



Article from Leadership IQ:

If Your Employees Aren't Learning, You're Not Leading

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What water is to the body, learning is to the brain. And sadly, right now, a lot of employees are dying of intellectual thirst.

Study after study finds that keeping your brain active and stimulated is a key to staving off the ravages of old age. But you don't have to be ninety to get the benefits of an active brain. In fact, employees that have to learn new skills (aka keep their brain active or stimulate the mind, etc.) are way more engaged than typical employees. And I mean WAY more engaged.

We recently completed a groundbreaking study on goal-setting (to be released next week). And one of the areas we asked about was whether or not employees would have to learn new skills to achieve their goals for this year (i.e. will employees have to expand their minds and learn something new OR can they just skate by without having to intellectually stimulate their brains).

Here are some shocking findings...

Compared to employees who don't experience new learning, employees who will have to learn new skills to accomplish their goals are:

- 22 times more likely to say "I would like to spend my career at this organization."
- 17 times more likely to say "I recommend my boss to others as a great person to work for."
- 21 times more likely to say "I recommend this organization to others as a great place for people to work."

Read those numbers very carefully. If your job is going to require you to expand your brain this year, if learning new skills is an essential part of your success, if you will have to exercise your brain like you'd exercise your muscles, then you are going to be a lot happier at work. In fact, you're 21 times more likely to be happy. And you're 17 times more likely to be happy with your boss. And 22 times more likely to want to spend your career at this company.

But if you're in one of those jobs that you can muddle through without lighting up the synapses in your brain, well, you're probably not going to be all that happy. If your company has said "Listen up people, we don't have time or money to learn right now, we're in a recession here!" then don't be surprised when your best folks flock to the exit as soon as the job market picks back up. Or when they don't seem to have the same energy and productivity as they used to.

Remember when we were kids and we sometimes said “I don’t want to go to school today. I’m sick of learning!” Well, it turns out that as we get older, we not only want to learn; we NEED to learn. [It turns out this growing older thing happens a lot. Remember when boys and girls found each other “yucky”? That didn’t last long.]

Now, let me clarify something. When we talk about learning, I don’t mean learning base-level skills that folks should be hired with anyway. If you’ve got a company software engineer who can’t turn on a computer, you’re facing a very different kind of problem.

What I do mean is learning that challenges employees to aspire to something greater than the status quo. Learning that elevates people’s level of expertise and increases their value within the organization. Yes, I’m saying that giving employees something they desperately want (the opportunity to learn new skills) will also benefit your organization. What manager doesn’t love when it works out that way?

Let’s say your company needs better software for organizing your client files. Your chief developer has been doing a really good job, so you offer him the challenge---which he jumps at. Not all the work falls into his current skills set, so he has to go out and learn some new database skills (things that interest and excite him) to overcome his limitations.

When he delivers the finished product, he arrives all pumped up with the emotional thrill of great achievement. It’s a feeling that, for most people, financial reward can’t come close to matching. He’s also got new and valuable skills he now brings to work every day, and, of course, the organization gets the software it needs.

So let’s get practical: What can you do about this? Well, let me show you a little piece of a technique that we teach to our leadership training clients. (If you’re already conducting Shoves & Tugs conversations like we teach in our latest book *Hundred Percenters*, this will just get added to those).

Every month, you’re going to ask your employees 2 questions about their learning:

1. What things would you like to get better at this month?
2. What’s something that you’re better at now than you were last month?

The first question lets you assess the directions in which your employees wish to grow and learn in order to reach their full potential. Encouraging employees to think about the steps they should be taking to reach that point will help them focus on the exact skills they need to learn.

The second question reinforces all the new skills employees have already learned. Never take it for granted that anyone other than you has been keeping track. As human beings, we’re learning all the time, but we often we don’t even realize it when it’s happening. And if you want your organization to get its due credit for being a learning organization, then you really need to capture all of the learnings that take place.

Remember the old philosophy question “If a tree falls in the forest, but nobody’s there to hear it, did it really make a sound?” Well, let me offer a slight paraphrase: “If your employees are learning, but they don’t realize they’re learning, are they really going to feel terrific about all the things they’re learning?”

So what’s my motivation in writing this article? Well, first, there’s really groundbreaking

data that I thought you should know. And second, we're in the midst of a looming crisis. In the great recession, organizations have drastically reduced the extent to which they're developing their people. They've cut training & development budgets. They're working people harder without reinvesting in their skills.

If you run a car into the ground: don't change the oil, don't do tune-ups, rotate the tires, etc. the car will break down. I don't particularly like comparing cars to people, but in this case it works. We're wearing out our employees in exactly the same way. People need new skills. They need to keep their brains active and rejuvenated. And if we don't care about whether they're learning and growing, they too will break down, usually by disengaging from work or even quitting.

Follow my techniques above (and get even more in my book [Hundred Percenters](#)) and you can fix this. And who knows? You may even get to energize your own brain in the process.

By the way, next week I'm leading a 1-hour teleconference called [Setting Goals That Push People To Greatness](#). If you've ever felt that your people aren't maximizing their potential, learning everything they could learn, and being as great as they could be, this is the program for you.

And don't miss my latest book, [Hundred Percenters](#). In the book I tackle the learning and goals issue in even more detail.

