



Professional Development

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Managers as Students

Managers are people too. They have to be trained on new capabilities to grow professionally, just like any other employee. But when it comes to what they want to learn about and how they want to learn about it, they're quite distinct from the rest of the workforce. This is due to a few factors, but it all boils down to time — they don't have much of it to spare.

"As a person rises in an organization, there are often more challenges to become an active learner," said Nikole Mac, a consultant in the learning and development department at the University of Iowa. "Setting aside time to come to the classroom is a challenge, as people are often busier in higher levels."

This lack of availability appreciably influences their learning consumption preferences, said Drew Morton, who heads up learning initiatives for management at IBM. Morton is responsible for developing the company's 30,000 managers, in addition to 10,000 employees on the verge of assuming a management position.

"I would say they're more sophisticated in their demands as learners," he said. "Because of the time pressures of managers, they demand more sophisticated learning."

"When you finally get them together in a classroom, they don't want instruction, they don't want to hear a lecture — they could do that on a podcast or a conference call. They want to have real simulations and role-playing. They want to roll up their sleeves and solve some business problems. We condition them to that. About seven years ago, we started on this path, using a four-tiered, blended model that goes well beyond just e-learning or classroom instruction. When managers get together in a learning lab, they want discussions, simulations and coaching, not presentations and PowerPoint slides."

Because of severe time constraints, learning can be a very hard sell for this audience, said Glenn Peterson, director of learning technology support and operations at information storage provider EMC.

"Managers are different, and you have to handle them differently," he said. "Managers don't have a whole lot of time, so they need to have very focused content and training, so they can take it during the little gaps in their workload."

There are a few ways to entice managers to be active and enthusiastic participants in learning programs, though. One of these is demonstrating that organizational education affects all levels of a company, from an entry-level new hire to the CEO.

"I'd say that it's important for managers as learners to understand that learning is occurring at all levels in the organization, and that they see the value in the experience," Mac said.

Additionally, organizations must make learning and the behaviors it produces an official priority and clearly publicize that fact.

"The biggest challenge is fighting for their attention — I call it their 'mind real estate,'" Morton said. "One of the things we've done is hold managers accountable for learning. We made a development plan for IBM employees. We created seven manager behaviors that we measure as part of their annual assessment. We actually assess managers on their effectiveness in addition to their business results."

Another way to attract managers to educational programs is by using instructors and subject-matter experts who have gravitas with that audience, Peterson said.

"You need to sample the audience and find out what will work for them. Then you have to go to credible sources within that organization or within organizations that line up with that organization. For instance, we may go out and look at how Cisco management does things."

Perhaps the most important factor in developing learning programs that will be valued by management, however, is to blend several accessible modalities into one training suite.

"I'm very open to the blended learning approach," Peterson said. "A blend of mentoring from credible sources is necessary for a manager to go forward. It's got to be just in time, so that managers can do it at 8 p.m. or 5:30 a.m."

Ideally, this blended learning package will include many opportunities for highly social and interactive learning opportunities, Mac said.

"After doing this for several years, one of the things I have found is if it's more interactive, it's going to be more successful. When I do curriculum development for a manager-level class, I know I need to have an opportunity for those leaders to discuss what we're talking about with each other. They have to be involved in a discussion about the content to see the value in it. For the management series specifically, we embed a lot of interactive components."

Any lecture components of this suite should be delivered in pithy, just-in-time learning objects, Morton said.

"If you're going to lecture, they're OK with it, but they don't want to spend a lot of time on it. They prefer snippets when they need it. We have a tremendous amount of learning assets on the Web they can go use, whether it's a video, simulation or a 'CliffsNotes' version of books. It's knowing what kind of learning works when."

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