

## How to Create a Learning Culture and Why You Need One

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In the fast-paced and ever-changing AEC industry, developing a learning culture within your company is essential. Organizational culture is generally understood as a company's beliefs, values, and attitudes, and how they influence the behavior of employees. A learning culture signals that you support your employee's need for professional development (a non-negotiable for Millennials and GenZ) and that you embrace creativity, innovation, and an expectation that the future holds bigger and better things. Additionally, a learning culture motivates people, creates better business results, and is a great recruitment and retention tool.

A perfect example of how a learning culture can transform an organization is shared by Brent Darnell, who offers an [online leadership development program](#) via CMAA:

We took all 235 folks of a midsized contractor through leadership and personal development training, and it changed their entire culture from an older, stuffy, stodgy culture to one that was driven by relationships. And even better – this shift in culture led them to win a multimillion-dollar project. They implemented their newly acquired emotional intelligence concepts on a \$45 million project that they were chasing. They were third on price, so they went into the presentation focusing on connecting with the selection committee. I think they thought, "Since we're not going to get this project anyway, let's do this Brent Darnell crap." They focused on connections and marrying the passions of the client with their passion



for building – and they were awarded the project! Since then, they have created such close connections with the company that they have been awarded an additional \$35 million worth of work, without bidding. That shift in culture is adding to their bottom line.

Although Brent's example included all employees in the company, and a prescriptive learning process, you can be equally effective with something small and simple as well. For example, a small engineering firm in South Carolina paid their employees overtime to attend monthly zoning meetings, so that they would better understand how projects got approved or disapproved.

Here is a list of ways you can get started developing a learning culture within your organization, with minimal effort and low cost.

## Cost-effective methods for fostering a learning culture:

- » Create a page on your internal website that aggregates industry-specific podcasts that can be searched by topic.
- » Have employees in the field film and upload videos of atypical situations and explain the circumstances (upload to a private YouTube channel and ensure keywords are included in the text description so that people can search for topics).
- » Provide tuition reimbursement so employees can advance their skills via your local community college or university.
- » Provide annual allowances for professional association membership, to attend industry events, or to simply take a one-off course they feel will enhance their knowledge and capabilities.
- » Establish a library of publications – magazines or books on industry-specific topics, or topics that will affect your industry (such as digitization or sustainability).
- » Create peer-to-peer learning groups in which employees meet regularly to share challenges and best practices/solutions.
- » Allow for “job visitations” in which an employee shadows another – from a different department – for a day or two, to learn more about their work and their department.
- » Conduct periodic “town hall meetings” in which employees are allowed to ask questions of leaders or specific subject matter experts to learn more about the business (these can be done virtually as well).

Many of the options above can be integrated into the regular flow of work; when that is not possible, however, the most important method to enable learning is to allow employees the time to learn. Be purposeful in allowing employees an hour or two per week to pursue learning that will help them to

understand or do their jobs better.

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## How to develop a culture of learning

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A learning culture must be a “top down” initiative, which means you have to walk the talk. Ask employees what they are learning and how they are applying it on the job. Use an internal newsletter or announcement to congratulate employees who have attended conferences or achieved certificates or degrees. Constantly remind employees of the time you expect them to devote to learning and the budget they have available to them (if that is the case).

At the managerial level, every manager should have a “learning conversation” at least once a year, with each employee. What are you interested in learning? How can I support you in that? These conversations are generally done at the same time as performance reviews, but they don’t have to be coupled together.

Additionally, every employee should have an individual development plan (IDP), developed in conjunction with their manager, which sets learning goals for the coming months. One technique, suggested by McKinsey and Company, is a 3x3x3 plan. Each employee should identify three things they’d like to learn in the next three months and identify three people who can help them achieve their goals. Identifying people within the organization who can assist in learning reinforces the culture of learning.

A learning culture empowers your employees to stretch themselves, which in turn enables your organization to adapt swiftly to (or better yet – to anticipate) marketplace changes, making it more resilient and competitive. You’ll also find that you become an employer of choice as more and more employees expect professional development to be part of the “package” they receive from your organization.



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

Brent Darnell is the owner and president of [Brent Darnell International](#) and a mechanical engineer and a graduate of Georgia Tech. He is a leading authority on emotional intelligence and a pioneer in its use in the construction industry to improve social competence and leadership skill among managers and executives. He is an adjunct professor at Auburn and Penn State universities and author of the well-received book, *The People-Profit Connection* and the Tough Guy series. His programs, books, and online courses, including [CMAA's Leadership Library](#), are helping to transform the industry.

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