



Creating a learning and development culture:

Guidelines for investing in your future workforce



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Introduction

Human Resources (HR) leaders are tasked with what is arguably the most critical task at any organization: Acquiring, developing, and retaining the talent that will create a competitive edge for their organizations—now and in the future. A comprehensive learning and development investment strategy creates the road map for accomplishing these goals, and HR talent leaders clearly make enormous investments in this strategy. The global market size for training and development topped 370.3 billion U.S. dollars in 2019 with an average spend of about \$1,280/per employee (Statista Search Department, 2023).

Even though organizations understand the importance of creating learning and development cultures, funds are limited, and HR professionals must balance investments between executives, high potentials, and emerging leaders (Brassie et al., 2019). Annual budgets must be justified. And unfortunately, the most tangible way to measure the investment and ROI of building a learning culture focuses on the costs of the material offerings: The skills-based training courses, leadership development programs, and other investments that can be measured and counted. Is this focus on the material offerings an effective way to build learning cultures? We will argue that it is not—and in fact, it is the least important component.

The research clearly demonstrates that investing in a learning and development culture has a significant positive impact on employee retention, engagement and purpose. Additionally, our research confirms that these investments must go well beyond the material offerings and programs for training and leadership development. Investments must be made to nurture individual employees' motivation to learn and develop. Managers and the organization itself must actively support that desire for growth. All leaders have responsibility for creating a learning and development culture - and doing so creates tangible results.

Through this research, we have identified a five factor model that provides a new measure for assessing an organization's learning and development culture. Let's begin by reviewing the findings and then dive into greater detail about the research methodology, detailed findings, and tips for taking action.



Experiencing leadership excellence requires a culture of intentional cognition, coaching and learning, as well as a unified organizational and stakeholder effort to support, develop, and nurture leaders in their journey to successfully achieve their goals and continue to be competent and effective leaders for the organization.

(Harris, 2019)



The Learning Culture Index (LCI) five-factor model

Truist Leadership Institute's in-house research team conducted research to understand the role of critical factors in a learning and development culture:

- Employee career satisfaction
- Employee motivation for growth
- Managerial learning and development support
- Organizational learning and development material offerings
- Organizational learning and development culture, policies, and norms



The five-factor model versus HR outcomes

We chose to examine these five factors in connection with three critical HR outcomes that are present in learning and development cultures as well as positively connected to retention (Pareek et al., 2019), innovation (Kwon & Tim, 2020), and strategy enablement (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Our analyses focused on determining which of these five factors mattered to these three HR outcomes - and by how much.



Intent to stay



Engagement



Purpose



Learning and development investments should be targeted towards employees who are likely to take the initiative to learn and grow.

These breakthrough results are likely to startle the most seasoned HR executives. Our data proves it could be time to reconsider resource allocation.

A learning and development culture has significant impact on employee engagement, retention, and purpose – and pays dividends. Employee commitment to growth, employee satisfaction, managerial support, and organizational support increased these outcomes by 10% to 24%. Engaged employees arrive with energy and willingness to put in discretionary effort. This enthusiasm creates stronger productivity, support for fellow employees, and profits.

Organizations must walk the talk with policies and norms. While a majority of employees confirmed their organizations supported learning and development, roughly half indicated a lack of time available for such opportunities. This suggests organizations have a focus on productivity but learning and development are expected to occur on the employees' own time.

Manager gaps must be addressed in a learning and development culture. Employees have clear annual goals, but many lack a development plan to achieve them. This includes a lack of stretch assignments, coaching, mentorship, and encouragement of a growth mindset to instill a sense of agency over their careers. Managers have opportunities to increase promising direct report visibility by decision-makers in the organization.

Only 39% of participants gave their organizations top ratings on the factors that create a learning culture. Engagement, purpose, and intent to stay scores are significantly higher when organizations score well on all learning culture factors. These findings led to the development of a Learning Culture Index that organizations may use to assess their performance.

Employees must own their development.

No resource, manager support, or organizational support will overcome a lack of employee motivation for career growth. Employees' commitment to growth and desire to learn are the foundation of a learning and development culture. Most employees indicated a strong interest in their growth AND are content to remain in their current role. In other words, employees want to be better at what they do and remain in the jobs or careers they have.

Material offerings are the least important component of a learning and development culture.

Material offerings - by themselves - do not create a clear return on investment, offer diminishing returns, and have an insignificant impact on engagement, intent to stay, and purpose. Many employees are unaware these offerings exist, and of those who are aware of these offerings, only a limited subset leverage them. Of the employees who are aware of and leverage these offerings, only a fraction believe they are effective.

In-person leadership development had the highest effectiveness rating for technical and leadership skills.

Yet, even when employees know these programs are offered, a limited number engage for a variety of reasons. However, developing leadership fundamentals benefits all employees, particularly first-time leaders.

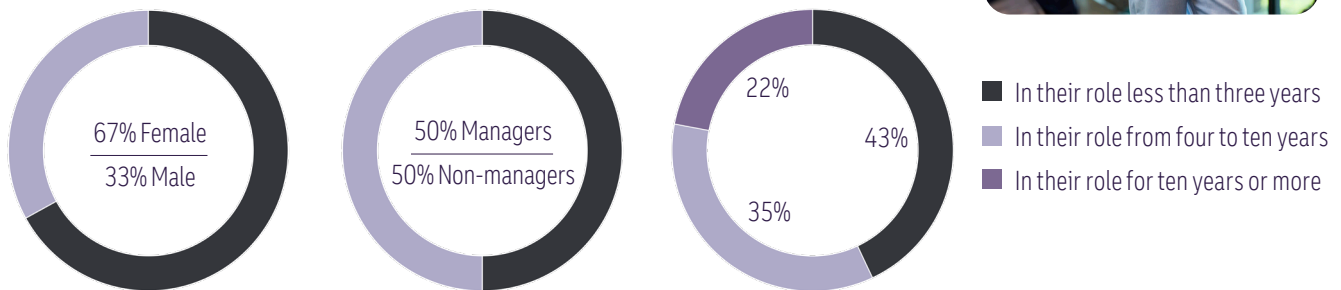


A culture of learning and development is proven to have tangible impact on retention, engagement, and purpose.

Research methodology

Truist Leadership Institute analyzed data from our national panel of 1,200 participants:

Truist Leadership Institute utilized our national panel of employees working at organizations with 2,000+ employees; 69% came from organizations with more than 5,000 employees. Respondents represented a mix of industries (e.g., healthcare, retail, manufacturing, and transportation) and functions (e.g., operations, marketing, information technology, and supply chain management).



Research participants completed an online questionnaire comprised of seven question categories:

- 1 — Current job roles and career growth (e.g., promotions, level of responsibility)
- 2 — Individual motivation for career growth
- 3 — Individual commitment to development
- 4 — Perceptions of managerial support for growth and development
- 5 — Organizational support for growth and development
- 6 — Availability of seven online and in-person training and leadership development offerings, level of participation, and the effectiveness of each offering
- 7 — Demographic information

We also asked participants to provide ratings for three HR outcomes, including:

- **Employee Engagement:** An employee's energy and immersion in their job roles
- **Intent to Stay:** An employee's likelihood to remain with their organization over the next 12 months
- **Purpose:** An employee's ability to pursue their organization's purpose in their day-to-day role

Armed with information from nearly 1,200 respondents, we asked two critical questions:

- 1 — What are employees' perceptions of their organization's learning cultures?
- 2 — Do employee's perceptions of organizational learning cultures have an impact on any of the three HR outcomes? If so, which ones—and how much do they matter?



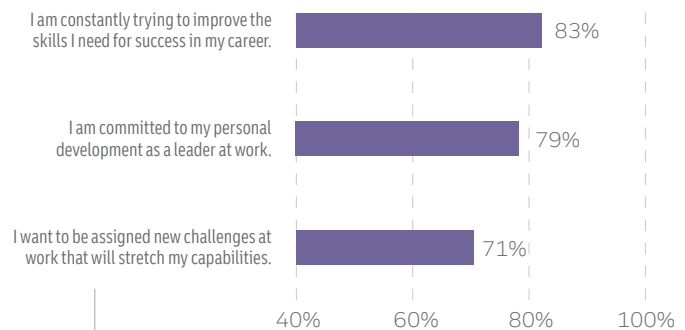
Growth commitment and career satisfaction

Do employees feel committed to their own growth? Absolutely. Are they satisfied with the current state of their careers? Mostly—but it depends. Research participants rated their agreement (using a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) on eight questions that assessed their commitment to growth and current career satisfaction (see Charts 1 and 2). Insights include:

- **Over three-quarters** of participants are highly committed to growth: Participants seek to improve their skills, are committed to their personal development as leaders, and are eager for challenging new assignments that stretch their capabilities.
- **About two-thirds** of participants are satisfied with their career progression, including success achieved, progress toward career goals, and progress toward income goals.
- **About half** of participants would be willing to stay at their present level in their companies—but only if they were continuously challenged.
- **The remaining half** do not want to remain where they are. Managers will need to clarify career pathways and proactively work with these motivated employees.

1. Employees' Growth Commitment

(% Strongly Agree/Agree)



2. Employees' Current Career Satisfaction

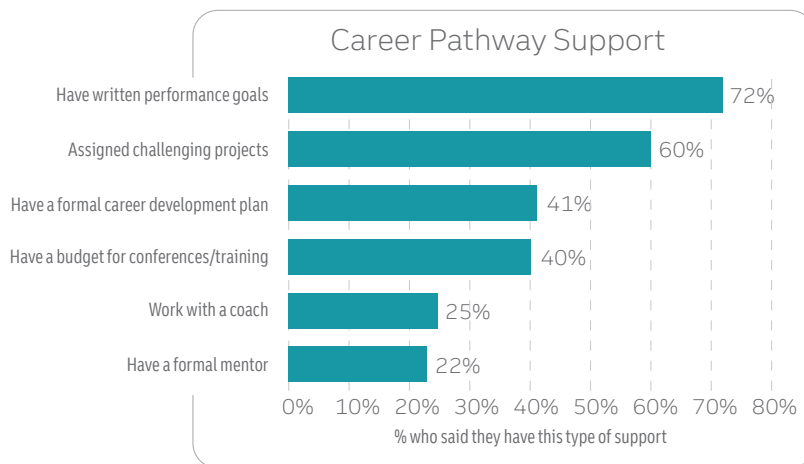
(% Strongly Agree/Agree)





The material offerings: career pathways and the Learning and Development Toolkit

Given that employees are highly committed to their own growth and career development, do they receive the material offerings that help them achieve their goals? We looked at the concept of material offerings in two ways: By asking whether employees have concrete career plans in place with the right support; and the availability of an effective toolkit of learning and development opportunities offered at their organizations.

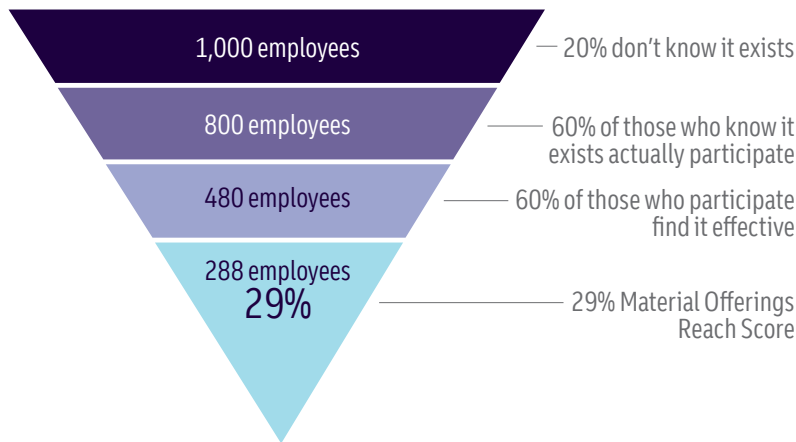


Career Pathways: Insights

- **72%** of respondents have written performance goals. They know what goals they must achieve during the year that will impact their annual performance evaluations. However, only 41% have a formal career development plan. Employees know how they are performing today—but not where they are going in the future.
- **71%** of participants want to be given stretch assignments that help them develop and grow but only about 60% have received those assignments.
- **Only about a quarter** of participants have mentors or coaches to help them advance their careers.



Illustrative Example: Diminishing Returns for Material Offerings



L&D Toolkit: Insights

To understand the availability and effectiveness of learning and development offerings, participants evaluated a list of seven potential offerings on four dimensions. They indicated:

- if they knew the offering existed
- if they participated in that offering
- how effective the programs were in improving technical skills and/or leadership skills

We found a law of diminishing returns for investments in the L&D Toolkit.

- **About 20%** of participants simply did not know whether a given learning and development offering existed.
- Even when employees knew that training and development opportunities were available, participation rates varied from **82%** (workshops/computer-based training for technical skills) to **55%** (job rotations).
- The effectiveness of the programs in improving either technical skills or leadership development skills varied from **59%** to **81%**. Note that in-person leadership development programs had the highest effectiveness scores for both technical and leadership skills.

The pyramid graphic illustrates law of diminishing returns. In this hypothetical example for an organization with 1,000 employees, the reach for the offering is only **29%**: Only 288 employees actually are aware, participate, and find the offering effective. The ROI of time and money spent on this offering could be greatly improved.

Table 1 presents the results for seven potential learning and development offerings evaluated by the participants. It includes a Reach Score for each of the seven L&D offerings, presented in column F.

| Table 1. Participation and effectiveness of seven essential development offerings | % Indicate Opportunity is Available (A) | % Don't Know if Available (B) | % Participated (C) | % Agree Effective for Developing Technical Skills (D) | % Agree Effective for Developing Leadership Skills (E) | Material Offerings Reach Score (per 1,000 employees) (F) |
|---|---|-------------------------------|--------------------|---|--|--|
| Workshops/Computer-Based Training-Managerial Skills | 63% | 13% | 72% | 76% | 72% | 34% |
| Workshops/Computer-Based Training-Technical Skills | 65% | 12% | 82% | 75% | 59% | 36% |
| Tuition Reimbursement-Educational Courses | 58% | 17% | 51% | 78% | 68% | 22% |
| Workshops/Computer-Based Training-Leadership Development Programs | 57% | 17% | 71% | 74% | 72% | 30% |
| In-Person Leadership Development Programs | 49% | 20% | 68% | 81% | 76% | 26% |
| Workshops/Computer-Based Training-Career Planning | 44% | 20% | 67% | 76% | 68% | 21% |
| Job Rotations into Different Divisions | 41% | 19% | 55% | 78% | 74% | 17% |

Less than half of employees indicate available



Several insights emerge from this table:

- Three programs are available to less than half of employees:
 - Career planning workshops or computer-based training
 - Job rotations into different divisions
 - In-person leadership development

We noted earlier that employees need and want career development plans that include stretch assignments and job rotations—but the Reach Score is very low for these offerings.

- In-person leadership development programs rank as the most effective for developing both technical and leadership skills among the seven L&D offerings—and yet the Reach Score is only 29%.

Managerial and Organizational Support

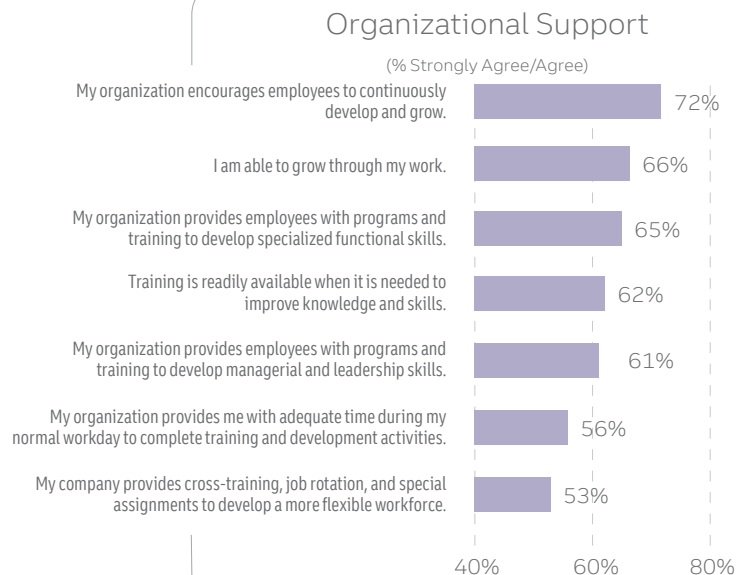
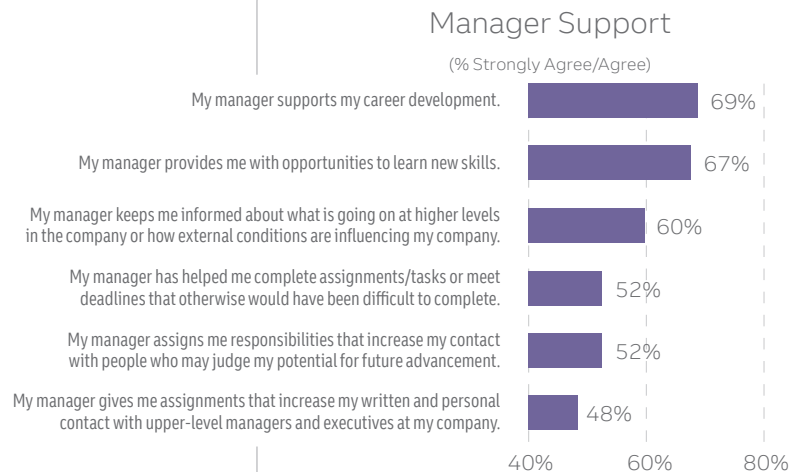
Employees need managers who offer opportunities to grow and develop, increase their visibility in the organization, and discuss the organization's strategy and future plans.

Insights include:

- **About two-thirds** of participants indicated that their managers provide opportunities to learn new skills—but about a third do not have that support.
- **Only 60%** of managers keep their employees informed about what's happening at the company.
- **Only about half** of managers offer to help complete tasks and meet deadlines; the remainder are hands-off.
- Managers have opportunities to raise the visibility of their direct reports with influential leaders. **Only about half** do so.

Almost all organizations will be philosophically (and even economically) committed to the growth and development of their workforce. However, that philosophical commitment may not play out in reality, and that's exactly the story told by our research participants.

- While **72%** of employees say their organization encourages them to learn and grow, only 66% indicate they can grow through work and just above 60% say what they need is provided.
- Note that **only half** of participants indicated their organization provides them with adequate time to complete training and development activities.
- Finally, **only about half** of participants get the on-the-job training that can be so vital in developing a future-forward talent pool.



Measuring the ROI: What matters most?

Factors and Outcomes

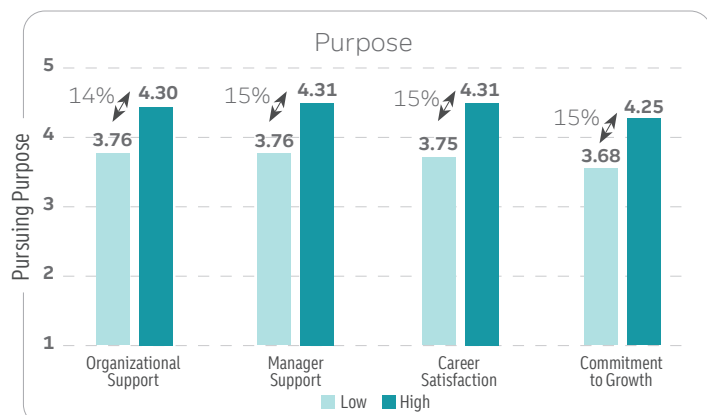
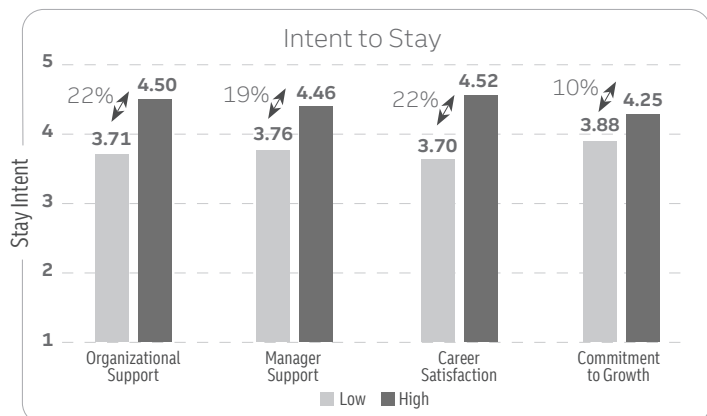
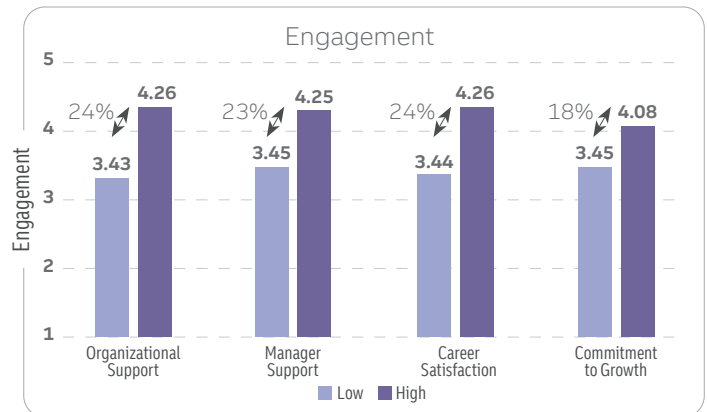
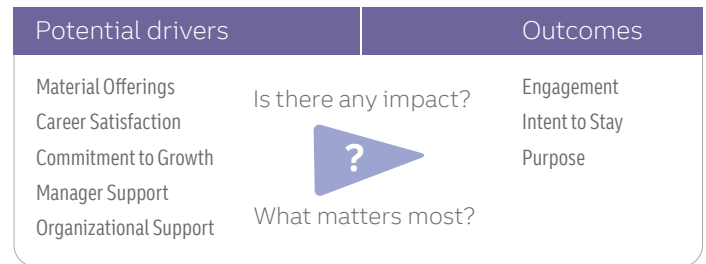
We now turn to looking at what matters most for the three HR outcomes: employee engagement, intent to stay, and purpose. We analyzed the importance of each of the five factors described in the first section of this paper to each of the three ROI outcome metrics.

The results may surprise you. You may be thinking that the material offerings (a career development plan and the training toolkit) mattered most. After all, that's the easiest thing to quantify and measure. However, material offerings had no significant impact on any of the three HR outcomes. Instead, employees' commitment to growth, career satisfaction, managerial support, and organizational support mattered far more. Organizations cannot simply offer training and development programs and hope they will be used. Tools and programs are not sufficient to create a true learning and development culture. Employees must want to grow and learn, and managers and organizations must support that desire to grow and learn. Let's look at the results for each of the three outcomes.

The Impact of Four Factors

Our analyses indicated that each of the remaining four factors (leaving out material offerings) had a significant impact on all three outcomes. For example, consider the graph for engagement. Participants who experienced low organizational support for growth and development gave 24% lower engagement ratings than those with high support. Similarly, participants who experienced low manager support for growth and development gave 23% lower ratings for engagement than those who experienced high support.

Organizations cannot simply offer training and development programs and hope they will be used.





Why does this matter to HR leaders? The charts clarify four conclusions:

- 1 — Investments in the material offerings do not—by themselves—create a clear ROI. Our analyses indicate they have a small and insignificant impact on engagement, intent to stay, and purpose.
- 2 — Employees' own commitment to growth and their desire to move beyond their current roles is the foundation for everything else. Encouraging a growth mindset and participation in the material offerings and taking the time to clarify career pathways will help employees believe that they have agency and choice in designing their futures.
- 3 — Both the direct support of managers and the support of the organizations have a large and significant impact on engagement, purpose, and intent to stay. Intentionally establishing those support systems will be worth the efforts made.
- 4 — Finally, the four factors have the largest impact on engagement—and engagement pays dividends. Engaged employees come to their organizations with a sense of energy and a willingness to put in discretionary effort to make things happen; that enthusiasm has many positive outcomes. Workers are more productive and more supportive of their organization and fellow employees. In turn, teams or business units with more favorable average job attitudes have been shown to be more profitable compared to those with less favorable attitudes (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2020; Mackay et al., 2017). For this reason alone, investments in creating a learning and development culture have a measurable payoff.

What to do and where to begin

We've reviewed the research findings and made the case for why developing a learning and development culture matters. Now we turn to actions you can take to create that culture.

1

First: Take action on the lowest hanging fruit

- Assign challenging projects.** Almost 80% of employees are highly committed to their own growth, 72% want to have challenging assignments that stretch their ability to learn, and 57% would be content to stay in their current position if they are challenged to learn. Stretch assignments are vital to learning and development—but 40% of participants said they do not receive stretch assignments and only 53% said their organizations provide such opportunities. The 70/20/10 model for growth and development (Rooke & Torbert, 2005) suggests that 70% of development occurs through on-the-job experiences, 20% from working relationships, and 10% from formal classroom training. Focus on stretching employees with a formal process for assigning challenging projects and new experiences.
- Ensure motivated employees have a career development plan.** Channel the energy and enthusiasm of enthusiastic and committed employees with a clear career development road map. Where do they want to go? What do they need to get there? Only about 40% of participants have a clear development plan. Implementing a formal structure and process for creating career pathways will set expectations for growth and advancement and provide a road map for how to get there.
- Invest early in leadership development.** Participants indicated the most effective tool in the material offerings for both skill development and leadership development was in-person leadership development programs. However, only half of participants indicated it was available at their organizations and of those, only two-thirds participated. This finding may reflect a pervasive issue in creating learning and development cultures: Organizations may not provide leadership development until later in an employee's career; they may also reserve it only for "high potentials." Research indicates that most employees do not receive leadership development training until ten years into their careers—even though they are tasked with leading teams (Griffith et al., 2019). Exposure to good leadership practices early in employees' careers is a foundation for developing the organization's future talent pool. Making leadership development a core part of the material offerings will strengthen the organization and accelerate development of a robust talent pipeline.





Make sure that messages about the importance of growth are backed by policies and practices that give employees the time and space to learn.

- **Provide mentors and coaches.** Only about one-fifth of employees indicated they had a mentor or coach to help them develop their leadership skills and careers. Research indicates that mentoring has the potential to develop leadership capabilities for both mentees and mentors. (Grocutt et al., 2022). However, a successful program depends on six factors: 1) Establishing clear learning goals; 2) The mentee's proactive initiative; 3) Seeing failures as opportunities to learn and grow; 4) Developing trust between the mentor-mentee pair; 5) Open communication; and 6) Engagement and commitment to the process and goals. Developing a formal mentoring program that uses a thoughtful, process-oriented approach can deliver real value to organizations.

2

Second: Ensure employee development is an organization wide mandate

- **Walk the talk.** Although 72% of employees indicated their organizations encourage them to continuously develop and grow, only 56% of employees said their organizations gave them the time to do so. Employees struggle with investing time in their own growth and development when it must be done on the back of already busy workdays. Trying to squeeze development activities into personal time can impact employee well being and may have ineffective results. Make sure that messages about the importance of growth are backed by policies and practices that give employees the time and space to learn.
- **Provide the right material offerings and communicate them.** Only about two-thirds of participants say they can actually grow their skills through work, that their organizations provide them with programs and training to develop specialized skills, and that they have programs to develop management and leadership skills. About 20% of participants don't know if specific learning and development opportunities exist. Finally, even given awareness of offerings, participation rates can be as low as 51%, and the effectiveness of training can also be low. The reach of an offering thus has diminishing returns because something is missing. Make sure that your organization really understands what employees need don't assume.

3 Third: Equip managers to support growth

- **Support through opportunity.** About two-thirds of participants indicate their managers support their career development and provide opportunities to learn new skills. All managers need to promote a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017), challenging employees to continuously learn. Actively supporting this will prevent skill atrophy in a fast-changing world where today's skills are irrelevant tomorrow. Upskilling is a key part of creating a viable success pool, especially when acquiring new talent can be expensive and disruptive.
- **Shift to visibility and sponsorship.** Only about half of participants indicate that their managers make them more visible to upper-level managers and executives and/or people who could be influential in career advancement. Creating visibility for promising employees is a critical responsibility for managers—they are literally opening doors for promotion and career advancement. This type of sponsorship can unearth unexpected career opportunities as employees get to know other influential people within the organization and can impact the results of performance reviews.

4 Fourth: Clarify what matters most

- **Professionals in human capital management work with a plethora of HR outcome metrics.** Identifying the metrics you want to improve will guide where you want to invest. This research highlighted how four key factors impact employee engagement, intent to stay, and purpose—but how much each one matters depends on the metric.
- **Once one or two outcomes of interest have been identified, HR leaders will need to conduct research to identify their organization's gaps in developing effective learning and development cultures.** Our research found five factors with varying levels of impact, and these present a road map for where to begin. What opportunities exist to improve the reach of material offerings? How can managers provide better support? What must the organization do to improve in how it fosters a learning and development culture? Addressing these gaps will clarify where investments need to be made.

Creating visibility for promising employees is a critical responsibility for managers—they are literally opening doors for promotion and career advancement.





Conclusion

Creating a learning and development culture requires motivated employees, support from managers, and clear policies, best practices, and investments from the organization. This focus and effort has a clear and tangible reward: An engaged, purpose-driven workforce that will stay with your organization to co-create its new future.

Learn more

Want to know more about the impact of organizational purpose? Download our Purple Paper, "[Why we work: What happens when you connect people and purpose.](#)"



Need to implement an employee engagement survey? Unsure whether the one you have now can identify actions to improve employee engagement and retention? Learn more about [Engagement and Analysis Consulting](#).

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The TLI research team included Sarah Coley, Ph.D. and Cheryl Flink, Ph.D. For more information about the research methodology, please contact Sarah Coley at sarah.coley@truist.com to receive a detailed technical report.

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Our purpose is to inspire and build better lives and communities through leadership. Our solutions are designed to deliver on this through our work with Truist teammates, Truist clients, and our philanthropic work with community partners, students, and educators.

We hope to collaborate with you to develop leaders who will solve today's challenges and create tomorrow's opportunities.