

WE LEARN

# OLD DOGS CAN'T LEARN NEW TRICKS?

THAT'S  
BULLS\*\*T



How workforce  
development creates  
enduring employee  
experience

You're never too old to learn something new. Anyone who tells you otherwise is full of it. There isn't some magical number or point in your professional or personal life at which you cross a threshold and become unteachable.



Often, when we feel like we're too old to explore and develop a new skill, what we really feel is that we are too removed from the stream of learning. "Soak up everything you can while you're in school — you won't get another chance!" But that's not really true. Learning may compete with myriad additional responsibilities as we progress in our lives and careers, but the opportunities to learn are still there.

When others infer — or outright say — that we're too old to learn something, what they're really saying is that they don't have the capacity to invest time and energy into teaching us. That, frankly, is also bullsh\*\*t.

***You're never too old — or too removed — to learn something new.*** Cooking. Coding. Public speaking. Getting forklift certified. You name it, you can probably find an accessible venue or module to teach it.

In an age of ever-expanding online learning platforms and open-source materials, the barriers to education have never been lower. Learning and development technology is exploding, with machine-learning-powered virtual learning platforms, dynamic targeted curricula, accessible modalities for diverse learning styles, and innovative consulting. There is a world of possibilities for individual and collaborative learners at all stages in their careers.

Yet even with rapidly expanding avenues for increasingly diverse learners, corporate learning and development initiatives often only target select groups of leaders, high-performing employees, or those otherwise earmarked for special consideration.



Almost all employees, **94%**, say they would stay at their current employer if the company invested in helping them learn.



## **BUT RELATIVELY FEW GET THE OPPORTUNITY.**

According to a 2019 study by The Execu|Search Group,



**86% of employees would leave their current job for greater professional development**



**66% reported that their organizations did not provide these initiatives.**

**The dilemma is clear:** While employees want to learn, employers aren't doing enough to teach. The result is a broad middle of employees who feel stuck, who aren't being inspired, who aren't being invested in. Grappling with pandemic-fueled introspection, these employees are increasingly wondering, "What's the point of sticking around?"

As employers try to combat rising worker disengagement in the post-pandemic workplace, they should turn their attention to the potential of learning and development to create an employee experience worth staying for.

# LEARNING AND EDUCATION CREATES A GROUNDED EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Employee experience feels like the zeitgeist of the contemporary, post-pandemic world of work. As social scientists and educators analyzing and intervening in workplace culture, we naturally waded into this discussion. But our unique perspectives and experiences have inspired a unique model: grounded employee experience.

**Grounded employee experience** is the quality of the time employees spend in their everyday professional roles: completing tasks, communicating with colleagues and clients, and moving through the work environment.

Grounded employee experience is not the lofty and often abstract concepts of company culture, organizational values, and mission statements. Rather, this is a “boots on the ground” experience from the perspective of those who fill the boots.

Drawing on nearly a decade of research on employee experience and workplace culture in locales as diverse as Midwest factories, craft breweries, Fortune 500 tech businesses, and Japanese Buddhist temples, Aaron Delgaty identifies four pillars of grounded employee experience: **resilience, reciprocity, meaning, and hope.**



## RESILIENCE

Confidence in the stability and sustainability of work



## RECIPROCITY

The feeling that professional relationships are based on mutual care



## MEANING

The validation that one's work has purpose



## HOPE

The belief that change is possible and things can get better

Continuing professional education can revitalize employee investment and can fulfill these four pillars of working life. Learning is a fundamental component of employee experience. Learning connects people to a sense of purpose.

Supporting development enables employers to connect more purposefully to their employees. Access to education stabilizes livelihoods, fosters connections between employees and employers, surfaces passion, and helps employees chart their own bright futures.

When organizations are grounded in cultures that meet every employee where they are and help them imagine and achieve their learning goals, they engender a quality of time for employees that inspires, motivates, and endures.

Promoting learning is essential to developing and maintaining a positive grounded employee experience. People get stuck because they **aren't given the constructs for access to learning** that builds them up, connects them to a supportive community, has meaning, and ultimately drives them to a more hopeful place.



## PILLAR NO. 1

# LEARNING BUILDS RESILIENCE

1

**Resilience** is the confidence that one's relationship to work, and the relationships that sustain that relationship, including one's relationship to the self, will remain dependable and sustainable come what may.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not employees see their organization as resilient, or whether or not they see their organization as promoting personal or interpersonal resilience, goes to the core of whether or not an employee-employer relationship is seen as viable and desirable.

Employee perceptions of resilience start at the top. Leaders have to model resilience. They have to maintain focus while inspiring their teams. Resilience has to be both walked and inspired. Employees resonate with this aura, pick up these behaviors, and become resilient themselves.

But who models for the leaders?

Organizations that seek resilience have to start by valuing the skills that make a company resilient. Those skills are generally human skills: kindness, generosity and gratitude, empathy, storytelling, and inclusion. Skills that value the humanity of employees, not just the outcomes. They must also commit to teaching these skills to leaders.

Professional learning and development interventions are most effective at teaching these skills when their designs reflect the skills they impart. Learning platforms, modules, and coaching that is thankful for and empathetic to the learner are critical.

**Compassion for the learner is key.** The learner is not a statistic. There is a human being on the other side of this, and that human being has their own relationship to learning, and they deserve an equitable chance to learn, and should see themselves as learning. Design learning that cares about how people learn as much as what they are learning: tools for retention, storytelling through words and pictures, case studies that ground lessons in relatable emotional moments.

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By creating engaged learners, organizations can forge resilience link by link.

<sup>1</sup> Hochschild 1979, Allison 2013, Delgaty 2020

## PILLAR NO. 2

# INVESTING IN LEARNING MODELS RECIPROCALITY

# 2

**Reciprocity** is the feeling that professional relationships are **not purely transactional**, that those within one's professional circle respond to individual effort with commensurate care, often expressed through recognition and rewards for achievement and understanding and responsiveness to moments of personal need.<sup>2</sup> Employees experience reciprocity when their relationships are grounded in a mutual practice of consideration and care. The failure to provide these more-than-transactional relationships undermines the feeling of connection, belonging, and safety to an employer.<sup>3</sup>

Learning can create a sense of reciprocity by investing in employees beyond a paycheck. However, this **only works if the learning is valuable to both parties**. Professional development has to be as meaningful and practical to the individual as it is to the organization. This means not just training workers on arcane in-house systems or methodologies, but on a broader range of technical and soft skills that could help them succeed wherever they go.

Showing employees your commitment to their broader professional development sends a powerful message about an employee-employer relationship grounded in care.

There is an opportunity for reciprocity to be built into learning when it is lifelong, always available, and relevant at every stage of the employee's journey. Learning is not just during onboarding, and not just for those with seemingly high potential.

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Employers can initiate a reciprocal learning relationship by having a conversation with employees about what they want to learn. Meet people where they are, and help them get there.

<sup>2</sup> Mauss 1925, Malinowski 1925, Hochschild 1979, Graeber 2011, Allison 2013, Delgaty 2020

<sup>3</sup> Allison 2013; Delgaty 2020

## PILLAR NO. 3

# PERSONAL GROWTH SURFACES MEANING

# 3

**Meaning** is the personal and interpersonal validation that one's work is purposeful and impactful for oneself, for the organization, and for the broader community.<sup>4</sup> Is the work meaningful? It's a deeply personal question based on experience, ambition, and the myriad other elements that make up an individual's broader context. But if the answer is "no," the employee, regardless of context, probably won't stick around.

Learning and development can create meaning when it's grounded in context. Adult learners need to understand why what they are learning is important, how what they learn will benefit them at a personal and professional level, and also how it will benefit the organization. How do they fit into the bigger picture?

Learning isn't really learning if it doesn't have meaning. And if learning isn't meaningful, it probably shouldn't exist.

Employers have the burden to demonstrate the meaningfulness of learning. One way they can accomplish this is helping employees see their place in the context of that learning.

Create a culture that welcomes all learners. Understand the potentially negative experiences people have had with learning. Be intentional about how employees are invited to participate in learning, what their role in the learning process is, and what it will be in the organization. Create a sense of belonging through learning. Enfranchising employees through ongoing learning grounds them in context, creating a better understanding of their purpose and reminding them that they have a place here.

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**Learning makes life meaningful.  
Employers have the opportunity to  
prove it.**

<sup>4</sup> Frankl 1946, Redfield 2013, Ocejo 2017, Graeber 2018, Delgaty 2020

## PILLAR NO. 4

# CHANGE INSPIRES HOPE

# 4

Lastly, **hope** is the belief that things can improve, or at the very least that change is still possible. It's the sense of possibility, maybe adventure. It's the opposite of feeling stuck, in a rut, stagnant.<sup>5</sup>

Does an employee have hope? That's an increasingly critical question in an age of pronounced economic and geopolitical uncertainty. The world can seem a bleak place at times, that no matter how hard one works or struggles, nothing really changes.

With the ongoing Great Reshuffle and emergence of so-called "quiet quitting," employers are experiencing their own brand of hopelessness. How are organizations supposed to justify learning and development initiatives when half their employees are heading for the exit and the other half are scrambling to compensate for a reduced workforce?

**Now is exactly the time to invest in learning for every employee.**

We asked an educator leader recently, "Why should an employer invest in an employee halfway out the door?" Their response: "Because they're only halfway out the door. Clearly there's a reason they are still there."

An employee who is still there wants to be there. This creates an opportunity to win them back. Invest in their professional development. Show them that they still have room to grow. Work to get them out of their rut. Even if they do eventually leave, that employee will leave as a fan of your organization, rather than a detractor. It's a small world. Positive brand affinity can go a long way.

Our interlocutor continued, "If you don't have hope in your learner who is halfway out the door, how can you expect them to have hope for you?" What you give, you get. If employers are unwilling to instill hope in a disheartened employee, to show them there is a future, how can they expect that employee to see the value in their organization?

See learning for what it essentially is — a tool to instill hope. Invest in employees, give them the skills they need to create personal and collective change. Invest throughout the employee lifecycle. Send the message that it's never too late to try something new.

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**Show employees that the future can be a better place, and that they — with a little support — can help make that future happen.**

<sup>5</sup> Traphagan 2004, Walley 2013, Heath & Heath 2017, Delgaty 2020



Creating a learning and development plan that enhances employee experience, rather than undermines it, requires intentionality, humility, and empathy. It also requires a firm belief that the opportunity to grow is evergreen.

Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, through the voice of Sherlock Holmes, “Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last.”



Ground employee experience in a culture of continual learning and prove you're never too old to learn something new. Anything else is bullsh\*\*t.

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