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ACCOUNTING

How a Learning Culture Can Transform Your Practice

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Paul McDonald • Dec. 08, 2021



In the world of public accounting, clients choose your firm because they know that the team is knowledgeable, professional and experienced.

There are times, though, when that expertise can hold you back. It can lead to rigid thinking when circumstances call for nimble decision making and creative solutions. Times change, and the need to keep an open mind — to continue learning — never ends. It's critical to foster a culture of ongoing learning in your organization. One of the best ways to do this is to encourage a beginner's mindset with your team.

What is a beginner's mindset?

Have you ever noticed how inexperienced people can sometimes be the most perceptive? For example, it's not uncommon for interns to spot a process inefficiency or an opportunity for improvement that the office veterans missed.

That's because the intern is looking at things with fresh eyes. Experienced people get acclimatized to processes over time, which means they start to filter out information they think is irrelevant. This can cause them to miss obvious areas for improvement.

A beginner's mindset is about trying to see things from an "intern's" perspective, if you will. If you can get your team into this mindset, your firm will be able to take

advantage of change rather than belatedly react to it. That means you'll be ready to quickly jump on new opportunities.

One of the challenges associated with team learning is that everyone is at a different level. Some people are great with technology; others know everything about compliance. And sometimes, people don't want to let others know they're struggling with a particular topic, sensing it would undermine their authority.

When your team embraces the beginner's mindset, these insecurities fall away. Everyone is free to ask questions without judgment, and subject matter experts are encouraged to review and, if necessary, revise their most fundamental assumptions about their specialist areas.

Building out your learning culture

Just because you shouldn't want your team's expertise to lead to rigid thinking doesn't mean it's no longer valuable. What areas do people want to learn more about and how can you leverage collective knowledge?

- **Ask your team what they want to learn.**

Address any knowledge gaps you feel exist within your team with upskilling opportunities, but also approach everyone in a group meeting or individually to ask what skills *they* want to learn or improve. Some employees might come up with areas you hadn't recognized as a skills gap, such as an emerging technology that wasn't on your radar. Deciding to provide training in that area may significantly improve your competitiveness.

- **Look for internal subject matter experts.**

Your team already has an incredible amount of knowledge. But it may not be evenly distributed yet. Find out what everyone is good at and what they would be comfortable discussing with their colleagues. Everyone has something to contribute. For instance, a recent college graduate who is just beginning their professional life might be able to speak about subjects that trip up more seasoned colleagues, such as technology, social media or [diversity](http://www.cpapracticeadvisor.com/21232312) (www.cpapracticeadvisor.com/21232312).

- **Build learning materials.**

If possible, ask your local experts to create reusable materials, such as blogs, how-tos, wikis and videos. This kind of work can represent a major time investment on the expert's part, but they will be creating something that can be used in training again and again.

- **Bring in outside expertise.**

If you don't have an in-house staff development group, consider bringing in external experts to train your team. Alternatively, you can look at online learning platforms like Skillshare or Udemy to see if they have suitable learning materials. Make sure to vet any external sources beforehand to ensure that they meet your standards.

- **Make learning part of a normal day.**

When should you devote time to education? In a learning culture, the answer is: always. You can help make learning part of the regular routine by scheduling lunchtime seminars (virtual or on-site) or including knowledge-sharing as an agenda item on meetings. If possible, encourage people to set aside some time in their daily schedule to focus on skills development.

- **Share your wins.**

A learning culture is, above all else, a culture. It is part of **who you are as an organization**. The team can benefit from talking to each other about what they're learning, share advice and resources, and encourage each other to continue developing. Consider starting a learning newsletter to help them do this.

- **Get senior leadership on board.**

Everyone benefits from a learning culture. A beginner's mindset might even help tenured employees see the business in a new light, which could spark some valuable strategic thinking. Having senior leadership involved also sends a great message to the team — that learning really is a fundamental part of how your firm's culture.

A learning culture is a win for everyone

Another benefit of learning cultures is increased employee engagement and retention. When people are learning, they're growing. And when they're growing, they're getting closer to achieving their professional goals. That sense of career momentum helps people feel energized about their work — and encourages them to stick with your team over the long term.

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