




CREATING LEARNING CULTURES

Assessing
the evidence

Report
April 2020



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Report

Creating learning cultures: assessing the evidence

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1 Summary

Workplaces need to invest in the learning and development of their workforce to stay future-fit in a complex and competitive world of work. Creating a supportive environment for learning is an important part of ensuring employees and the wider organisation have the right capabilities to adapt and respond to challenges in an agile and effective way.

The CIPD's *Professionalising Learning and Development* report found that 98% of learning and development (L&D) practitioners wish to develop a positive culture for learning, but only 36% feel like they've developed one. A key question is, therefore: how can L&D practitioners take action to embed learning into their organisation's day-to-day practice? In this report, we explore the evidence on what a learning culture is, what the benefits are, and what practical steps professionals can take to support learning.

What is the definition of a 'learning culture'?

Our review of the scientific evidence found that there are several definitions of learning culture, including related concepts such as the learning organisation and learning climate. While there is no unifying definition or theory of learning culture, there are several common concepts that can be found in many of the definitions:

- supporting individual learning and transformation, and allowing this knowledge to shape strategy and process
- encouraging teams to learn and reflect on their work and proactively influence strategy and process change
- a willingness to learn and improve from the wider organisation and key decision-makers.

Is 'learning culture' a useful term or concept?

Culture is a broad term, and as a result it is difficult to define targeted actions or practices that work. There is evidence to suggest that learning culture is linked to outcomes such as job satisfaction and motivation for learning. However, there's less evidence on how to create a learning culture and what its long-term impact might be.

Recommendations: what should L&D professionals do?

Instead of concentrating on creating a new culture for learning, we recommend that L&D professionals at all levels reframe 'learning culture' as the 'environment' for learning. They can then provide guidance on tangible organisational practices and behaviours, and use the factors that underpin 'learning culture' as a framework to evaluate their learning environment.

For learning to be truly embedded within the business, L&D professionals should evaluate the current learning environment in place in their organisation and consider taking action at an organisational, team and individual level. We highlight key recommendations at each level below.



Organisational learning

Businesses need structures and systems in place to support learning, as well as a shared vision for learning and transformation. L&D professionals should:

- Work with leaders to define and communicate a vision for learning and transformation, clearly linked to organisational objectives.
- Evaluate current systems for knowledge management and learning.
- Consider whether there are appropriate channels in place to allow individual and team learning and reflection to feed into organisational decision-making.

- Consider whether dialogue, challenge and reflection are embedded into the organisation's approach. If not, consider how reflection and feedback can be encouraged as part of day-to-day activities.
- Examine whether individuals have an appropriate degree of voice and autonomy.



Team learning

Teams are a key place where social learning and dialogue can occur. Managers have an important role to play in ensuring that their employees also have the relevant support for learning. L&D professionals can:

- Help line managers understand the key role they play in supporting learning, whether this is formal or informal.
- Support managers to prioritise time and resources for formal and informal learning.
- Build support for learning and development into management objectives.
- Encourage line managers to be role models, to demonstrate how learning is part of everyone's role, and share their learnings in their team training or encourage reflection as part of project evaluation.



Individual learning

Learning needs to take place in a supportive environment that allows employees to apply their learning. L&D professionals should engage with employees to:

- Consistently communicate learning opportunities across the organisation.
- Highlight everyone's role in organisational and team learning – how does individual continuous learning benefit individuals, their team, and the wider organisation?
- Consider how opportunities to reflect and share on learning can be used to follow up formal training, or be encouraged as part of individual development.
- Provide different types of learning that appeal to a range of learners and allow employees to build their learning pathway within an organisational framework.

2 Introduction

The learning imperative

Many organisations today operate in a complex and highly competitive environment and rely heavily on access to high-quality skilled labour. Successful firms know that a skilled and developed workforce is key to delivering organisation outcomes. Recruiting, developing and retaining the right skills is an important element of people practice. To remain relevant in a challenging labour market, organisations must think strategically about how they invest in and develop human capital: the knowledge, skills and abilities of the workforce.

Several challenges and trends in the wider world of work are shaping organisations today. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the way businesses operate, leading organisations to change where they work and also consider how they work and the services they offer. Many organisations have had to upskill or reskill staff quickly, owing to redeployment, or to support staff needing to work remotely. The ability to learn, adapt and continuously improve is vital in the face of such a challenge. Digital tools and innovative processes are vital as businesses navigate a complex landscape.

In the skills and learning space the rising role of technology and automation is a key driver of change. The implementation of technology that is augmenting roles, rather than replacing them, means that employees need support and upskilling to make effective use of new technologies.¹ In knowledge-based sectors, such as financial services or pharmaceuticals, upskilling is also often more cost-effective than recruiting, especially given that many businesses struggle to fill specialist skilled roles.² This requires employer investment in training and learning, and recognition that this is imperative for organisations to stay future-fit.

However, fewer than half (47%) of UK employees agree that their job offers good opportunities to develop their skills,³ and case study research into the implementation of new technologies in the workplace suggests that learning provision is often not fit for purpose when it comes to new technology.⁴

It's also not just about formal learning – informal and social learning are increasingly important. Many employees want to choose how and when they learn.⁵ Again, this requires organisational support and resource for learning – whether building time in for learning or facilitation of informal, social and digital learning.

Importantly, businesses also need to consider how they harness individual knowledge and learning to continually improve business processes and employee skills. Research suggests that workplace autonomy and good-quality line management has declined in recent years.⁶ This means employees may not be getting the support they need to use their learning to suggest business improvements, which can have a negative impact on productivity.

While formal and informal learning is key for organisations to adapt, individual learning is not the norm in every organisation, and businesses do not always support this learning and use it to continuously improve the way they do things.

Creating a culture for learning

To support learning at an individual and organisational level, organisations need to create an environment that embeds learning into the way they do things. This is often referred to as learning culture.

Recent research identifies that organisations in which learning has a deep impact on key behaviours and is supported by learning interventions and programmes experience better growth, transformation, productivity and profitability.⁷

Creating a supportive environment for learning is understandably a key concern for L&D professionals. The CIPD has recognised the importance of this wider cultural support for learning in the new [CIPD Profession Map](#), by calling out learning culture in the [L&D specialist knowledge area](#).

However, our [Professionalising Learning and Development](#) report reveals that while 98% of L&D practitioners wish to develop a positive culture for learning, only 36% feel like they've achieved this. It is clear, then, that there may be specific practice barriers that are preventing learning professionals from developing learning cultures.

A major challenge is that culture is a broad term, and a learning culture itself has several definitions and related concepts, such as 'the learning organisation'.⁸ So, while creating a culture for learning sounds compelling, how to do so in practice is less clear.

Uncovering the evidence on learning cultures

In this report, we uncover the evidence on learning cultures to better understand what learning cultures mean in practice, and what L&D professionals may be able to do to develop them (for our literature review methodology, see the [appendix](#)).

First, we explore the practical evidence of learning cultures, drawing on definitions of learning culture, learning climate and the learning organisation. We also consider whether creating a 'learning culture' is a meaningful objective, given the broad nature of the concept.

Next, we highlight the case for embedding learning into organisations, by bringing together the evidence of learning culture on business and employee outcomes.

Finally, we explore the barriers to embedding learning and identify the practical steps that organisations and L&D professionals can take to tackle them, and better support learning in their organisations.

3 What is a learning culture?

There are several definitions of learning culture, including related concepts such as the learning organisation and learning climate. While there's no unifying definition or theory of learning culture, there are several key themes. Overall, we find that:

- A learning culture is one that embeds learning into how things are done at an individual, team and organisational level.
- This requires strong leaders to follow a strategic model for learning and to support employees towards a collectively shared vision and positive change through open dialogue and reflection.
- The factors that underpin a learning culture could be reframed as the 'learning environment', allowing workplaces to tie these factors to tangible practices and behaviours, rather than attempting to undergo dramatic cultural change.
- There is a large theoretical evidence base on learning culture, but there is less robust, controlled research that demonstrates its impact on organisational outcomes in practice.

Organisational culture and climate

Organisational culture is often cited as a key factor in business success. Understanding and influencing culture is important for L&D and the wider people profession, given their expertise in people and work. However, culture is challenging to define⁹ and is often conflated with other terms like organisational climate.

Colloquially seen as 'the way we do things around here',¹⁰ organisational culture is the shared characteristics among people within the same organisation, including values, behavioural norms and perspectives. Organisational climate, on the other hand, is the meaning people attach to features of their work setting¹¹ and the feeling or atmosphere people interpret in an organisation. These are two concepts that are linked and influence each other, which helps to explain why they are often mistakenly used interchangeably. These two concepts are explored in the wider context of culture change in our factsheet.

Learning culture vs learning organisation and learning climate

Our literature review indicates that learning culture is similarly difficult to define. It is often used interchangeably with two other terms: learning climate and the learning organisation. We explore the three concepts below and highlight the key unifying themes that appear across the literature. For an overview of these concepts, see Box 1 on page 6.

Box 1: Learning culture concepts

Concept	Key characteristics and measures
Learning culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embeds learning into the systems, values and resources of an organisation • promotes and rewards learning at an individual, team and organisational level
Learning organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supports the transformation of an organisation by allowing it to develop and adapt • aims to enhance organisational capability
Learning climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how employees perceive workplace practices and processes that relate to their learning

Learning culture

A learning culture is one that embeds learning into how things are done in an organisation. This requires organisational systems, values and resources to be aligned with continual learning, and for individuals to be empowered to fail and learn from mistakes.¹² Three levels of learning culture have been proposed – individual, team and organisational.^{13, 14, 15}

According to one measure widely used in the academic literature, called the Dimensions of Learning Organisations Questionnaire (DLOQ), there are seven ‘dimensions’ that underpin a learning culture (see Box 2 on page 7). However, the same authors also refer to ‘learning organisation’ in relation to this measure.^{16, 17, 18}

The learning organisation

The learning organisation, popularised by Peter Senge, is thought to be an organisation that facilitates a business’s continuous transformation through adaptation and development.¹⁹

The ultimate aim of this is to enhance organisational capability, or the tacit, experiential learning that goes unnoticed in the workplace, rather than individual learning per se.²⁰

According to theory, learning organisations are built on:

- supporting individual learning and allowing this knowledge to shape strategy and process, otherwise learning becomes a knowledge management exercise²¹
- requiring employees throughout businesses to challenge and transform, as a result of learning²²
- teams and the wider organisation continually adapting their thinking and processes,²³ and engaging in ‘double-loop learning’, where reflection proactively influences strategy and process change²⁴
- trust in the organisation and a willingness to learn, improve and change, from the wider organisation and key decision-makers.²⁵

It is clear that learning culture is conceptually similar to the learning organisation. In fact, the terms are often used interchangeably.

Learning climate

A learning climate²⁶ is how employees perceive workplace practices and processes in relation to their learning – and what ‘climate’ this creates for their learning. For example, the behaviour of others, or workplace practices and policies, create the sense that learning is the norm.

Box 2: The DLOQ

The Dimensions of Learning Organisations Questionnaire (DLOQ) includes seven dimensions. The first four dimensions operate at the people level, while the final three relate more to the structural level of an organisation:

- 1 Create continuous, on-the-job learning opportunities, for all members.
- 2 Promote inquiry and dialogue: creating a culture in which feedback and experimentation are encouraged.
- 3 Encourage and reward collaboration and team learning.
- 4 Empower people toward a collective goal, using feedback from members to bridge the gap between the current status and the new vision.
- 5 Connect the organisation to its environment by helping people see the impact of their work on the entire business and linking the work of the organisation to its community.
- 6 Create systems to capture and share learning, ensuring these are integrated with work and are accessible.
- 7 Enable leaders to think strategically about how to use learning to create change and move the organisation in new directions.

Source: Watkins and Marsick (1993, 1996, 1997)^{27, 28, 29}

The factors underpinning learning

There are some key differences between these three concepts. For instance, learning climate is related to employee perceptions of the immediate learning environment, whereas learning culture refers to wider organisational systems and beliefs. The learning organisation refers to an ideal state for organisational transformation.

However, there are clear similarities, namely that they describe how organisations support learning, albeit through different lenses. For clarity, below we highlight the factors that consistently appear across the evidence base that underpin this support for learning.

- **Individual and team-level learning:** supported by a structure that enables this.^{30, 31, 32}
- **Structure:** this structure needs to be underpinned by management relations and leadership style, autonomy and responsibility, and opportunity to develop as key factors in a learning climate.³³
- **Knowledge management and sharing knowledge:** good-quality knowledge management systems are in place and employees at all levels have responsibility for developing and willingly sharing knowledge.^{34, 35, 36}
- **A shared or collective vision:** leaders motivate and support employees towards a clear vision and change.^{37, 38, 39, 40}
- **Shared or institutionalised mental models:** how the individual and organisation look at the world. In the context of the learning organisation, this might be an individual's belief in their role in transformation and learning.⁴¹
- **Leadership:** leadership supports personal development and guides the organisation through change and learning, while encouraging questioning, feedback and risk-taking.⁴²
- **Strategy:** a strategy and action plan in place to support learning.⁴³

An overview of learning culture

According to the literature, an organisation has a learning culture (or could be called a learning organisation) when it embeds learning into its way of doing things, at an individual, team and

organisational level. Strong leadership and organisation-wide buy-in are required to create a collective vision for learning. Learning also needs to be built into organisational strategy and ensure working practices allow for dialogue, reflection and continuous improvement.

Many factors are highlighted in the learning culture literature. Some of them relate directly to learning – such as having time and resources for employees to take up learning opportunities. Others relate to wider workplace factors, like the ability to influence decision-making and how organisations learn from their mistakes. These wider factors are important because they help individual and team learning influence wider organisational transformation and, ultimately, business performance.

Is learning culture the way forward?

There is plenty of literature building the theory behind learning cultures. There is also some emerging evidence linking aspects of learning culture to organisational outcomes, which we discuss in the next section. However, there's little evidence on how to create a learning culture – aligning it with practical steps – and what its ultimate impact is. This means there are unanswered questions about learning culture.

First, organisational culture is undoubtedly important – and adopting a learning culture sounds appealing. But is a learning culture a useful 'end state'⁴⁴ and is it the sole responsibility of L&D practitioners to create it? Culture of any kind is created over time through interactions, values and beliefs and is therefore challenging to shift. And, organisations will have an overarching 'culture', unrelated to learning. How do these influence learning and transformation?

Second, learning culture is a broad concept that requires multiple management practices to be in place – from autonomy to avenues for voice. Which aspects of learning culture are most important and most likely to have an impact on organisation and business outcomes – and whose responsibility is it to influence these processes?

Finally, if a learning organisation's ultimate aim is to drive transformation, is there a danger individual learning and development get forgotten in the process, or that formal training and learning opportunities get neglected? While informal learning is undoubtedly important, organisations still need to invest in skills training where required.

In the new Profession Map, the CIPD calls out creating and understanding the impact of learning culture as specialist knowledge for chartered members and fellows. This reflects the complexity of cultural change and the expertise and influence to embed this. However, L&D professionals at all levels can also take practical steps to support the learning environment in their organisation.

Culture can be a broad and unclear term, making it difficult to target action. Instead of concentrating on creating a new culture for learning, we suggest that L&D professionals at all levels can reframe 'learning culture' as the 'environment' for learning, to tie it to tangible organisational practices and behaviours.

This is especially relevant when getting other parts of the organisation on board. For example, providing guidance on supporting informal learning to line managers is a targeted way that L&D professionals can help create a positive learning environment.

L&D professionals at all levels can also use the factors that underpin 'learning culture' as a useful framework through which to evaluate their learning environment and tackle any issues.

The learning culture evidence base does provide insight for practice. It demonstrates the importance of taking a systems view of organisational learning. For example, it

calls out wider management practices and line managers as key influencers of learning opportunities and outcomes, and provides a clear link between individual learning and wider organisational transformation.

In the next section, we highlight why organisations should pay attention to the wider learning environment, and the benefits of doing so.

4 Making the case for taking a systemic approach to learning

Given that learning culture is a broad concept, addressing it isn't a simple task. However, there are several reasons why businesses should pay attention to it.

Our review suggests that there are correlational links between learning culture and:

- growth, profitability, transformation and productivity
- motivation to transfer learning
- knowledge management and sharing, which in turn can impact on employee skills and organisational performance
- job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover.

Our review highlights that there are several links between aspects of 'learning culture' and positive outcomes, which we discuss below. Given the broad nature of 'learning culture', where possible, we specify which aspects of learning culture each study measures.

Overall, there are relatively few pieces of empirical research in this area, with one study⁴⁵ arguing that there is still much to explore on the interactions between learning culture and employee learning and performance outcomes. Indeed, more research is required on both individuals' learning approaches and contextual influences of the learning process in practice.⁴⁶

Growth, profitability, transformation and productivity

In its study of learning cultures, Emerald Works classes the top-performing 10% of its data sample as high-impact learning cultures (HILCs).⁴⁷ These environments typically see learning having a deep impact on behaviour, in that members' ability to adapt and identify capability risks is improved. This compares with organisations at lower levels of learning maturity, who have in place learning interventions and programmes, but are not business-aligned and thus fail to have more than a surface-level impact. HILCs were found to have greater:

- 1 **growth:** through greater innovation and employee motivation
- 2 **profitability:** through improved performance and external customer satisfaction
3. **transformation:** a greater capacity to solve problems and respond quickly to changing business conditions
- 4 **productivity:** both on-the-job productivity and improved talent management.

Motivation to transfer learning

Several studies in our review highlight that learning culture could enhance training effectiveness through supporting and motivating employees to take part in training.

For example, one study investigated the influence of continuous learning culture on motivation to transfer learning.⁴⁸ Continuous learning culture was defined here as *'an organisation-wide concern, value, belief and expectation that general knowledge acquisition and application is important'*.⁴⁹

The researchers found that when employees felt that the organisation had a continuous learning culture, they were more likely to be motivated to transfer their learning back to the workplace and into their job. However, the researchers also found that supervisor support for learning was more important in learning transfer than an overall culture for learning.

Another study⁵⁰ also found a positive link between learning culture – measured by the DLOQ (which measures learning culture across seven dimensions, see Box 2 on page 7) – and individual motivation to transfer learning into their work. This research, alongside the study above linking learning to motivation, supports the importance of investing in learning to increase performance through motivating employees to use their acquired knowledge.

Increased knowledge management and sharing

Research has also indicated that knowledge management and knowledge-sharing are strongly correlated with learning culture. For example, one study⁵¹ found a link between knowledge management, learning culture and human capital (employees' collective skills and knowledge). Organisations that had a strong culture for learning had better knowledge management practices, such as training employees to transfer skills. This, in turn, was linked to stronger human capital and improved organisational performance.

Similarly, another study⁵² found a significant direct relationship between learning culture and knowledge-sharing behaviours.

These findings imply that adopting a learning culture supports knowledge management and transfer, which can enhance organisational performance.

Greater job satisfaction, organisational commitment and reduced turnover intention

An organisation that prioritises and supports learning can help create a fulfilling and satisfying environment for employees. Indeed, one previously mentioned study⁵³ found the presence of a learning culture to be positively associated with job satisfaction. In turn, this could increase organisational commitment.

One study⁵⁴ found just this through exploring the joint impact of learning culture and management–employee social and psychological support (known as leader–member exchange) on employee turnover intention. The DLOQ was used as a theoretical base for the study (see Box 2 on page 7).

The researchers found a link between a positive learning culture, strong leader–member exchange and organisational commitment. In contrast, these two factors are negatively associated with turnover intentions. We can infer here that when an organisational culture allows employees to learn on a continual basis, while being supported by line managers, they show greater commitment towards their business, which in turn reduces their intention to leave.

Given the outcomes discussed above, it's important to consider what professionals and the organisations in which they work can do to support learning, and the organisation's ability to adapt and improve based on that learning.

In the following sections, we consider the barriers that stand in the way of learning and then explore the practical decisions L&D professionals can make to overcome such barriers and support learning at each level of the business, including the importance of assessing the current state of the learning environment in organisations.

5 Barriers to embedding learning

From evidence we know there are several barriers to embedding and promoting learning in an organisation which must be actively considered by L&D professionals:

Formalising learning and culture is difficult

As the term ‘learning culture’ has multiple potential meanings, there’s a danger that practitioners focus on only a small part of organisational learning when they seek to create a learning culture. Research suggests that when individuals are asked if an organisation has a learning culture, they often say yes. But, those same organisations are far more likely to be prioritising formal training and knowledge management activities than reflective, transformation activities.⁵⁵

In addition, there can be confusion about what we mean by training and learning, and where the responsibility for them lies.⁵⁶ Creating a supportive learning environment needs to consider formal training opportunities available – but tacit, informal learning and dialogue is also important.

Mixed effects on employee learning

Attempts to structure informal learning could ultimately backfire if employees feel like they lack agency in their own learning and development, especially if they are already prioritising their own development. If creating a ‘culture for learning’ is interpreted as steering individuals to a fixed way of learning with little flexibility, this may not lead to better learning outcomes.⁵⁷ Systems thinking, collaborative inquiry and continuous improvement are also important.

One study⁵⁸ explored these ideas by looking at leadership style and its relationship with learning culture (once again, the DLOQ was used as a measure of learning culture – see Box 2 on page 7).

Overall, learning culture was shown to have a positive impact on learning outcomes. However, leadership was also found to be an important factor. For example, when leaders took a laissez-faire approach, making few decisions and allowing their teams to have influence in these, learning culture did not have a positive impact on learning. We can see how a culture for learning might clash with this leadership approach, as laissez-faire leadership generally allows employees to take responsibility for their own learning, while a learning culture may limit this autonomy. It is suggested, therefore, that a more individualised approach, where employees’ individual learning needs are considered, may yield greater benefits.

Organisations are complex

Organisational processes and bureaucracy can often restrict information-sharing, social learning and collaboration, which act to embed learning into the way organisations function. In addition, ‘micro cultures’ within functions and location mean that learning attitudes and practices vary across organisations. Creating a consistent vision for learning in siloed or dispersed organisations is likely to be challenging.⁵⁹

Lack of support from senior leaders and line managers

Senior leadership buy-in is key, so its absence can be a significant barrier. For example, 76% of L&D professionals in our *Professionalising Learning and Development* report felt that learning was not seen as a management priority. In addition, 64% said that management sees learning as a cost centre rather than an investment. Therefore, spending time and effort addressing the wider system for learning could be challenging.

Line managers may be hesitant to prioritise learning in their team – especially if learning is perceived to take employees away from their ‘day job’. However, some research suggests that manager support may be a more important driver of learning outcomes than organisational-level culture for learning,⁶⁰ highlighting the importance of line manager buy-in.

6 How can organisations embed learning in their workplace?

As we’ve discussed in previous sections, a ‘learning culture’ is underpinned by many practices, behaviours and organisational norms, which will vary by context. For this reason, it’s not possible to define a single programme or intervention that can embed learning into the way businesses do things, or that enables an organisation to continually adapt and transform based on learning.

Creating an organisation that supports learning is not the sole responsibility of L&D professionals. Building a shared understanding that ‘learning is how things are done around here’ requires organisation-wide vision, buy-in and action. However, L&D professionals are instrumental in creating this vision.

The question is therefore: what can L&D professionals and the wider organisation do to support learning and embed it in organisational systems? We explore this further below by exploring how L&D professionals can:

- evaluate their current learning environment
- take practical steps to ensure learning is supported at every level of the organisation.

Evaluating the current learning environment

Before taking action, it’s important to understand the current learning environment in your organisation.

Indeed, organisations may have to continually review their learning systems, particularly in the face of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when large sections of the workforce are connecting remotely, requiring a focus on digital and social learning.

There may be a temptation to use formal training participation as a ‘measure’ of learning culture or learning environment, but this is only one part of the story. Organisations need to use innovative and robust methods to evaluate their learning environment, especially harder-to-measure and intangible learning like social and informal learning.

Insights from the following data may be helpful:

- Existing organisational data – such as employee engagement or organisational culture surveys – may contain items relating to influence, decision-making and learning from mistakes that indicate whether wider organisational systems are set up to connect individual and organisational learning.
- Examine uptake of learning opportunities, by team and level and type. This could include formal training as well as data on self-directed learning platforms. What kind of learning is being undertaken, and by whom?
- Focus groups and other forms of qualitative employee feedback data can help to understand how and when people learn, and what the barriers to their learning are.
- Learning transfer is an important indicator of the wider organisation’s support for learning. If employees aren’t able to use what they’ve learned in formal training and apply it back to their jobs, this can indicate a lack of manager support for learning.

- Use existing measures of ‘learning culture’, such as the DLOQ (see Box 2 on page 7), that cover all aspects of organisational learning, and adapt this to the specific organisational context.

Supporting learning at all levels of the organisation

There are several levels of learning in an organisation: individual, team and organisational.⁶¹ Employees may interpret the phrase ‘learning culture’ as related to their individual development or availability of formal training.⁶² Managers may interpret this as encouraging knowledge-sharing in their team. Senior leaders may interpret it as building learning into their organisation values.⁶³ None of these interpretations is incorrect, but without a shared vision of how these threads connect, there will be a lack of alignment across the business.

L&D professionals need to work with all levels of the business to create a shared understanding of the current environment for learning. They should have clear sight of:

- what ‘learning’ means in their organisation
- what the current environment for learning is like; what support is given for learning now, and how it is perceived
- why learning is important to their organisation and its strategic objectives
- the barriers that hinder learning in their organisation
- the enablers of formal and informal learning in their organisation.

Below, we provide recommendations for L&D professionals to support each level of organisational learning and bring them together to support individual and organisational learning.



Organisational learning

Businesses need structures and systems in place to support learning, as well as a shared vision for learning and transformation. Professional courage and influencing skills are required to ensure learning is part of organisational strategy, especially in businesses where learning is seen as a ‘nice to do’, but not essential. Our research suggests⁶⁴ that L&D teams that possess professional courage are more likely to bring stakeholders together to support learning.

L&D professionals should:

- Work with leaders to define a vision for learning and transformation, clearly linked to organisational objectives.
- Support leaders to clearly communicate a vision for learning and transformation.
- Evaluate current systems for knowledge management and learning: are they accessible across multiple devices, fit for purpose and set up for social and informal learning? We explored digital learning further in our report *The Future of Technology and Learning*.
- Consider whether there are appropriate channels in place to allow individual and team learning and reflection to feed into organisational decision-making. If not, consider how a feedback loop can be implemented.
- Consider whether dialogue, challenge and reflection are embedded into the organisation’s approach. If not, consider how reflection and feedback can be encouraged as part of day-to-day activities.
- Examine whether individuals have an appropriate degree of voice and autonomy. While it isn’t expected that each employee will have a deciding say in every organisational decision, not allowing employees a feedback loop, or the ability to shape their role and responsibilities at all, means that individual-level learning may not transfer across the organisation.



Team learning

Teams are a key place where social learning and dialogue can occur. Managers have a key role to play in ensuring that their employees also have the relevant support for learning. Indeed, our review found evidence that suggests managers play a pivotal role and can be more influential for individual learning than overall ‘learning culture’.

Managers need to deliver on operational objectives – allowing individuals to take time out of their role to attend training or other forms of development is not often top priority. However, managers stand to benefit by prioritising learning. Our [diversity management research](#) highlights that the most effective way to get managers ‘on board’ with strategic people objectives is to give them agency in how they meet those objectives.

L&D professionals can:

- Develop managers as ‘change agents’ in learning.⁶⁵
- Embed support for learning in leadership and management development programmes.
- Support managers to prioritise time and resource for learning.
- Build support for learning and development into management objectives.
- Help line managers understand the key role they can play in supporting learning, whether this is formal or informal.
- Encourage line managers to be role models, to demonstrate how learning is part of everyone’s role, and share their own learnings with team training or encourage reflection as part of project evaluation.



Individual learning

Learning needs to take place in a supportive environment that allows employees to apply their learning. Many other organisational practices will influence how and when people apply learning. How can organisations connect individual learning to organisational learning?

L&D professionals must engage with employees to:

- Consistently communicate learning opportunities across the organisation.
- Highlight everyone’s role in organisational and team learning – how does individual continuous learning benefit individuals, their team and the wider organisation?
- Consider how opportunities to reflect and share on learning can be used to follow up formal training, or be encouraged as part of individual development.
- Provide different types of learning that appeal to a range of learners and allow employees to build their own learning pathway within an organisational framework.

7 Conclusion

This report brings together the evidence on learning culture – a broad concept commonly used in practice to describe the ideal set-up for organisational learning. We suggest that reframing ‘learning culture’ as the ‘learning environment’ would provide a more practical and easily definable concept that learning professionals at all levels can implement, while still being an important element of learning culture. Learning culture can be more greatly influenced by professionals in leadership positions who have the ability to mould the more general culture within the organisation. This is a helpful lens through which to evaluate support for learning and learning processes in organisations.

Whether we use the term ‘learning culture’ or not, organisations must pay attention to how they support learning at all levels. Individual, team and organisational learning must be more closely aligned to one another for L&D to have the most impact.

Senior leaders and line managers play key enabling and delivering roles. L&D professionals and others responsible for delivering learning strategies should work with these groups to build a collective vision for learning, as well as design and curate meaningful learning opportunities for employees. This is key if organisations are to continue to be successful in the changing world of work, where businesses must be able to respond to sudden change in challenging times.

8 Appendix

Research methodology

This report answers three questions:

- 1 What is a learning culture and what does it look like in practice?
- 2 Why should businesses take a systemic approach to learning?
- 3 How can organisations, and L&D professionals within them, embed learning in their workplace?

Specifically, we reviewed and reported on articles that:

- address or develop the meaning of learning culture, and/or two similar concepts, learning climate and the learning organisation
- highlight the empirical outcomes of developing an environment for learning at an individual, team or organisational level
- outline behaviours that can help develop an effective learning culture across all levels of the organisational hierarchy.

Inclusion criteria

To be included in the review, articles had to:

- relate to learning in a workplace setting (rather than in education or other wider societal settings)
- be available in the English language
- be peer-reviewed.

Search

As we proceeded with the search, it became apparent that two terms, learning climate and the learning organisation, were often used interchangeably with learning culture. This overlap meant that we had to consider these two concepts throughout the search.

To ensure results were relevant, we used a broad combination of search terms alongside learning terms (learning culture, learning climate, learning organisation), such as ‘organisation’ and ‘workplace’. The initial search suggested different types of learning, such as e-learning and collaborative learning, might be relevant, so these were included in the search terms.

Two databases (Ebsco and ABI/Inform) were searched in August 2019, and again in November 2019 to identify any new articles. In addition, we conducted a manual search of key paper reference lists to ensure articles were not missed.

Selection

Once duplicate papers were removed from search results, articles were reviewed using their title and abstract to remove obviously irrelevant papers.

Each remaining article was reviewed using the full text, for relevance to the research question. Irrelevant papers, papers without full-text availability, or papers that failed to meet the inclusion criteria were removed.

A manual search of references and citing literature for key papers was also conducted to ensure key papers were not missed.

A total of 52 articles were included in the final review, including those from manual search.

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