

Professional Development Through Peer Learning

Written by: Dr. Nanette Miner, Leadership Development and Workplace-Learning Strategy Consultant, The Training Doctor

A relatively new approach to professional development is peer learning. It is exactly as it sounds – coworkers within your company work in small groups, on a regular basis, to share best practices, discuss frustrations (and solutions), and develop their skills in aggregate.

Here are a few ways that you can orchestrate peer learning in your own organization.

Best Practices Groups

Today's world of work is often a moving target. Even standard operating procedures aren't so standard anymore. A best practices group meets on a weekly or biweekly basis to share what they've learned and/or to offer solutions to one another. The focus can be short term or long term; for instance, one of our clients implemented a new software system in their customer service department and with everyone working remotely, it wasn't as easy as in the past to simply "ask your neighbor" if they were having the same hiccup. This organization utilized a best practices "lunch and learn" every Friday for the first nine months after implementation so that everyone in the department could help one another. The peer group reduced frustrations and built camaraderie, and helped the organization as a whole by eliminating one individual calling the help desk for themselves and keeping the answer to themselves.



Leading up to the meetings the department maintained a Slack channel with their questions so that they didn't forget to ask during the weekly meeting (peers could also "up vote" topics that they were struggling with as well), and during the meeting one person acted as recording secretary so that over the course of the nine months they built a robust Frequently Asked Questions repository.

Business Book Club

While the previous example demonstrates how peers can help one another learn to do something, a business book club can uplevel the thinking and interpersonal skills in your organization. At the start of the year, the leader (who

may be the CEO or a department manager) chooses a book for everyone in the organization to read simultaneously.

The assignment is one chapter per month and at the end of the month the coworkers hold a discussion group to review their thoughts and how the concepts play out in their own organization (or lives), or how they can integrate what they learned from the book into their company.

Note: The person who choose the book must show up to the discussion. They must walk the talk.

A particularly adept discussion leader will bring examples from within the organization and relate them to the chapter being discussed. For instance a discussion of critical analysis might include the story of your company spending thousands of hours pulling together an RFP response that failed to win. The discussion might include questions such as,


- » Were we truly capable of doing the work? Did we take enough time to analyze the RFP?
- » Was this a “stretch” that was worthwhile to take (e.g. were we ultimately going to learn something if we failed)?
- » Are we capable of pursuing this kind of project in the future? What capabilities are we missing?

This approach is useful for changing culture as well due to the consistent focus on and discussion of one topic/skill throughout the year. Depending on what you want to build as an organization you may choose a book about better communication (Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone), teaming (The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups), or business acumen (The Data Detective: Ten Easy Rules to Make Sense of Statistics).

Online Learning

This approach introduces a bit of professional training into the peer discussion. There are many, many economical options for online learning these days – from LinkedIn Learning to Coursera to the offerings of your industry/professional group. This approach to learning works the same as the book club except the source of learning and discussion is an online course.

Each month your employees work their way, independently, through an assigned course online and then come together to discuss it. One of our clients purposefully chose 12 topics from LinkedIn Learning’s vast library of offerings. While each month’s topic was different, there was a consistent theme of “leadership.” This organization also sought to develop employee’s organizational and communication skills by assigning two members of the group to lead the discussion each month.

Having spent over 30 years in professional training and development, I believe that peer learning is the best solution to a lot of objections I hear about offering professional development – such as the cost and time commitment required. Each of the suggestions above are economical and easily organized. The key to success lies in consistency – when your employees hear the same message month after month and have a voice in what that looks like in the organization, they are more likely to adopt what they are learning. 



About the Author

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.

She has written articles for *Chief Learning Office magazine*, *Forbes*, and *MBA World* and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as *Inc. Radio* and *America's Workforce Radio*.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is *Future-Proofing Your Organization*.

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