

The Key to SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL LEARNING INITIATIVES Comes Down to This



Like so much these days, corporate learning is undergoing a big transformation. In fact, more and more organizations are grappling with how to implement an impactful learning strategy for a dispersed workforce.

Learning professionals have been clamoring to develop new ways to communicate and engage employees, and implementing initiatives to develop talent or change a corporate culture can be challenging to do well remotely.

“How do you demonstrate leadership’s support and commitment to a new initiative when employees are remote? How do you compete for their attention when they are surrounded by potential distractions—both work and home?” asks Jeff Becker, Director of Corporate Learning Solutions at American Management Association (AMA). “These are some of the common issues our clients are having when they partner with us for change initiatives.”

To engage employees in talent development opportunities, organizations must effectively define, align, and execute their learning development plans using techniques that are effective both for adult learners and for virtual delivery.

DON'T SKIP THE FIRST STAGE: DEFINING THE BUSINESS ISSUE AT HAND

“Often, we find clients want to jump right into the execution of a virtual learning initiative,” says Becker. “But the first stage, where you define your program and its objectives, is where you should spend the bulk of your time.” The *define* stage is where you identify a clear vision for your program, and a compelling reason to move forward. It’s often in this stage that mistakes are made.

“It’s important to not lose sight of what you’re trying to accomplish at your organization in the long-term,” says Becker. “There’s often a behavior or a skill issue the learning is intended to address. Underneath that, though, is usually a deeper issue, a problem that is caused by that behavior or lack of skill. This is the real problem the learning needs to ultimately tackle to be successful.”

To get at that deeper problem, ask yourself:

- What specifically are we trying to improve or change?
- Why is this important to the company? To the team? To the individual?
- Are we in alignment on what needs to change?
- Have we clearly communicated this with everyone involved?
- How will we know this training helped our people? What will success *look* like?

These questions will often reveal the deeper issue at stake.

“We often find that assumptions in this stage, for example, that building up a particular competency will address an underlying business concern, can be wrong or inadequate as a solution,” says KC Blonski, Vice President, Corporate Learning Solutions at AMA. “We’ve found it’s best to start with the ‘why’ and make sure we’re partnering to develop the best solution for our clients. Sometimes there’s a mix of competencies needed, and sometimes those competencies need to be tailored and very clearly defined within an organization’s own culture and vision. This is why our corporate solutions always begin with an assessment between current capabilities and desired future state before we lay out a strategy and implementation plan.”

Once you’re clear on the underlying issue, you must make the connection between the issue(s) and the planned learning experience crystal clear to learners.



Leaders need to ask questions and listen to the feedback as it will often point out what should happen next. This conveys real commitment and will further increase the potential for success.



ALIGN: THE STAGE WHERE LEARNING INITIATIVES OFTEN FAIL

Alignment includes two critical steps:

1. Obtain a commitment from top leaders in your organization
2. Establish the value for learners

Adult learners are quite savvy. They know that they can spend a long time and a lot of effort learning new skills only to discover they weren't very important to leadership. In fact, employees have become adept at sifting through organizational communications to glean which information they really need to know to be successful. This is why it's extremely important to have buy-in and participation from your organization's leaders in a meaningful way.

In a recent poll by AMA of 400 HR and learning professionals, more than 60% said that *leaders demonstrating commitment* was the area they really struggled with and needed to improve. Demonstrating leadership commitment can be tricky in a virtual environment where employees don't have as much interaction or exposure to high-level leaders. So, what does leadership commitment look like in a virtual environment?

"They need to do more than simply kicking off the first session," says Becker. "That's a good start, but leaders are capable of contributing in a more meaningful fashion. When it is valuable and not inhibiting open communication, leaders should participate in the training events." It shows their commitment to the initiative and their commitment to self-development, including their own. Leaders need to go the extra mile and participate in follow-up conversations with both participants and their managers. Most important, leaders need to ask questions and listen to the feedback, as it will often point out what should happen next. This conveys real commitment and will further increase the potential for success.

Leaders should:

- Ask questions and listen openly; be curious
- Reference the learning in communications
- Reference, again, the connection between the learning and the business issue(s) it addresses
- Monitor and celebrate successes
- Offer additional coaching to help those who would benefit

In the end, you get what you measure. Leaders who demonstrate they are expecting results from a learning initiative send a strong message to employees that they need to get on board.

ADULTS NEED TO KNOW WHY

From the employee's perspective, new initiatives can feel like just another distraction. This is especially true when it's virtual and your learning program competes with their daily lives. Employees need to feel like the learning is fundamental to what they do and to the future of the company, and that it's not just a passing fad they can ignore. This is the *why*—*why* do I need to learn this? Why is it crucial to the company, and why do I need to focus on it *right now*.

Relevance and urgency are two critical components of a successful virtual program, especially for adult learners. Research into brain-based education supports this.



The adult brain learns better when it's clear that the learning is purposeful and will be useful later. But there are other brain-based techniques that will influence the success of your virtual learning.

Adults learn faster and better when they:

- Want to learn
- Know why something is important to master
- Feel that learning will help them in measurable ways
- Are comfortable and do not feel threatened
- Are confident they have the ability to learn

ALIGNMENT IS ABOUT MORE THAN LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

Even with leadership commitment, that is only half of alignment. The employee has to be aligned to the goals of the initiative and to its success.

So how do you get this kind of alignment between leadership and employees? Include your leaders in the project from the start, and throughout the process. They need to support the focus and the issues that need to be addressed by developing your people. Real leadership commitment is shown continually over time—at kickoff, during and throughout the initiative, and most important—*after* the initiative is over. Ask leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the organization and the development plan by regularly participating in meetings and group learning sessions, and by connecting it to other initiatives employees are involved in. If you've done the work to clearly define the initiative, it will be clear how it fits and will benefit your people and the organization.

When employees are physically in the workplace, you can reinforce your messaging by leveraging the office environment. You can engage in impromptu conversations in the hall to solicit feedback and progress, or alter seating, for example, to reinforce new reporting structures or to demonstrate a flatter organizational structure.

Aligning employees when you're virtual takes more planning and a more active role on the part of leaders and managers. Managers have learned that to lead remote teams effectively, they need to communicate clearly and more often. To set the stage for a successful learning experience, managers must start early and be transparent about why the team member is going to participate in the training and how it relates to their specific work. Adults learn best "in context," so managers need to be able to clearly articulate the connection to the work.

How can you do that?

"Anchor it to something," says Becker. "Performance management, development plans, competencies...these all help give your initiative structure and help employees ensure their daily behaviors are supporting it." Coaching conversations and performance goals help link the learning to the employee. Before you execute your plan, make sure your leaders and managers understand their role in this process.



EXECUTE: IMPART KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS THROUGH AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING PROCESS

As part of the define stage, you should have established the specific skills, knowledge, and behaviors that your organization wants to emphasize to improve performance and change behavior. You likely also defined the content you will use to achieve those learning objectives.

But before you jump into executing that content, you need to ensure it is delivered in a way that employees can quickly learn *and* retain it. This is best done by ensuring it engages and stimulates employees by providing activities for them to perform.

"As many learning professionals know, if all the participants are getting a lecture, they might retain about 5% of it," says Becker. "If you supplement that with reading, you will increase to about 10%. Audio and visual presentations might get you to 20% of retention if they aren't distracted. But that's not enough. You want to stimulate their minds visually and engage them."

Demonstration will bring retention rates up to 30%. "If I allow discussion during the demonstration, retention can go up to 50%," says Becker. "At AMA, we see how important discussion is to help participants retain knowledge, and that makes sense. If I get to talk about it, I'm going to understand it a bit more."

However, says Becker: "If I get to actually do it and bring it to life by using the skills, I am now up to 75%. This is why we always incorporate experiential learning to any change initiative at AMA."

You can get retention even higher, though. "If participants get to actually teach others how to do something...then we're upwards of 90% from a retention standpoint," says Becker. Having participants coach co-workers in their new skills is a great way to do this. It not only reinforces the learning, it reverberates beyond the group that took the learning and leads to lasting behavioral change—both for the participants and for others throughout the organization. It becomes a cultural change.

Adult learners will get more out of your virtual learning if they:

- Obtain information in more than one format
- Perform a task to learn it
- Have the opportunity to practice
- Are given feedback and praise
- Are asked to re-teach it to others

In addition, the organization must also consider what process or barriers your learners are going to face when trying to practice and implement changes.

A good way to effectively remove barriers is to ask learners for feedback. Your employees are the individuals best equipped to identify whether a change or new process will impact the flow of work internally or, more importantly, your customers. Giving your employees a way to provide feedback helps them feel that they are a part of the change to improve. You will also often learn about other related areas of need as new skills are applied in real work scenarios. Behaviors will change only after practice is allowed to happen over time with supportive feedback.



MEASURING OUTCOMES IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

In the define stage, we emphasized that knowing the business problem your initiative is designed to address is crucial. Maybe you were trying to reduce turnover or ensure managers could effectively mentor their team members. Did you solve the original issue at the heart of your learning development plan? Can you prove it using the data you collected?

Just as it's difficult for leaders to demonstrate commitment virtually, it can be difficult to measure success when employees are remote. Some measures, such as turnover, are obvious. Less clear, however, is employee engagement or whether an adequate amount of coaching is going on.

Employee feedback, especially when solicited informally and over time, can be extremely insightful.

"The biggest piece of feedback that we hear around a virtual implementation is questions around *why*," says Becker. "And it doesn't mean we haven't determined why. Often we haven't adequately communicated why." This can be addressed through reinforcement from managers and leaders.

"We're finding that virtual initiatives require more reinforcement than in-person learning," says Blonski. "This is in part because employees don't see their managers and leaders as frequently, and the initiative can feel out of context. Incorporating the *why* into informal conversations between managers and employees can help a lot to reinforce messaging and is something we often incorporate into the learning plans we develop for clients."

THE MOST IMPORTANT STEP: ASSESSING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S NEED

COVID accelerated many trends that were already occurring, such as a more dispersed workforce. The effects of those changes will reverberate long after the pandemic recedes into memory. How will your organization fare when the dust settles? Will your current initiatives inspire a more engaged, productive workforce, or will they fall flat? The best way to ensure your solution will work is to assess where you are now, define the objectives and goals, and then develop the strategy to get there.

In the end, the real measure of success for corporate learning initiatives is in meaningful behavioral change, which can only happen through proper evaluation and design:

Ask about AMA's assessment process and implementation matrix to support your learning strategy.

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