

Learning Culture to Go?

What it takes to transform your company into a learning organization

Many traditional industries get disrupted by players that breathe agility, innovation and a strong pursuit to get things done. To compete and survive in these fast-moving times requires the openness to listen and learn from each other, be bold and experiment – not only for individuals, but also for leaders and entire organizations. One way to influence these elements is by fostering an organizational culture that encourages curiosity, development and continuous learning – in short, a learning culture. But where do organizations start and what buttons should they push? We suggest focusing on the three culture levers – leadership, talent and infrastructure. Managed right, these will enable a learning culture that fits your organization, your business strategy and most importantly, your people.

Curious? Then let's go!

It's Friday, 7 o'clock at night. Jenny, CEO of an automotive company, closes her laptop in frustration. Wasn't this the week the leadership committee wanted to develop the new business strategy for next quarter and launch the new product line? Again, things are rescheduled and postponed, but not only that – most of the ideas she came across were weak, or worse, the great ones were swallowed by the strong result-orientation and company-wide need for safety and order. Jenny feels weighed down by the huge responsibility she carries as well as the slow reaction time and inertia in the organization. She realizes she needs to know the answers to the big questions of their business reality. However, she alone does not have these answers. Rather, she needs a competent team around her – one that speaks up and is bold enough to challenge her.



So, what would need to change for Jenny to create an environment and organizational culture where her team feels encouraged to speak up, to learn from colleagues regardless of their rank and to innovate together? How do leaders need to guide their teams to bring these behaviors and practices into the organization and ultimately release the great potential of employees that is currently locked behind strong walls? And how can the company ensure quick iterations, agility, innovation and curiosity to experiment in these fast-moving times? Jenny realizes that a culture change is what the organization needs right now. A change toward a culture that is characterized by exploration, openness, creativity and growth to enable innovation, agility and organizational learning. A change toward a continuous learning culture.

Definition of Culture

We view culture as an organization's "unique fingerprint" that is:

ALIGNED TO THE ORGANIZATION'S BUSINESS STRATEGY AND DESIRED BUSINESS OUTCOMES

COMPOSED OF THE CORE VALUES AND BELIEFS OF THE ORGANIZATION

SHAPED BY THE BEHAVIORS MODELED BY THE SENIOR LEADERS

REINFORCED THROUGH ACTIONS, SUCH AS COLLABORATION, COMMUNICATION AND DECISION-MAKING

Do Jenny's thoughts sound familiar to you? If so, it's no surprise, as many organizations are facing the same problem as Jenny. Every organization has a learning culture in place — i.e., the way employees learn, develop new ideas and handle failure. In many cases, however, it is just not the right one to support the strategy and ambitions of the organization. As many industries get disrupted by players that are known to be innovative, fast, bold and experimental, organizations need to review their learning culture now and ask the right questions. Does the existing learning culture support ongoing development and openness to grow in fast-changing times? Does it help or hinder us to compete in the market and achieve our strategic goals? And to what extent do our leaders, talent processes and organizational infrastructure support a learning culture to make learning a day-to-day experience for everyone?

Learning culture is characterized by exploration, openness to new ideas, creativity and a growth mindset that enables innovation, agility and fast organizational learning.

Enabling elements of your learning culture — how to use them wisely or fail lively

A successful business requires an aligned interaction of a clear business strategy, established organizational processes and technology, and a culture that drives results. As the pace of technology change accelerates, organizations face the need to reassess their strategy and culture more frequently to adapt and pivot their direction accordingly. Building a learning culture positions your organization to identify, design and respond to changes in your industry because every member of your team will be empowered to make creative suggestions on how to tackle the next challenge.

Cultural change doesn't happen overnight. It requires alignment at the top and change management along the way. It starts with articulating the north star and defining what priorities and behaviors a learning culture includes in your case (e.g., giving feedback or focusing more on cross-functional collaboration) and aligning the top leadership team before the actual movement of the organization can happen. Although culture is a group phenomenon, we know that cultural change occurs at the individual level. At some point, every person in your organization must be made aware of the change, have an individual desire to take part in it, be knowledgeable enough and able to behave differently, and be incentivized to continue the new behavior.

The Jenny Assessment

How much Jenny is in you and what should you do next?

Find out by answering the following questions:

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| 1. In my organization, we have a healthy balance of innovation and achieving results | Yes | No |
| 2. In my organization, everyone feels safe to speak up with their ideas | Yes | No |
| 3. In my organization, we give each other candid feedback regardless of rank or position | Yes | No |
| 4. In my organization, risk-managed failure and the resulting learnings are celebrated as much as wins | Yes | No |
| 5. In my organization, the workforce is trained and ready for the challenges of the future | Yes | No |

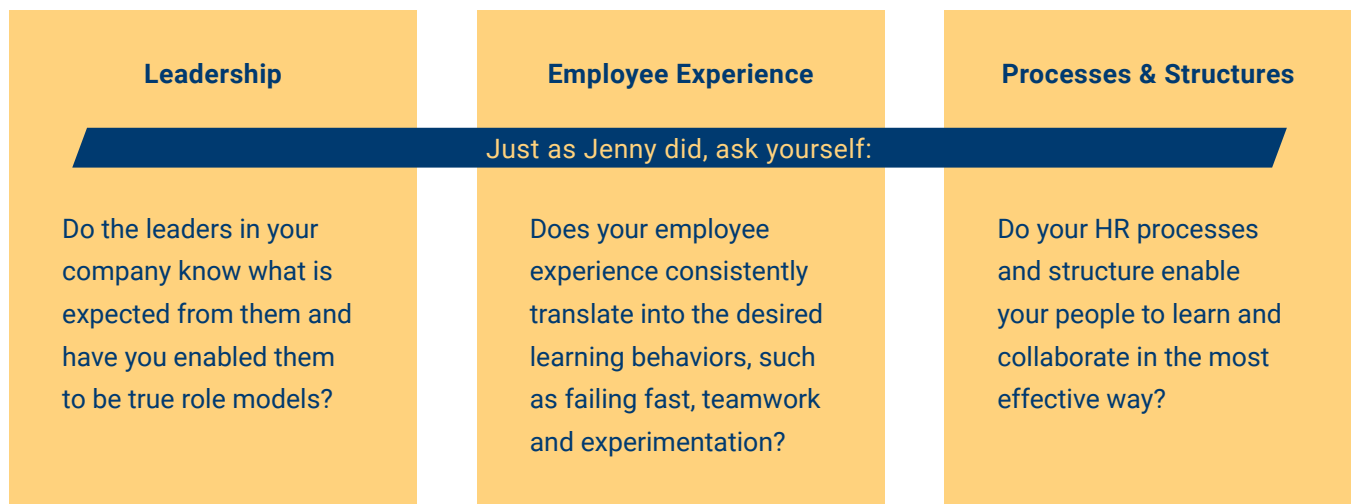
If you answered at least one question with **“No”**

Keep reading and learn how to strengthen your learning culture.

If you answered all questions with **“Yes”**

Congratulations! Why don't you keep reading and provide us with feedback as we want to learn from you!

As a leader, Jenny recognized that her company cannot succeed with the current organizational culture and thus designed her learning culture transformation to address three enabling elements:



Checking those elements can successfully enable CHROs to build a learning culture that fits their strategy and position them for success.

Let's discuss each of these enabling elements one by one.

Leadership makes it or breaks it

Many organizational transformations use a tornado approach — trying to do it all — by reshuffling the whole organization, changing processes, systems and structures, and sending everyone into new roles and teams. These approaches risk overwhelming the organization and do not give people enough room to understand what is expected from them. We therefore suggest you start thinking about the role of your leaders in creating a learning culture that fits your needs. If you manage to get your leaders involved and engaged in new behaviors, they are your most important behavioral multipliers and accelerators of change. Start with them, train them and include them in cocreating their own learning journey toward leadership behaviors that foster your learning culture. Give them the chance to understand why a growth mindset and leadership style that supports learning and experimentation is necessary for your organization and which goals they need to pursue, and work together to co-create a plan for achieving this. If your leaders buy into the change, they will model needed behaviors and spread them throughout the organization. This will result in sustainable change, creating a climate of psychological safety and trust first to allow experimentation and failure, as learning will not be achieved through classical webinars and trainings.

Jenny approached her leaders by involving them in the change toward a learning culture from the very start. In many organizational transformation processes leaders are only informed about changes, but Jenny wanted to do it differently. She started with an assessment of all her middle and senior

management to understand their starting points and create an awareness that the change needs to start with the leaders themselves. She then involved leaders as co-creators in designing their own development program to become learning champions and role models for change. Together with development experts, leaders created a program focusing on self-reflection and understanding underlying assumptions of learning, failure and growth, as well as developing practical skills to foster innovation and give strength-based feedback. Throughout this process alone, they experienced aspects of a learning culture: an agile, co-creative and iterative design process with feedback loops and collaboration across the organization.

Reflection questions we ask our clients:

1. How are your leaders currently fostering a learning culture? How do they hinder it?
2. Are you and your leaders clear about which leadership behaviors are expected from them to foster a learning culture?
3. What is one thing that would make it easier for your leaders to change their behavior? Where are they coming from?



Learning positioned consistently throughout the employee experience

A second enabling element for establishing a learning culture that fits your strategy is to weave it throughout your employee experience consistently and intentionally. Your employee experience should embody a learning culture from the first time new applicants read about your organization through to onboarding, further development, performance discussions, feedback sessions, rewards and promotions, right up until the day they leave. Your whole employee lifecycle should breathe "learning." One will not change behavior organization-wide by changing processes alone, so let us invite you on a quick thought experiment: Let's assume you have activated and developed your leaders to bring the new culture and respective leadership behaviors into the organization. They promote teamwork, take time to collaborate on ideas, implement innovation without knowing the outcomes and spend at least one hour a week to broaden their knowledge through different channels. After a while you have performance review discussions and measure people against the "old" performance criteria. According to these criteria, individual results are rewarded (instead of team results) and solely financial performance is looked at (instead of broadening to see the full range of innovative products and services that were created). This scenario implies that you as leaders and organizations are not walking the talk, which causes frustration, cynicism and confusion. Thus, your talent processes need to be aligned with the learning culture you want to advocate.



When Jenny, together with her project team, reviewed their talent processes and checked for compatibility with a learning culture, they found a few pitfalls they were not aware of. Thus, in their recruiting and onboarding processes, changes were implemented to identify talent with a propensity to learn, setting expectations from day one about the importance of learning not only when joining, but throughout the career journey. In their reward and recognition programs, they introduced non-monetary and monetary rewards geared toward recognizing people who successfully completed learning programs and who learned (from success or failure) by being bold and bringing in new ideas. Lastly, in their retention and succession programs they ensured that everyone knew what is expected of them and what it takes to become a learning champion. This awareness and ability is now a prerequisite for succeeding in any new leadership role.

Reflection questions we ask our clients:

1. (How) Do you ensure new joiners are clear about your learning culture from day 1?
2. (How) Does your organization's reward system encourage what you want to achieve in fostering a learning culture?
3. (How) Do you ensure that you promote the people who are advocates of your learning culture?



Breathing and living learning requires structure

Another enabling element of a learning culture is your organization's infrastructure. You need an infrastructure that supports learning, experimentation and innovation. How do you do that? Through organizational design (the frame), tooling (your virtual environment) and office space (your physical environment).

Firstly, your organizational structure and org chart should mirror what you want to establish. If it's collaboration, experimentation and decision-making across the organization, then a usual pyramid-shaped organizational design does not do it justice. Instead, think about an organizational structure that emphasizes collaboration instead of power, that includes circles instead of pyramids and that empowers everyone in the organization to make decisions if they feel knowledgeable enough to do so.

Secondly, use your tooling to democratize learning. To become a learning organization, it is crucial to provide learning opportunities for every single employee "in the flow of work" on a daily and regular basis — workshops and trainings only for top management are no longer adequate. Creating a virtual learning environment that is always on and where employees can interact and learn together makes learning accessible to everyone in the organization. It supports the individual learning journey in an interesting and motivating way. Further, virtual learning pathways, virtual reality and online coaching platforms offer new opportunities besides traditional learning concepts. For Jenny, the tooling that supported development and learning within her organization was the infrastructure

aspect she wanted to improve. Her organization had a virtual learning platform, but it was rarely used. When creating development pathways for everyone, she made sure to include many different resources that led learners to the platform so they could become comfortable using it and exploring themselves. While she was still including more traditional formats, such as facilitated workshops into the learning pathway, most steps were self-directed.

Thirdly, make sure your office spaces enable the learning culture by making it visible and, above all, tangible. It's not about fancy interiors or new table tennis equipment. Rather, it is time to rethink the purpose of office spaces — away from parallel working toward active collaboration. Why not encourage employees to use the office as a collaborative space if they need interaction and joint innovation time? Utilize collaboration rooms with creative material and open coworking spaces to actively encourage the exchange of ideas? At the same time, focus time and conceptual elaboration of ideas could be done from "silent offices" or from home.

Reflection questions we ask our clients:

1. Which cultural aspects come to your mind when looking at your org chart? What would an applicant think about your organization when looking at the org chart?
2. (How) Do all your employees have access to regular and inspiring learning opportunities?
3. How could your office environment foster creative exchanges even more?

Conclusion

Working on these enabling elements will not turn your organization into a learning organization in days. However, getting an understanding of where you stand on each of these will allow you to put together a holistic change strategy, just as Jenny did. While Jenny and her team could already see the first successes of their transformation, such as an increase in ideas brought into the innovation department and increased usage of the learning platform, the change is ongoing. Jenny realized quickly that they had to learn and adjust along the way – and live the learning culture themselves while creating it.

We as authors of this article love to learn ourselves. If you have feedback for us, please reach out to lisa.birkenbach@kincentric.com.

CONTACTS

Bernhard Stieger

Leadership Assessment and Development
Europe Practice Leader
bernhard.stieger@kincentric.com

Lisa Birkenbach

Consultant, EMEA
lisa.birkenbach@kincentric.com

Selina Gentele

Associate, EMEA
selina.gentele@kincentric.com

If you have any questions, please feel free to [contact us](#).
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