indeed as good as you promised the board.



This connection is not so obvious until you add the middle link in the chain . . .

So let's look at these links as we travel there and back along the chain.

### 1.



This one takes little explaining and is almost a bedrock of faith in the way leadership is promoted and evangelised. And it's true – there's a strong link between the two. Indeed, you could say that the sole purpose of leadership is to get people engaged; to engender within them a desire to participate in the leader's vision, and go the extra mile.

It is this desire to participate that is the key. The leader proposes a vision, a task, a project in such a way that people want to contribute; they want to get involved, and they want to see it come to fruition and succeed. They want to be part of something significant, something they would most likely not wholeheartedly support were it not for the leader.

Of course, if there is no leadership, there will be little engagement; except perhaps that engendered by basic worker compliance that will be just sufficient to ensure a pay check is available at the end of each month.

### 2.



Let's assume we have engagement. We have people who want to participate and contribute. What is their next step?

They will do what they need to do to get involved. They will find out what they need to find out. They will speak to whoever they need to speak with. They will put in the time, and they will put in the effort. And they will learn what they need to learn so their contribution can be effective and meaningful. They want success for the vision of the leader, simply because they are engaged with it.

Given that a leader's vision is different to the status quo – or it wouldn't really be a vision, let alone a motivating one – it will involve change, which will usually require new skills and new ways of doing things. Change requires learning, so participating in a leader's vision will almost always involve learning. When people are engaged, they will learn in order to participate.

But if the engagement is not there, why would anyone bother to learn?

Learning in adults tends to be a goal-oriented process, especially in the workplace. We do things for a reason. When we have a goal that we wish to achieve, we learn what we need to learn in order

to achieve that goal. If there is no goal, no desire to participate, no engagement, then learning dies. And if training is delivered that does not relate to a present goal, the learning is not received. You can't teach someone something they don't want to know, no matter how much you might dress it up with phrases like "You will need this later".

3.



Now let's look at this connection from the other direction – the effect of learning on engagement.

When people learn new things in order to pursue a goal, and it makes the pursuit of that goal easier, the goal seems closer and more attainable. A goal that you can reach out and almost touch is more motivating than one that seems impossible because you just can't imagine ever being able to do it. The more you learn that enables you to contribute meaningfully to a leader's goal, the more engaged with that goal you will become. It is exciting being part of something bigger than you, and able to contribute to it. In the words from the Genesis song -

"I know what I like,  
and I like what I know."

But what if you can't learn what you need to know in order to participate? What if the barriers to learning are too high? What if

the information you need is not available? What then?

And what if you can learn, but find the barriers to implementing the learning are high? For example, mistakes are not tolerated so trying new things is dangerous, or systems are set up in such a way as to stifle any change in the way you do things. What then?

This breeds frustration. The desire to go for the goal dissipates, and engagement wilts like a plant without water. The desire to participate fades away, and in many cases is replaced by cynicism in response to any further attempts to win engagement. The employee feels unsupported by the organisation and by their manager, so they start looking for the door.

Lack of opportunity to learn, or to apply learning becomes a restraining force on engagement, and indeed, can even destroy it completely.

4.



What is the effect of engagement on leadership?

When people are engaged, they will follow the vision; they will follow the leader because they like where the leader is taking them. The more they follow a leader, the more they will allow themselves to be influenced by that leader.

Engagement and leadership feed on each other.

But what if the engagement hits a stumbling block? What if some other factor reduces its power? What if there are barriers to follower behaviour, such as lack of the proper equipment, lack of clarity over decision boundaries, or ineffective work processes?

People will lose their desire to participate. They won't follow that vision, that leader. If the ability to engage is restricted in some way, the leader will have no followers, and a leader with no followers is simply someone walking their path alone. They are no longer a leader.

Now we can see the interdependence up and down this chain. We can see how leadership can impact learning, not because the leader espouses learning, but simply because they are a leader.

We can also see how learning can impact the effects of leadership. It can act as an accelerator or a brake on the primary output of leadership, which is engagement.

If your learning environment is not functioning well, pouring resources into developing leadership will never have the impact it could have. Many organisations wonder why they do not see the returns they are assured will follow leadership training.

Organisations need to ensure that it is easier to follow their leaders, than not to follow. Engagement without enablement will get you nowhere.

## The Learnscape

Every organisation has a learning environment, or Learnscape. It is the ecosystem that comprises all that is within or around an organisation that has an impact on learning. Employees exist within this Learnscape and how much or how easily they learn depends on how well the Learnscape is functioning.

The effectiveness of the Learnscape will determine whether an organisation's leaders can be successful. If the Learnscape is not functioning well, it takes an extraordinary leader to engage people sufficiently to succeed in spite of their handicap. Conversely, if the Learnscape is working well, people can follow a leader more easily, and the quality of leadership is not so important. Perhaps there are people in your organisation who already have sufficient leadership capabilities, but they cannot be effective leaders because of the defective learnscape.

Now, here is the critical thing about a Learnscape that many people don't realise: very little of it is formal training. Most of the know-how that people require in order to fulfil their job roles is learnt outside the classroom, and outside any formal training initiative. The bulk of the learning that goes on within any learnscape is informal learning, and this is especially the case with learning done in the moment by people following a leader's vision. They just find out and figure out what they need in order to participate. That's informal learning.

You can't force informal learning. All you can do is provide a backdrop and environment in which it is more likely to occur. This environment is your learnscape.

### Moment of truth

What happens in your organisation when an employee wants to do something they have not done before and about which they feel unsure?

This is a 'moment of truth', and these come often when following a leader on a new path of change and success.

The phrase 'moment of truth' was popularised by Jan Carlzon, CEO of Scandinavian Airline Systems and architect of its spectacular turnaround.

For him, it meant that moment when one of his employees interacted with a customer making a reservation, checking in or being served a meal. The brand of the airline was at stake during every such interaction because the customer would form or change their impression about his company. He focused on making sure that his employees would handle those moments of truth well; after each one that was handled well, he would then have another happy customer.

When following a leader, the moments of truth are those moments when an employee comes to a fork in the road. Down one road are actions that support and contribute to the success of the leader's vision. Down the other are at best indifference and perhaps even cynicism and sabotage of the leader's vision.

Which is the easier road for the employee to travel?

Manage your learnscape so the employee finds it easiest to take the road that leads to engagement. Consider this quote from Jan Carlzon:

"An individual without information can't take responsibility. An individual with information can't help but take responsibility."

### Invest in your Learnscape

Many people talk about the need to invest in their people. People are our greatest asset, they cry. We must invest in them, and pour knowledge and skills into them. The Learning & Development department looks into the oracle of their Learning Management System (LMS) and decides who needs to learn what, based on their role in the organisation.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, except that it focuses attention on individuals because they appear as line items on the LMS screen. Consequently, L&D practitioners may lose sight of the fact that employees are operating within a Learnscape and there is far more that is relevant to their capability to do a job than is indicated by a row of LMS tick boxes.

Think instead about investing in your Learnscape to improve the whole learning

environment within your organisation. Your Learnscape stays, even as employees come and go. So invest in what stays with the organisation. Invest so that employees can reach out and learn wherever, whenever and however they need. Make sure the barriers are low between people and what they need to learn. If you have the right learning environment, it is actually easier for people to learn than not learn. It is easier for them to take that fork in the road that leads to success for the organisation.

### Don't sell learning

There is a catch. You want to invest in your Learnscape and create a learning organisation. You have learning as a goal; as an outcome in its own right. The problem is that the people who you want do the learning, don't have learning as a goal.

When an employee chooses to follow the leader down the fork in the road that involves change, they seldom think of the word 'learning'. They think in terms of what they need to do, or what they must find out in order to do what they want to get done.

Their internal dialogue when faced with a new or difficult task is 'I need to find out some information' or 'I must look that up on the web' or 'who do I ask who knows about that'. Very few people would naturally use the word learn. Their outcome is to pull enough information together to do the task and move on. The word 'learn' seems like overkill in this context.

It sounds like it would take more effort, like you would need to learn a lot more than perhaps the minimum needed to do the job.

'Learn' also sounds like a more permanent thing to do when people see knowledge as transient these days. It changes even as we watch it, slithering out of date so quickly. So why would we aspire to learn stuff?

What we do want is to get our immediate outcome, and move on to whatever comes next. Of course, there are situations where learning is the outcome, but these are a small fraction of the situations that occur where learning takes place. Most learning is unsought. It just happens as a serendipitous by-product of what we are doing.

People don't typically seek learning. It may be what they need, but it is not what they think they want. So you need to dress it up in clothes that make it look like what they think they want. The only way to do this is to ask them what they want. It is basic marketing.

Get your marketing friends to help and go through some basic marketing steps.

- Who is the audience?
- What is the problem they have that your offering can address?
- Do they know they have a problem that needs solving?
- What do they think they want (notice that this is a different question from what they actually need)?

- Why should they get it from you as opposed to somewhere else?
- What benefits and results would they get?
- What testimonials do you have?
- How do you need to package it so they buy it?

As well as marketing your learnscape initiatives directly to people, you also have a powerful sales force available to you. They are your managers.

### Managers in the middle

Who has the biggest influence on how well the learnscape operates, as well as on motivation and engagement?

Answer: your supervisors and line managers.

Studies show that an employee's direct supervisor has the greatest impact on their performance, and on their loyalty and motivation. But survey after survey delivers data showing far more

employees are disengaged than engaged, far more managers are thought to be poor than good, and managers are more likely to douse the flames of enthusiasm than fan them. Something clearly needs fixing in many, if not most organisations.

And it is not just a leadership problem, though many would have you subscribe to that view. It is also a learning problem because leadership and learning are interdependent.

The solution lies with the team supervisors and middle managers.

I leave you with a question . . .

“How can you tune and redesign your Learnscape to make it easier for people to follow them, so it is easier for them to lead and succeed?”





# PEOPLE ALCHEMY

People Alchemy is an automated, learning workflow platform which encourages real behaviour change through action, activities and tasks. It's innovative, easy-to-use and jam-packed with features designed to deliver benefits to your people and your business, straight out of the box.

It's your modern solution to driving learning impact.

Our Learning Workflow Platform focuses on delivering activities, not content. That leads to true learning transfer and application of knowledge. People Alchemy gets learners doing the practice they need to improve performance

This is not an LXP. Or an LMS.

This is a Learning Workflow Platform and it's instigating real change in learning.

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## **Paul Matthews**

is the founder of People Alchemy and an internationally recognised author and speaker on L&D.

Thanks for reading this Best Practice Guide. I hope you found it useful. You picked up this Guide, which means you are keen to find new ideas and new ways of doing things to get better results. I can help you. Together we can look at what you want to achieve and then develop your strategy to make it happen. What is your L&D goal? What do you want to achieve? Let's talk about it :-)

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