

Building skills for the future of work

Develop the skills you'll need to reduce risk, drive growth, and innovate amidst disruption.



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Featured authors



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Cornerstone Editors

A collection of editors who manage the editorial calendar for Cornerstone's Resource Center.

Introduction

In the HR world today, we hear a lot about upskilling or new skilling the workforce to prepare for changes — whether it's adapting to new technology or new ways of doing business. In fact, according to research from PwC¹, the availability of key skills is a top concern for business leaders worldwide as they look to ready their companies for the future of work.

But even though technology is driving the need for new skills, the skills that will help companies tackle the challenges they face — from transforming in the face of disruption to pursuing revenue growth and increasing operational efficiency — are not technical.

In fact, training for those skills is producing less return² than it has in the past because business changes are so rapid. Some skills become outdated or unnecessary thanks to automation, for example.

But regardless of our predictions, technology can create jobs just as much as it replaces them. Increasingly, it's our uniquely human skills that will qualify us for those roles and help organizations adapt to these changes.

In 2019, our team at Cornerstone gathered data from 40 million users to discover the most in-demand skills, and soft skills were the top 12 on the list.

13 skills in demand in today's workforce



These skills will help employees remain resilient to the myriad ways jobs, companies, and industries will change and evolve in the coming years. As my colleague and change expert Dr. Tom Tonkin likes to say, 'Companies don't change, people do.'

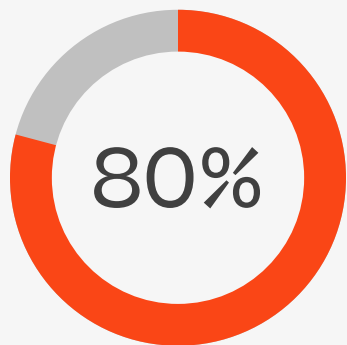
– Jeff Miller, Associate Vice President of Learning and Organizational Effectiveness at Cornerstone



Communication

Technology has made communication easier than ever before. When something comes up, we can pick up the phone, shoot off a text, or send a quick email. But communication for the sake of building interpersonal connections? That has become much more difficult.

For companies to meet their organizational goals and employees to achieve their personal ones, teams must be communicating regularly, effectively, and openly. This helps companies build stronger, more trusting relationships where even the most difficult topics — like delivering feedback or discussing personal growth — are easy to approach.



of American workers feel stressed as a result of poor communication at work³





How to develop your company's communication skills at every level

By The ReWork Editors

At one point or another, we've all been lazy communicators — we sent a quick Slack instead of making a phone call or put off monthly check-ins to catch up on work.

But when these habits become a trend, companies begin to suffer. They can lead to misaligned expectations, uncertainty, and eventually a lack of trust. As a result, employees become overly stressed, unproductive,

and more likely to leave for a job elsewhere.⁴ And this problem is more widespread than you might expect: One survey found that four in five Americans are stressed as a result of poor communication at work.⁵ As technology continues to disrupt the workplace with new ways for employees to connect, it's easier than ever to avoid effective communication. A direct message is more efficient than an email, and an email is faster than a

face-to-face conversation — both options are easier, but far less conducive to goal-setting or developing interpersonal relationships.

We sat down with three HR experts to learn more about how companies can practice strong communication at every level — from company messaging to everyday interactions between managers and employees.





A strong communication culture starts at the top

According to research from UCLA, only 7% of communication happens through words — the remaining 93% is body language and tone of voice.⁶ This makes company-wide communication difficult, and it's why most companies thoroughly review

messaging to ensure the right words and tone are always used. But in her 40 years of experience as an HR executive, Carol Anderson still noticed gaps between company messaging and what employees are actually hearing.

“Sometimes, no matter how effective a script or newsletter, organizational noise often holds more influence over employees’ beliefs rather than carefully crafted text,” Anderson says. “It’s important for companies to watch this communication and be sure it aligns with the messages they hope to convey.”

Organizational noise is made up of the inferences, observations, and speculations about company ongoings that employees or managers are privately engaging in. Office politics or rumor mills are common examples of what this noise can look like. Leaders need to make sure that there aren’t any gaps between what

their company practices and preaches. When actions don’t align with messaging, it breeds speculation and distrust.

“For instance, if your company publicly states that employees are its most valuable asset, treat them as such,” explains Anderson. “Ask your direct reports about their opinions and thoughts. Check with them to see if they feel like the company’s messaging feels honest and tangible. And don’t brush off negative body language — if someone seems irritated or overwhelmed, find out

Great communication begins with what’s wrong.”



Great communication begins a connection, and there are two types to choose from — chance or conscious.”



Managers and employees should make conscious connections

Vicki Hess, a thought leader and workplace consultant for the healthcare industry, agrees that effective and regular communication between managers and their direct reports is crucial to success.

“Great communication begins with a connection,” says

Hess. “And there are two types to choose from — chance or conscious.”

Chance connections require one part to be proactive while the other is reactive. Offices that practice an open door policy communicate largely via chance connections. Managers are always available, but the onus is on employees to reach out. While these types of policies may seem like the foundation of

open communication, more often employees don’t feel comfortable with or aren’t proactive about going to their boss. As a result, whether or not the two parties connect is left up to chance.

Conscious connections, on the other hand, require mutual proactivity. Employers and employees are both responsible for pursuing a meeting and work together to decide on a specific time and place. Both also come prepared with topics of discussion. According to Hess, these are the most powerful kinds of connections and usually appear in the workplace as one-on-one meetings.

“With [conscious connections], a manager and employee can plan in advance and arrive

with discussion points and observations about their work-life or career trajectory,” explains Hess. “Chance connections lack structure and consistency — here, an employee is more likely to discuss less important problems like loud office spaces or poor lighting.”

Conscious connections are more effective but can be difficult to prioritize. Employees and employers should work together to reevaluate their schedules (and skip relatively unimportant meetings or miscellaneous tasks that aren’t time-sensitive) to make time for conscious connections.



When team members and managers define their strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, they create a work environment where everyone is enabled to do their best work.”



Employees are responsible for communicating their needs

Communication styles vary greatly from person to person, says Jeff Miller, associate vice president of learning and organizational effectiveness at Cornerstone. While some people thrive in “directive” environments where they’re told what to do, others do better in “requestive” environments, where managers ask questions to get employees thinking of the best solutions, instead of handing them the best path forward. Some people need time to prepare for a conversation, while others like to have off-the-cuff discussions. For managers, being aware of these preferences can help ensure their teams are effective.

“Managers are responsible for creating the environment that their employees operate within,” explains Miller. “A manager struggling to create an optimal environment can actually inhibit a team.”

But the only way for a manager to learn and respond to these preferences is for employees to speak openly and honestly — not only with managers but also with co-workers. The better individuals can communicate about themselves and their preferences, the more the group can operate with empathy and understanding — making collaboration and problem-solving much easier and more effective.

“When team members and managers define their strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, they create a work environment where everyone is enabled to do their best work,” says Miller.

The good news is, when strong communication practices are present, they trickle down. When a company’s shared messaging is open, clear, and honest, teams are more loyal and trusting of leadership. And when managers actively plan and prioritize check-in meetings with their team members, employees feel more comfortable communicating their needs. If teams learn how every member prefers to communicate, everyone becomes more efficient and collaborative.

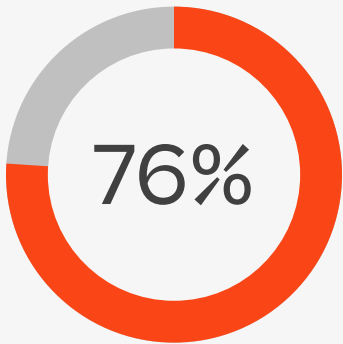




Personal growth

Any effective manager will tell you that learning and development is key to employee success. But while many L&D initiatives tend to focus on teaching highly technical, job-specific skills, the most successful workers are also setting personal goals for

themselves and keeping tabs on their growth. For instance, one employee might want to improve their presentation skills, while another might think about how to be more mindful at work or prioritize their wellness outside of the office. Managers can work with employees to identify opportunities for personal and professional growth — and design a tailored L&D plan to help them reach these goals.



of employees are looking for growth opportunities⁷





How Organic Valley made learning part of its company culture

By Chris Stewart

The key to a successful company is adaptability. Employees and managers need to be able to learn new concepts, acquire skills, and evaluate their work methods to grow. By creating a culture centered around learning, you can teach employees how to take initiative, expand their skill-set, and strive for better results.

Mark Schroeder, the HR/L&OD technology strategist at Organic Valley, made it his mission to revamp the company's employee learning and development processes. He wanted to develop a program that was sustainable, scalable, and engaging, so he partnered with Cornerstone to build a learning portal for

employees, where workers could access videos, playlists, online courses, and other resources to better equip them for their jobs.

In just one year, the team saw results. "We have increased applications by 42 percent just by updating the user experience with a redesigned portal,"

Schroeder said. Employees sign up for three courses on average each month, and the completion rate is 100 percent.





Transforming a company's culture takes time and strategy, but it's doable. Follow Schroeder's three steps for integrating learning into your company.

1

Engagement

When employees are excited about the tools at their disposal, they're more likely to put energy into learning.

To improve both the look and user experience of the learning portal, the team designed a new logo and created fresh visuals. Then, to further engage employees, they held a contest to brand the portal. "An employee suggested we call it 'The Tool Shed,' which is genius because it's the place you go to get the tools you need to do your work," said Schroeder.

The team also developed in-person learning events that departments could sign up by visiting The Tool Shed. Schroeder wanted to make this resource a part of daily life at work, so employees would be familiar with it when they had to do compliance training.

"Involving employees in the process of updating the portal — not to mention incorporating their feedback — led to greater overall buy-in and interest in learning," Schroeder said.

2

Empowerment

As part of the larger culture shift, Schroeder's team wanted to empower employees to take initiative on projects and manage their own growth.

To start, they encouraged employees to contribute their own content to The Tool Shed in the form of sharable reports and documents. Next, they reconfigured the portal, so employees could submit employee growth initiative (EGI) requests directly. As a result, employees were able to track and manage their own growth, instead of inundating managers with EGI requests to see their progress.

This change accomplished two things: First, it gave employees more ownership and autonomy over their work, and second, it gave managers more time to focus on big-picture growth and leadership.



3

Education

To reinforce the idea of continued learning at Organic Valley, Schroeder and his team resolved to make the content within the learning portal as relevant and meaningful as possible.

As part of that goal, they designed a program to engage managers and increase learning retention. “We use Cornerstone to deliver 7-, 14-, and 30-day interval lessons and ‘engagement guides’ to managers before and after employee learning,” said Carrie Bero, the senior learning and organizational development specialist at Organic Valley.

The program grew quickly and changed the company’s approach to employee growth opportunities. Instead of promoting employees based solely on position or title, managers began to promote employees based on their skill levels, as shown in the learning portal.

Schroeder and his team then employed the Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation to rate the effectiveness of the lessons:

- 1. Reaction:** How did you feel about the trainings?
- 2. Learning:** How much did you learn? Would you be able to pass a test?
- 3. Transfer:** Were you able to apply the lessons you learned to your job?
- 4. Results:** Did the company benefit from your learning?

They also sent every manager a guide to supporting employees before, during and after their respective learning portal courses.

Creating a learning-focused culture is crucial to a company’s success. What’s more, implementing programs that promote personal and professional development can lead to greater employee satisfaction and higher retention rates.⁸ With the help of the Cornerstone learning platforms and courses, Organic Valley has been able to establish itself as a company that prizes learning and growth.





Leadership

Managers at every level of an organization are responsible for helping their teams reach individual as well as company-wide goals. But that's easier said than done. What exactly can managers do to increase employee engagement and earn the trust of their team? Setting reasonable expectations with your employees, asking them for feedback on your management style, and being authentic are great ways to start.

When managers help employees grow and develop through their strengths, they are more than twice as likely to engage their team members.⁹





To be a better leader, ask yourself these three questions

By Jeff Miller

Even though I was a teacher for 25 years, I was not a model student. Whenever I was in trouble at school, I knew it not because of my teachers' words but based on his or her actions. A simple look or some tense body language, and I knew. I also remember thinking not just "I'm in trouble" but also "she's doesn't like me" or "he's judging me."

At the time, I'd probably done plenty to earn this frustration. But the memory holds a lesson: our actions send an emotional message to the people around us.

In my experience, people are often unaware of how their actions speak for them. For example, if a manager schedules a coffee meeting with an employee to talk about their

progress, but then finds they have to reschedule it, the action might say to the employee: you are not my priority. Of course, this was not the likely message sent by the manager, but it's one the employee could easily internalize.

This kind of unspoken interplay has a huge impact: According to a Gallup study, managers account for 70 percent or more variance in employee engagement.¹⁰ To avoid the negative impacts of unspoken communication, managers (or anyone in a leadership role) should take a step back and assess the many different ways they might be sending messages to employees.





Leadership

To understand how, as a manager, you are helping — or harming — a team’s engagement just ask yourself the following questions:

1

Have I set the right expectations?

My team at Cornerstone has grown recently — which I’m really excited about — but because we have new faces and a new dynamic, I made sure to gather everyone together to reset expectations. One of the most important things I wanted to accomplish was to create an environment where everyone felt comfortable giving, and taking, feedback.

In her book *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott writes about how Steve Jobs made a habit of putting a strong point of view on the table and demanding responses from the team; he called this “loud listening.” In the meeting, I encouraged my team to adopt this practice. Now, just putting a bullet on my slide about loud listening doesn’t make it easy for my team to do right away. But saying, “It’s okay to disagree,” lays the groundwork for a more open, honest relationship in the future.

2

Have I asked for feedback?

If you’re not confident that your actions or the expectations that you set are being received by your team, run an informal review on yourself. Ask your employees for feedback about how you’re managing (and let them be anonymous if they’d prefer).

This exercise does double duty: you’re gathering information about your own performance, and you’re modeling vulnerability for your team. In the same way

we model our behavior after role models as children, employees will model their behavior after people in positions of influence in the workplace. And the best way to know where you stand as a manager is to create an environment where employees feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback.



3

Can I apologize authentically?

The most important thing when it comes to enhancing team engagement is to know how to apologize. It's something we tell kids over and over again, but many adults don't do it well. I've been on the receiving end of a bad apology (or lack thereof) in my career: I once told a manager that I thought I was owed an apology for the way they spoke to me in front of a group of people. The response was something like, "I'm older than you. I have more experience than you. I don't owe you an apology for anything."

An apology doesn't have to be an admission that someone is right or wrong. I would have been happy to hear something like: "Listen, my intention was not to embarrass or humiliate you. I stand by what I said, but maybe there was a way that I could have done it a little differently." This kind of emotional connection and vulnerability helps rebuild trust.

It might feel overwhelming to be "always on" to keep your team on track. Start by assessing your effectiveness as a manager with these questions, and search for

ways to improve. When you're managing to the best of your ability, you'll start to see a major improvement in your team.

Research shows managers can not only make or break an employee's work experience¹¹ — they can make or break a company's success. High-performing managers (i.e. those who are successful at engaging their team members) contribute 48 percent higher profit to their companies than the average manager.¹²





Stress management

The rise of technology has sped up the pace of work, contributing to a corporate culture where employees are “always on.” While many of these technologies have increased workplace efficiency, they have also contributed to employee stress levels. But technology isn’t going anywhere — in fact, it will probably play an

even larger role in workplaces of the future — so learning how to manage stress is crucial. However, doing so is no small task. It requires employees to be mindful of how they react to challenges and think critically about how these reactions impact those around them.

Work-related stress can have a direct impact on employee happiness and performance. It’s on the rise, increasing by 20% over the past three decades.¹³





Learning corner with Jeffrey Pfeffer: How to redesign jobs to improve employee health and company performance

By Jeffrey Pfeffer

Employers today face an epidemic of workplace stress and depression that takes an enormous toll on employees and company performance. In late 2019, the American Institute of Stress pulled together “42 Worrying Workplace Stress Statistics”¹⁴ from a variety of sources, including Gallup, Korn Ferry, and the American Psychological Association.

Some of the most troubling revelations:

- **83% of U.S. workers** suffer from work-related stress
- **In 2018, a third of U.S.-based respondents** visited a doctor for something stress-related
- **16% of workers** have quit their jobs due to stress

And then there's depression: The American Psychiatric Association reported that depression “significantly impacts productivity”¹⁵ (along with stress, it also leads to absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover¹⁶), and the World Health Organization

noted that it's one of the leading causes of disability.¹⁷ But that's not all: Numerous studies show that depression has physiological repercussions and can increase the risk of heart disease, insomnia, weight gain, and other unexplained aches or pains.¹⁸ No wonder employers are placing more focus on employees' mental and physical health.

But to make a difference, they — and we — need to acknowledge the causes. Research has uncovered some principal sources of workplace-induced stress, anxiety, and depression: job strain resulting from a combination of high job demands and low

job control, long work hours, economic insecurity due to job loss and scheduling uncertainty, low wages that produce economic insecurity, work-family conflict, workplace bullying and harassment, perceived unfairness or a sense of injustice, and a lack of social support.¹⁹ So how do we go about fixing these issues?



Redesigning jobs and work environments to fix the problem

Many of the factors causing stress and burnout can be at least partly remedied if companies stop taking existing jobs and organizational arrangements as sacrosanct and engage in serious redesign initiatives.

2 businesses doing just that: Removing unnecessary distractions

When I wrote a case on SAS, the largest privately owned software company in the world, I interviewed co-founder and CEO Jim Goodnight about the company's 35-hour workweek and what made it possible. Goodnight, his VP of HR and many other SAS employees all had the same response: Few people work 35 productive hours in a week.

SAS successfully reduced distractions that wasted time by providing employees with high-quality help for their life issues. This included on-site childcare, adoption assistance, assistance with elder care, a chief medical officer to help choose the best health providers, and select health plans that didn't bog people down with paperwork.

An emphasis on employee trust and the decentralization of decision-making also eliminated endless "check-in meetings" and the need to get approval — processes that unnecessarily consume much of people's time.





Using automation to relieve burdens

Recently, I met with the CEO of a company that is redesigning the primary care experience for both patients and providers. To be successful, he needs to reduce physician turnover and burnout (a massive problem within the industry²⁰) and to provide an outstanding patient experience by increasing doctors' level of engagement. Doing so requires addressing a dramatic rise in bureaucratic tasks, too many hours spent at work, and the increasing computerization of practice — what some people call desktop medicine.²¹

The company is doing something that any organization can do to reduce the wasted effort that makes long hours necessary and work stressful. I describe it as a “user-centered work design.”

User-centered product design, which was more or less pioneered by IDEO, has become de rigueur and typically includes an almost anthropological observation of people's product experiences.

A user-centered work design takes the same form. The company has hired more than 100 software engineers — and does not use off-the-shelf software. Instead, the engineers engage with physicians to figure out what

tasks can be automated to reduce doctors' workloads and to provide doctors with software designed to be easy to use and helpful. Groups of people from all jobs and levels at the company now meet regularly to determine how to allocate work in ways that reduce stress. This helps the employees figure out what practices, tasks, and operations can be eliminated without any adverse consequences.



Many companies take current job designs and work arrangements for granted, thereby foregoing opportunities to seriously reduce workplace stress.”



Making a real commitment to change

The number of unnecessary work tasks performed on a given day is pretty astounding. Many activities are simply leftovers from long-established policies that no longer serve a purpose. Certain processes, including some owned by human resources — think job requisitions and the now-disappearing annual performance review — do not add significant economic value. And many companies take current job designs and work arrangements for granted, thereby foregoing opportunities to seriously reduce workplace stress.

Some of my colleagues at Stanford's School of Medicine and I conducted more than 20 interviews with supposedly leading-edge companies that have embraced a holistic definition of health and well-being and claim to understand the connections between health and economic performance. We found that most organizations consider their work environments and habits necessary and never question what they are doing or how they are doing it. For instance, one financial services firm never even considered the

idea that its 100-hour work-weeks were neither mandated by law nor useful in attracting or retaining talent. No wonder workplace stress is not only high, but it's also on the rise.¹³

Job redesign to reduce stress — and thereby increase health and productivity — is not a formulaic activity. Just like product design, it requires observation and employee interactions to ascertain how to remove unnecessary tasks and consulting with the people who do the work every day.

Mostly, it requires people who refuse to accept workplace stress and depression as unchangeable and who don't apply Band-Aids like yoga classes and stress-reduction workshops to the problem. Any organization can accomplish this if, and maybe only if, it's willing to place employees at the center of the job redesign process.



Coaching

No one wants to be a micromanager, but leaving employees to find their way with little to no guidance isn't a recipe for success. Research shows that organizations whose leaders successfully empower others through coaching are nearly four

times more likely to make fast, good decisions and outperform their industry peers. But that's not all: strong coaching cultures can lead to increased employee engagement, productivity, improved team function, and even increased revenue growth.

Organizations with strong coaching cultures are more than 2x as likely to also be labeled as high-performing organizations.²²





Coaching

How to turn managers into coaches

By The ReWork Editors

At the core of a successful company, you'll find great culture. When employees unite around common goals and core values, they create a positive and productive work environment.

Organizations are increasingly moving away from traditional training in favor of building coaching cultures. Rather than the customary process of management delegating assignments and solving problems

as they arise, coaching empowers employees to work through challenges by guiding them to a solution. With this method, employees creatively problem solve, assume responsibility for their actions, and feel a greater sense of company identity.

Strong coaching cultures can lead to increased employee engagement and productivity, improved team function, and increased revenue growth.

We spoke with Magda Mook, CEO and executive director of the International Coach Federation (ICF), to learn more about the impact of coaching and how organizations can integrate this philosophy into their own leadership programs.





Coaching

How does coaching differ from traditional training methods?

ICF defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.

The individual or team being coached sets the objectives, and the coach provides guidance on the process.

Training, on the other hand, is based on objectives set by the trainer or instructor. It follows a linear process and adheres to a distinct curriculum. In other words, coaching is about the learner, not about the teacher.

What benefits can companies gain from implementing a coaching culture?

ICF's research with the Human Capital Institute (HCI) has shown that organizations with strong coaching cultures consistently report higher employee engagement and revenue than peer organizations without strong coaching cultures.²²

Companies are losing millions of dollars per year due to low employee engagement.

Anything that can improve this situation is definitely worth the investment, as the return is significant and long-lasting.²³

What challenges come with creating a coaching culture, and how can organizations overcome these obstacles?

The greatest obstacle reported by organizations is lack of time. It's absolutely true that building a coaching culture requires a significant investment of time on multiple fronts: sourcing external coaches, internal training, and coaching engagements.

We've found two ways organizations with strong coaching cultures can overcome this obstacle. First and foremost, ensure the buy-in of senior leadership. If there are vocal coaching champions in the uppermost echelons of an organization, they ensure that building a coaching culture is a priority and promote this mindset throughout the organization. Secondly, don't treat coaching as an add-on to existing training and development programs or employee calendars. Instead, integrate coaching and coaching skills into existing offerings.

“

As you design your organization's coaching culture, take care not to confuse coaching with other modalities such as mentoring or consulting.”





Coaching

How can organizations integrate coaching into their own leadership programs?

First, it's essential to be clear with employees and senior leaders about what coaching is and what it isn't. As you design your organization's coaching culture, take care not to confuse coaching with other modalities such as mentoring or consulting.

Second, invest in a combination of external coach practitioners, internal coach practitioners, and managers or leaders using coaching skills. Not all styles are appropriate for all situations — for example, someone in your C-suite might feel more comfortable with an external coach practitioner.

Finally, set the bar high from day one. Invest in external coach practitioners who meet high professional and ethical standards, and utilize accredited training providers to help your internal coach practitioners meet the same high benchmarks.

Can you share an example of when coaching has helped a particular organization?

Every year, we use the prestigious ICF Prism Award program to recognize organizations that use coaching to yield discernible and measurable positive impacts, fulfill rigorous professional standards, address key strategic goals, and shape organizational culture in sustainable ways.

This year's Prism winner, GlaxoSmithKline, incorporated coaching across their global enterprise. Coaching is integral to their Accelerating Difference (AD) program, an initiative that aims to get more women into senior leadership roles within the organization. Approximately

46 percent of 201324 AD participants have been promoted by at least one level, compared to 26 percent of women and 27 percent of men at the same grades across the organization. AD participants are more likely to

stay at the organization, and their direct reports indicated that AD participants improved in manager effectiveness more than three times faster than a control group.

Even if your organization's current training and development offerings are working well, coaching can take them to the next level by enabling participants to personalize what they're learning in the classroom and think about the immediate applications.





Unconscious bias

Unconscious biases can create discriminatory workplace atmosphere that negatively impacts every people-related interaction or decision. These conditions are harmful to more than just employees: When biases are present, companies risk losing customers and employees and experiencing severe reputational damage. Studies have even found that companies without

ethnically diverse workforces are less innovative²⁵ and profitable²⁶ and are less likely to spot risks.²⁵ To combat this, organizations use diversity and inclusion programs to teach about unconscious biases and how to eliminate them — but, unfortunately, this training is easy to get wrong. Eliminating unconscious biases is a laborious and consistent practice that cannot include shortcuts.

An increase in individuals' feelings of inclusion translates into an increase in perceived team performance (+17%), decision-making quality (+20%), and collaboration (+29%).²⁵





Unconscious bias

How to get your unconscious bias training programs right

By Carol Anderson

Back in May of 2018, Starbucks temporarily closed 8,000 stores to provide unconscious bias training for over 100,000 employees — a decision that was made after an employee stopped two black men from using their onsite restroom in a Philadelphia location. That same year, Papa John's also announced its plans to roll out mandatory bias training across all stores after a former chairman publicly made racist comments and slurs.

As a former chief learning officer for multiple organizations, I don't think either of these training programs amounted to much.

And as a consultant, I can also estimate how much these sessions cost both companies. It's an all-too-common trend: Companies invest heavily in unconscious bias programs that ultimately do little to stop future occurrences. Why? Because it's easier to "train" people for half a day than to do the challenging work of creating an infrastructure of leadership and a culture of diversity and acceptance.

For both fiscal and cultural reasons, every company wants to be welcoming (or at least be perceived as such) to everyone, right? But in practice, it's not that

simple. Whether we realize it or not, humans bring complexity, variability, and bias to the table — and four hours of training won't change that.

To drive real change, organizations need leaders who understand their role in shaping behaviors, and it's up to these leaders to teach employees how to best represent the image of the organization in their work.



Building skills for the future of work



Unconscious bias

Here are three practical ways leaders can shape the culture and behavior of their teams:

1

Don't hide behind the scenes

If you're a manager, your office is a great place to hole up and get work done, but that's not where the real leadership happens. It takes place where employees work — in front of customers and with the products.

Being a leader means regularly listening, observing, and when appropriate, immediately intervening to acknowledge behavior that is exceptional or reprimand behavior that must change. Make it part of your routine to be present and active, side-by-side with employees.

2

Be aware of the situation

Your presence alone isn't enough. Leaders must view the workplace and their employees through the values of the organization. This way you're more open to noticing when the culture that you seek — one of belonging and warmth — is being violated.

Using values as a filter may not come as second nature, especially because this type of leadership is a time consuming and all-encompassing practice. It's critical for leaders to see beyond their point of view, embrace the organization's values, and coach employees, thereby shaping behaviors that represent the values.





Unconscious bias

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3

Find teachable moments

Leaders sometimes view coaching and feedback as something that's provided to employees only when they're doing something wrong. As a result, they are uncomfortable providing feedback regularly because they think it sends the wrong message to workers. But by adopting a teaching mentality, leaders can view feedback as a good thing — a learning or developmental opportunity rather than a corrective one. A mindset of continuous learning goes a long way for opening up a meaningful dialogue.

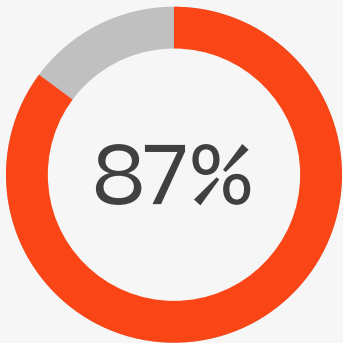
Leaders who understand that shaping their culture is an ongoing process, and approach it from a long-term learning and engagement lens can generate excitement about their organization's value. And that excitement typically lasts a whole lot longer and is much more effective than a four-hour training session.



Emotional intelligence

Workers were once expected to come to work buttoned up and professional, revealing little to no information about their emotions or personal lives. But this approach no longer flies — in fact, managers are now encouraging

employees to do the exact opposite by bringing their whole selves to work. This concept, known more broadly as emotional intelligence, is more than just a skill employees need to master — it's a movement that prioritizes empathy in the workplace. By becoming more emotionally intelligent, employees can manage their stress effectively and grow into a strong leader by managing workers with sensitivity and intention.



of CEOs believe a company's financial performance is tied to empathy in the workplace²⁷





Want to manage distress at work? Improve your emotional intelligence.

By Jeff Miller

When I first started working at Cornerstone, my boss would send me emails and texts that ended with the phrase, “Let’s discuss.”

“What did I forget?” I’d think, “How did I mess up?” I felt distracted, anxious, distressed, and downright stupid. The feeling would stick with me for hours and wouldn’t fully resolve itself until I spoke with her — at which point she would assure me nothing was wrong and that she just wanted to talk further in person. It’s amazing the world we self-create.

Distress is the dark side of stress. Unlike eustress — positive stress, which can actually drive you and help you focus — distress does the opposite. Psychologists call what happens under distress the amygdala hijack, where the amygdala (the emotional center of your brain) takes over your stress response from your frontal cortex (the logical part of your brain).

So how do we mitigate the distress response? By upping our emotional intelligence. I’ve taught hundreds of courses focused on emotional intelligence, and when it comes to distress, it’s critical to start by first acknowledging that it is present and then understanding what causes it. From there, we can figure out how to react to those causes so that moments of intense distress become less frequent and don’t derail you at work — or in life.





Emotional intelligence

Everybody experiences distress differently

To start understanding your distress at work, the first question to ask is: What causes me distress? Make a list and look for patterns. Is it usually caused by a specific kind of request from a client? Or do you experience it most when communicating with your manager?

For most people, what puts you over the edge into full distress can often be traced back to a single, repetitive question — in my case, it's “Is someone doubting my competence?” When my

boss texts me “Let's discuss,” I immediately feel like she doubts my competence. Other common questions include, “Am I not lovable?” and “Am I not important?” — but it's different for everyone.

This process of understanding each person's repetitive question stems from the work of Dr. Taibi Kahler. Kahler is the creator of the Process Communication model, which allows you to understand communication more effectively by encouraging self-reflection, empathy, and conflict resolution.

Once you recognize your pattern, recognize your behavior (and start to change it)

1. They attack – Distress can cause people (me included) to lash out. An attack can vary from an insult to a weird look in a meeting. Instead, attackers should try asking questions. Rather than say, “You don't know what you're talking about,” ask, “I don't understand what you mean by X — can you explain further?”

2. They blame – Another common reaction when someone feels distress is for their self-preservation instinct to take over. Then they can't do anything except throw other people under the bus or look for external factors on which to place blame. Blame is an indicator of an external locus of control (feeling at the mercy of outside forces).

Ending the blame game means shifting toward an internal locus of control, and it can be simple to start. For example, find one thing you could have done to avoid or

improve a situation. That line of thinking not only keeps you from blaming but it also starts to engage your frontal cortex to help you find a more logical way to assess an otherwise distressing situation.

3. They sulk – Rather than returning to work or finding a solution to the problem at hand, some people process distress by withdrawing and becoming apathetic. And it can be challenging for them to get feedback about this behavior because it's a less outward sign of distress.

If your response to distress is to sulk, find a way to step away from work (or whatever the cause of your distress is), even briefly, and try to re-energize, whether it's by exercising or talking to a confidant.





Remember: It's a practice

Communicating about what puts you into distress — and your response to it — can help those around you better understand your actions and reactions.

In the case of the comments from my boss, I finally told her, “When you send me emails that say, ‘Let’s discuss,’ I feel like I’m doing something wrong and feel the need to get defensive — and it drives me crazy.” She explained to me that she was trying to communicate something different altogether (in one instance, that we should discuss on Monday after I enjoyed my weekend). Now, I make a conscious effort to interpret her emails differently, though she hasn’t sent me a message saying those two words since.

The only person who can get you out of distress is you. But it’s a long-term practice, full of self-reflection. Soliciting feedback from managers and peers about how you are managing your distress can be a valuable tool in tempering its impact on your work.

Being able to understand ourselves in this ever-changing world of work (as corny as that may sound) is really important. Investigating who we are, what triggers us, and what drives us can help increase our emotional intelligence at work, making us better employees, colleagues, and leaders no matter the industry or role.

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Active listening

Our daily attempts at being talented multitaskers — ones who can complete projects while firing off emails, checking Slack notifications, and running between meetings — are only worsening our ability to listen and thoughtfully process what people around us are saying. (Not to mention, we're not actually doing as great a job we think we are.) Being a good listener involves more than not speaking when someone else is talking and nodding along. To truly absorb what's being said — and ideally apply that information to better our understanding of a person, topic, or problem — we need to do a whole lot more.

Within eight hours of listening to a talk, the average listener tends to forget from one-half to one-third of what they've learned.²⁸





Can you hear me now? A guide to active listening.

By Ira Wolfe

Anytime we talk about listening, my mind immediately travels back a decade or so to Verizon's "Test Man" character. Played by actor Paul Marcarelli, he's best known as the guy who asks, "Can you hear me now?" in Verizon ads. Like many other famous media catchphrases, it's now part of commercial history.

Verizon may have made it so that fewer people have to ask "Can you hear me now?" when speaking on the phone, but no one has solved the larger challenge: To truly be heard amid all the digital noise and everyday distractions, we need to become better at active listening. And it's up to us to fight against shrinking attention spans²⁹ and improve the way we connect with each other.





Why we're so bad at active listening

Active listening is a bit of a misnomer. Leaders want to be heard. Managers want to be heard. Salespeople want to be heard. Employees want to be heard.

But they also need to learn to listen.

We spend nearly half of our days³⁰ listening compared to 30 percent speaking, 16 percent reading, and 9 percent writing. But even though listening is the communication skill we use most frequently, it is also the skill in which we've had the least training. Only 2 percent of us are taught how to listen.³¹ It's no wonder most of us struggle to do it intentionally.

Our difficulty listening isn't just an attitude or behavioral problem — it's a cognitive one. We speak at 125 words per minute, but we listen at 400 words per minute.

Author and host of the podcast Deep Listening, Oscar Trimboli calls this the “125–400 rule of listening.”³² As a result, the likelihood that we can express an idea in our head completely and others can understand it the very first time we speak is very low.

Another rule that makes it difficult to actively listen? The 125/900 rule.³³ We think at a rate of 900 words per minute, but words come out at only 125 words per minute. The result? Immediately after speaking, the listener only remembers half of what they heard, no matter how carefully they thought they were listening. Add a few glances at the clock or emails and Slack messages, and we squander what few listening skills we actually have.

Since listening doesn't come naturally to most people, we need to take extra steps to ensure people nail this skill. According to Trimboli, failure to listen leads to:

- 1. A feeling of disrespect or belittlement by others**
- 2. Limited frame of reference or context**
- 3. Assumptions and misunderstanding**
- 4. Poor and boring conversation**



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How to become an active listener

The good news is that there are plenty of things you can do to improve your active listening skills in addition to making it easier for people to listen to you. Here are a few tips — according to the experts.



1

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood”

This is habit five of Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Trimboli adds a twist: “Seek to understand rather than just listen,” he says. In other words, to be a good listener, you need to remember that you are not the most important person in the conversation.

2

Listen and observe

Active listening is not a passive activity. During a conversation, most people focus only on the words being spoken, but words make up only 7 percent of effective communication.³⁴ Body language (both yours and the speaker’s) impacts more than half of the messaging. The tone and pace of the conversation make up the rest. Pay attention to the body language of the speaker. Gestures, facial expressions, and motions are all nonverbal cues that send a strong message. Your posture affects how you listen, too.

3

Ask thoughtful questions

Help the other person gather some of those 400 words still stuck in his or her head that haven’t traveled past the lips yet. How- and what-based questions move conversations along and are less intimidating than why.

4

Become a master of the pause

All excellent listeners are masters of the pause and demonstrate comfort with silences, suggests Brian Tracy. Treat a pause like it’s another word in the conversation, Trimboli adds. The breath or the moment of silence isn’t the time for you to jump in. Let the speaker revisit what they haven’t yet expressed.

Conclusion

Once companies know which skills to focus on, the hard work of developing them begins. These eight skills are soft skills, and developing them is a constant process. Given today's tightened time constraints and higher business demands, learning has to be easy and accessible enough for employees to make time for it during their busy day.

To make sure employees are continuously prioritizing their soft skill development, companies need to rethink their strategy. Not only must learning be made a constant, but it should be paired together with performance. There are actionable ways of doing this: For one, keeping courses relatively short and consumable can help employees engage with the material. The average human attention span is eight seconds, so it's better to catch their attention within the first

few moments — or risk losing it altogether. Similarly, by making digital learning courses easily accessible, employees can complete courses when it works best for them.

And to be sure that this learning results in actual changes, companies must examine their content. Even after receiving a lesson on active listening, employees won't necessarily understand how to begin practicing it. But demonstrating how pausing during meetings to allow others to speak up is one way to practice active listening, for example, can start to reinforce the concept. Or in a lesson on leadership, be sure the content is highly contextual and situational. Demonstrate the techniques, words, and body language of what a great leader looks like at your company. Content in isolation is not going to do much — but

content mixed with conversations, activities, and experiences that your employees know and understand can actually develop these skills.

Finally, set clear goals and expectations for your learning program. Building soft skills will not immediately result in better business outcomes — but it is one step towards a broader goal of building teams that are more engaged, efficient, skilled, and prepared for the workplace of the future.



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