



# ENGAGE YOUR DISENGAGED LEARNERS THROUGH EFFECTIVE DESIGN

{ PERSPECTIVES } **LEARNING DESIGN**



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# ENGAGE YOUR DISENGAGED LEARNERS THROUGH EFFECTIVE DESIGN

How do you grab the attention of employees who face so many competing priorities and distractions? Three key design principles help you deliver programs that break through the noise for more effective learning and, ultimately, higher levels of engagement.

BY MICHELLE HUMES AND ROBERT MCKINNEY

We've all heard the news: in organizations crossing a wide array of industries, employee engagement—employees' emotional commitment to their organization and its goals—is low.

According to Gallup's 2015 U.S. engagement survey, the percentage of workers in 2015 who were considered engaged averaged only 32 percent. The majority of employees were "not engaged," and 17 percent were actively disengaged. Notably, these numbers have stayed largely flat since 2000, with little improvement.

Many organizations use learning programs as a means to improve engagement. But the disengagement problem is especially acute when it comes to leadership development and learning. Here, time-starved leaders are grappling with more and more complexity in their jobs every day. As a result, they're unable to reflect on their workday and developmental experiences and apply what they've learned in their daily work.

Even engaged employees find it hard to make time for learning. Those who are disengaged have even greater difficulty building such time into their work lives. And when employees opt out of the learning process, organizations pay a high price.

In the 2015 Brandon Hall Group State of Leadership Development Study, 71 percent of survey respondents said their leaders are not ready to lead their organizations into the future. If organizations have difficulty developing the capabilities required for today's ever more challenging business environment, these organizations will not have long-term success.

To overcome this hurdle, learning and development (L&D) practitioners can start by deepening their understanding of what's eroding engagement in learning. They can then apply proven practices for designing developmental opportunities that deliver as promised for their organizations.



Lack of engagement is an ongoing challenge and constitutes the number-two issue on the minds of human resource leaders.

GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL TRENDS 2014 STUDY BY BERSIN BY DELOITTE

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## Four Forces Eroding Engagement

Powerful pressures are coalescing to imperil engagement in workforces. These forces make it increasingly difficult for organizations to boost engagement overall, as well as in learning opportunities.

### 1. “TIME STARVATION” LEAVES NO BANDWIDTH FOR LEARNING

Many employees feel that there just isn’t enough time for them to take advantage of developmental opportunities. The ongoing stream of distractions created by our “always on, always connected” world—from emails and texts to endless meetings and impromptu visits from colleagues—is a major culprit behind this problem.

Technology advances have also increased multitasking, including checking emails and texting during meetings, conference calls, and training sessions. Multitasking only worsens time starvation, and it lowers productivity by up to 40 percent, according to Peter Bregman in his *Harvard Business Review* article “How (and Why) to Stop Multitasking.”

With employees feeling that they have little time to spare for their regular job responsibilities, it’s not surprising that they’re having difficulty engaging in learning opportunities.

### 2. FLATTER ORGANIZATIONS PUT MORE PRESSURES ON LEADERS

Companies have become “flatter” through matrixed reporting structures and self-management models, with the intent of driving collaboration essential for innovation. But flattening negatively affects engagement. Here’s why: In flat organizations, leaders have a greater span of control, which translates into more direct reports. Further, many people who oversee direct reports are also individual contributors. Result? Less time to spend with each direct report.

Flat organizations require “conversational leadership,” which takes time and a deep understanding of each employee’s unique learning needs. All this puts additional pressure on already time-starved individuals, further hurting engagement.

### 3. LEARNING DOES NOT ADDRESS DIVERSE LEARNING STYLES AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

People have always embodied different learning styles. But with increased diversity of generational cohorts in the workplace, differences among styles and preferences have intensified. Today, there are as many as five generations active in the workforce in the United States alone, with millennials constituting the most populous age cohort, according to a 2015 Bureau of Labor Statistics report.

All individuals have their own personal learning preferences, of course. In addition, some general preferences predominate within generations. All this has raised the bar for HR practitioners seeking to design development programs that appeal to each style.

### 4. L&D RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Considering the pace at which the business is changing, it’s a challenge to keep up, and many organizations just don’t have the bandwidth to regularly reexamine the way learning is being delivered. L&D teams face resource constraints at a time when huge shifts are reshaping the workplace. Without sufficient resources, L&D groups have greater difficulty creating the kinds of innovative



Time constraints are now the biggest barrier to successful leadership development programs.

**HARVARD BUSINESS PUBLISHING 2015 SURVEY OF 700 LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS LINE PROFESSIONALS**

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developmental opportunities required to fully engage their organization's workforce.

It's clear that many employees (along with their supervisors and their companies' HR teams) are overwhelmed. But that doesn't mean L&D professionals have no hope of combating the culprits behind disengagement.

By taking a new approach to designing developmental opportunities, they can help people at all levels in the organization actively engage with learning initiatives and over time help them build the knowledge and mindsets needed to become talented leaders.

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## Reengage Learners with Innovative Learning Design

To help organizations tackle the disengagement challenge, Harvard Business Publishing has drawn on proven pedagogy, leading-edge research, and experience with hundreds of client organizations around the world to define principles for designing developmental experiences that engage learners—and keep them engaged.

Leadership development is a particularly urgent imperative for organizations today. Here, we spotlight three principles—learning through emotional engagement and context, learning over time, and learning by doing and reflecting—we believe can greatly enhance learning engagement among aspiring leaders.

### DESIGN FOR LEARNING THROUGH EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND CONTEXT

We've found that leaders learn best when they're emotionally engaged and feel intrinsically motivated to build and apply new skills. They get the most from their developmental experiences when their learning is driven by and aligned with their organization's strategic priorities. It also helps to have opportunities to explore new concepts and try out new skills in the context of their everyday work.

And when it comes to emotional engagement, listening to others share stories of their own learning experiences can be an especially powerful way to activate feelings within learners. As a matter of fact, research reveals that human beings are “hardwired” to engage with stories. MRIs, for instance, show that when we hear someone tell a personal

story, the parts of our brain we would use if we ourselves were experiencing the events we're hearing about “light up.” Our brains process our imagined experiences much as they process real experiences.

When someone tells a story that engages our emotions, our brains synchronize the storyteller's feelings, as if we were experiencing those emotions ourselves—further fostering engagement in the learning experience.

While the notions of emotional engagement and context can be thought of as distinct, combining them in learning design can deliver major benefits. For instance, having an executive share an important lesson she learned during her career and tying that lesson to a challenge employees are



“A story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience.”

LEO WIDRICH, CO-FOUNDER, BUFFER

#### QUICK TIP

### Find Your Hook

Find connections between the subject matter, the content and the experience, and the learners' context. Why does it matter? Why should they listen? How will it help them, both now and in the future?

Tying learning to the organization's strategic priorities—for example, "Your new hiring skills are helping us bring in the talent we need to enter our target markets"—can further strengthen the link between emotional engagement and context. People get invigorated when you help them make the connection.

facing in their organization will capture learners' attention much more than a generic example offered by a trainer.

Stories—fictional or real world—can be designed into learning initiatives through a variety of means. Examples include videos in which someone describes a personal on-the-job experience that helped them gain new insights or acquire new skills. Or videos could show characters interacting with each other or solving problems. Stories can also be presented in text form—such as narratives featuring characters mastering skills needed to address a particular challenge.

## LEARNING THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AND CONTEXT

### Cinépolis

Cinépolis is a rapidly growing cinema and entertainment company based in Mexico. Its industry has been upended by streaming video services and other alternatives to the traditional moviegoing experience. To fuel its continued growth, Cinépolis set out to build a culture of innovation.

L&D executives decided to use several learning solutions developed by Harvard Business Publishing, such as *Leadership Direct* and *Harvard ManageMentor*®, and content from *Harvard Business Review* provided through *LeadingEdge*. The target audience for the new learning program included senior managers, corporate managers, and local cinema-complex managers. The L&D team tailored these resources to Cinépolis' culture and designed a distinct experience for each level. The program featured a blend of Spanish and English content, reflecting the mix of participants from across the Americas.

Crowdsourcing was used to identify the development program content that employees would find most engaging. Gamification also encouraged participation. For instance, participants earned points as they progressed

through the learning program and as they contributed to the individual and group learning experience with their comments and questions. Monthly reports allowed each participant and their manager to track progress, and the best scores for each module were showcased across the group. The strongest participants became moderators for the next run of the program.

The program boasted 100 percent engagement and paid big dividends—especially with the real-world project work completed. Participants learned more about Cinépolis' customers and devised new ways of serving them. Ideas included designing a mystery-shopper market research program. All of this was a testament to the power of engaging employees in the learning experience and of aligning learning with a company's strategic priorities.

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Activating a spirit of competition—for instance, through gamification—can also enhance learners’ emotional engagement in a learning program. This could be as simple as creating a leader board within an online program or rewarding the top contributors in a live group discussion. Ongoing team competitions over the course of a program have also proven to be engaging.

#### DESIGN FOR LEARNING OVER TIME

Our research has found that delivering a concentrated learning experience over a few days is less effective than

delivering learning over a longer period of time, giving learners chances to reinforce their new insights and skills. Leaders learn best when they take part in a development process, versus a one-time event. Being able to choose when they take part in learning activities also helps.

Learning over time, leaders can experience multiple cycles of trying out new skills on real work challenges, reflecting on what they’re learning, and sharing new insights. All of these activities increase their ability to retain the new knowledge and skills they acquire. And when people learn

### LEARNING OVER TIME

## *Consumers Energy*

Consumers Energy is an electric and gas utility company serving nearly 70 percent of Michigan’s population. The company also has independent energy-generation operations throughout the state. Executives anticipated significant gaps in the company’s leadership pipeline, including a retiring workforce and required new capabilities, and they worried about how the shortfall might affect business performance. The company was also experiencing a cultural transformation to a flatter, more collaborative model, and needed support for the transition.

In addition to sustaining the organization’s values during this time of change, L&D executives wanted to develop a learning program that aligned with the current training model, in which programs were facilitated internally. “We have a strong philosophy that leaders are teachers and that development is the responsibility of all,” said Stacy Mowrer, director of learning and development. “To effectively sustain behavioral change and in the spirit of getting better every day, ongoing coaching and feedback are critical. We are well-positioned to provide that support.”

With these goals in mind, they developed the “Leading with Impact” program. The effort drew on Harvard Business Publishing’s *Breakthrough Leadership*®. It also included a “train the trainer” element aimed at scaling the program, incorporating more face-to-face learning, and integrating the program with other in-house development opportunities. The program was delivered in short bursts to leaders of leaders.

“Learning at Consumers Energy is not a single event, but a journey, including classroom or virtual experience, practice, and assimilation of skills,” said Jerry Kaminski, manager of learning and development, instructional design.

Savvy design of the learning program delivered impressive results, including high participation and completion rates. The first cohort reported an average of more than 11 percent behavior change by its conclusion. “When you have participants and their leaders saying that they are seeing a difference and are better leaders as a result of the learning experience, you know you are on a path to success,” said Mowrer.

more from a developmental experience as well as retain more of what they've learned, they're more likely to remain engaged in the learning process. In addition, learning over time regularly draws employees' attention away from the many distractions facing them in their everyday work life. As such, it further helps combat disengagement.

Research from Will Thalheimer has confirmed the value of spacing learning experiences over time. Thalheimer maintains that while it's relatively easy to learn, it's also all too easy to forget what we've learned. Learning over time, including on-the-job application and practice of new knowledge and skills, reduces the "forgetting curve," boosting retention and enabling learners to build deeper expertise.

L&D professionals can apply this design principle in numerous ways. Leaders can explore a particular concept through a variety of experiences over many months. Building in time for leaders to fully absorb concepts from one session before moving on to the next can make a big impact on engagement.

#### QUICK TIP

#### Deliver Learning in Short Bursts

Don't try to cram critical development into a three-day workshop that then gets shortened into two days because no one can be away from the office for that long. Design your programs and learning experiences to make information easier to digest, provide reinforcement in between sessions, and encourage sustainment over the long term.



"We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience."

JOHN DEWEY

#### DESIGN FOR LEARNING BY DOING AND REFLECTING

While it's important to secure and sustain leaders' initial engagement in learning programs, HR practitioners must also design programs that help leaders continue to engage in the learning process even after a program or a particular component in a program has ended. That's where learning by doing and reflecting comes in—with an emphasis on reflecting.

Research has long suggested that people best learn how to lead through experience. Many of us have focused on the "70-20-10" finding showing that people master 70 percent of leadership skills through on-the-job learning. That has led to a strong emphasis on learning by doing. However, additional research reveals that relying on experience alone can backfire, because owing to the distractions and time pressures discussed above, many people have difficulty processing lessons they gain from experience. If people can't build new knowledge and skills from the lessons of experience, they won't likely remain engaged in the learning process.

Recent research from faculty, including Harvard Business School's Francesca Gino, offered the first empirical evidence of the value of reflection in learning. They focused their field study on real-world settings at Wipro, the IT services outsourcing giant. The research team set up an experiment based on a two-week training program that Wipro runs, which combines on-the-job and classroom training. One group took 10 minutes at the end of each day to write down two things they had learned that day. The control group had no such structured reflection. On the final test, the reflection group scored 22.8 percent



## *Arthur J. Gallagher*

Arthur J. Gallagher is a global insurance brokerage and risk management firm headquartered just outside of Chicago, and is the fourth-largest insurance broker in the world. To support its growth and success in a changing market, the company decided to take an accelerated approach to building leadership capabilities and bench strength in its management ranks.

With an eye toward incorporating learning by doing and reflecting, the company implemented a customized version of Harvard Business Publishing's *Breakthrough Leadership* program for an initial audience of 142 mid- to senior-level leaders in the first year of the effort, followed by 100 additional leaders the following year.

Executives set high expectations and standards for participation in the program. They also leveraged the study-group component from the program to drive reflective discussion among participants.

In addition, they used a highly proactive engagement model, staying closely connected to participants and executive sponsors to request feedback to ensure that all learners stayed on track throughout the program.

This design paid off. The company had an average 6 percent behavior change across its population, as measured through learner self-assessments at pivotal points during the program as well as after completion of the program. This is an impressive gain, in a short period of time, and reflects a team of leaders who are better able to manage their own direct reports, themselves, and their network. Indeed, 95 percent of the program participants reported an improved ability to lead. Even after the program had ended, A. J. Gallagher continued to place high expectations on participants regarding application of their new skills, and rewarded them with expanded career opportunities.

higher than the control group. Clearly, the act of reflecting helped these employees retain more of what they had learned from the training.

Persuade already overwhelmed learners to take time to reflect, especially in organizations strongly biased toward action.

Designing learning programs that prompt participants to identify insights gained as well as opportunities to apply their new knowledge and skills can help. We also suggest providing questions to encourage peer discussions, helping learners develop action plans for working toward a newly defined goal, offering on-the-job activities that help learners experiment with newly acquired skills, and leveraging peer study groups.

### **QUICK TIP**

#### **Practice Makes Perfect**

Provide opportunities to do—to practice or work with new skills or concepts. Encourage your learners to experiment in safe ways—and to reflect and learn from those experiences—both successful and not so successful.

Using all of these devices to create a highly structured “Learn, Practice, Reflect” approach can be especially valuable, whereby learners are encouraged to go through this cycle over and over. The result is that reflecting on and capturing lessons from experience becomes an ingrained habit.

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## Succeeding in the New Normal

In the “new normal” characterizing organizations today, the forces eroding leaders’ engagement in learning will only persist, if not intensify. Meanwhile, the pace of change will keep accelerating, further overwhelming already distracted and time-starved employees, managers, and executives. To build the talent and leadership pipeline essential for thriving in the new normal, organizations must reengage their people with the learning process.

L&D teams can play a vital role in this effort by designing developmental opportunities with engagement in mind. Three design principles merit special attention: learning

through emotional engagement and context, learning over time, and learning by doing and reflecting. By ensuring that learning programs meet these imperatives, L&D practitioners can help people throughout their organization rise above the “clutter” and gain develop critical capabilities. The payoff will be well worth the effort: valuable business outcomes generated for the organization, along with satisfying career opportunities opening up for aspiring and seasoned leaders alike.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## **ABOUT CORPORATE LEARNING**

With more than 25 years of success delivering dynamic learning experiences to the world's biggest brands, Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning partners with Global 2000 companies to co-create leadership-development solutions that align with strategy and engage learners. The company combines unrivaled subject-matter expertise and scale with unmatched flexibility and contextualization to bring the right programs to the right learners in the most useful ways. From highly focused executive leadership programs to enterprise-wide engagements for thousands of global employees, each learning experience leverages the remarkable depth and breadth of Harvard Business School and *Harvard Business Review* resources, industry experts, technology-enabled and user-friendly solutions, and a creative, collaborative mind-set to help clients discover something new. The result is stronger companies better prepared to meet their challenges and thrive both today and in the future. Harvard Business Publishing is comprised of three market groups—Higher Education, Corporate Learning, and Harvard Business Review Group—and is an affiliate of Harvard Business School.

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Harvard Business Publishing was founded in 1994 as a not-for-profit, wholly owned subsidiary of Harvard University. Its mission is to improve the practice of management and its impact in a changing world. The company achieves its mission through its relationships with customers in three market groups: Higher Education, Corporate Learning, and Harvard Business Review Group. Through these platforms, Harvard Business Publishing is able to influence real-world change by maximizing the reach and impact of its essential offering—ideas.



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