WHY LEARNING TOGETHER IS SUPERIOR, SUSTAINABLE & SCALABLE

BY BEN BROOKS

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Foreword

FOREWORD

A common misconception is that managers are the best people to develop employees. Managers do play a key role and have a unique perspective in supervising and developing employees. But today's flatter organizations mean managers have a wider span of control and less time to develop any given team member.

What's missing from the employee development conversation is leveraging the employees themselves. Behavioral research has proven that when people change behaviors as a group they attain superior and more durable results, and that this extends to employee development.

-Ben Brooks, PILOT Founder and CEO

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Surfacing the Knowledge
In The Room

SURFACING THE KNOWLEDGE IN THE ROOM

I was at a professional writers retreat a few years ago. If I had to guess, I'd say we had all taken the minimum number of mathematics courses required to finish high school.

Due to a scheduling error, the main presenter on the third day was booked to speak to us about derivative investments. Fifteen minutes in we were thoroughly lost and it seemed impossible anyone would be learning anything over the next two hours.

Then from the back of the room, the CEO of a local non-profit put up her hand and asked "I'm sorry, I forget. What's a derivative?" We all exhaled in unison. Over the next half hour, she asked a series of rudimentary questions as the speaker continued on. Other hands started going up around the room. By hour two we were all exasperated by the presenter's inability to speak our language and those of us with more knowledge started answering each other's questions in the clearest way possible.

After the session ended and we all sat down for lunch, I asked the CEO about her persistent questions. She smiled and said she didn't care if it made her look clueless, she just wanted to get us all to a place where we might learn something.

I think about this often. When I am in a room full of people, I wonder what would happen if we could pool all of our knowledge and skills? What would we be able to accomplish?

SURFACING THE KNOWLEDGE IN THE ROOM

"What problems would be able to solve? What could we achieve?"

This is a good question for managers to ask themselves next time they are trying to create an opportunity for their employees to grow. As it stands, one-on-one employee feedback and development conversations are a weak link in the process because they rely on the skill of each particular manager.

We rarely create structures and spaces for employees to openly share about their growth and development with *each other.*

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Gather Feedback From the Crowd

GATHER FEEDBACK FROM THE CROWD

One of the most important things to instill in any culture is celebrating learning and growth. This means taking a step back from our perfectionist tendencies. Instead, we should celebrate those who are open and vulnerable about the feedback they receive, the areas in which they want to develop, the mistakes they make along the way, and their incremental progress in doing so.

We have made feedback something shameful to be embarrassed about. Instead, we should think of feedback like we do data and analytics at our firms, something highly valuable that helps us to be smarter.

Eric Mosley, the author of The Crowdsourced Performance Review, maintains that the concept behind *"the wisdom of crowds"* is that collective knowledge is always superior to individual knowledge.

He says: *"When we tap into the knowledge and/or opinions of a group of people rather than a single expert to answer a question, we end up with a more informed and complete picture of reality."*

How often are we bringing employees together, creating intentional spaces and structures to do this?

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Building The Foundation
For Group Learning

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BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR GROUP LEARNING

We know that social learning drives intelligence. That is why getting manager feedback only once or twice a year in a formalized performance review is not enough to reliably change behavior.

Here are six ways to ensure your workplace is set up for social learning success:

1.

Design programs and systems that "take a village" rather than rely only on managers.

2.

Have employees take ownership of their development, making it easier for managers to support their growth with right-sized asks.

3.

Create a culture where growth, learning, and continuous professional development are celebrated.

4.

Ask employees to openly share their development goals and objectives, as well as the feedback they've received.

5.

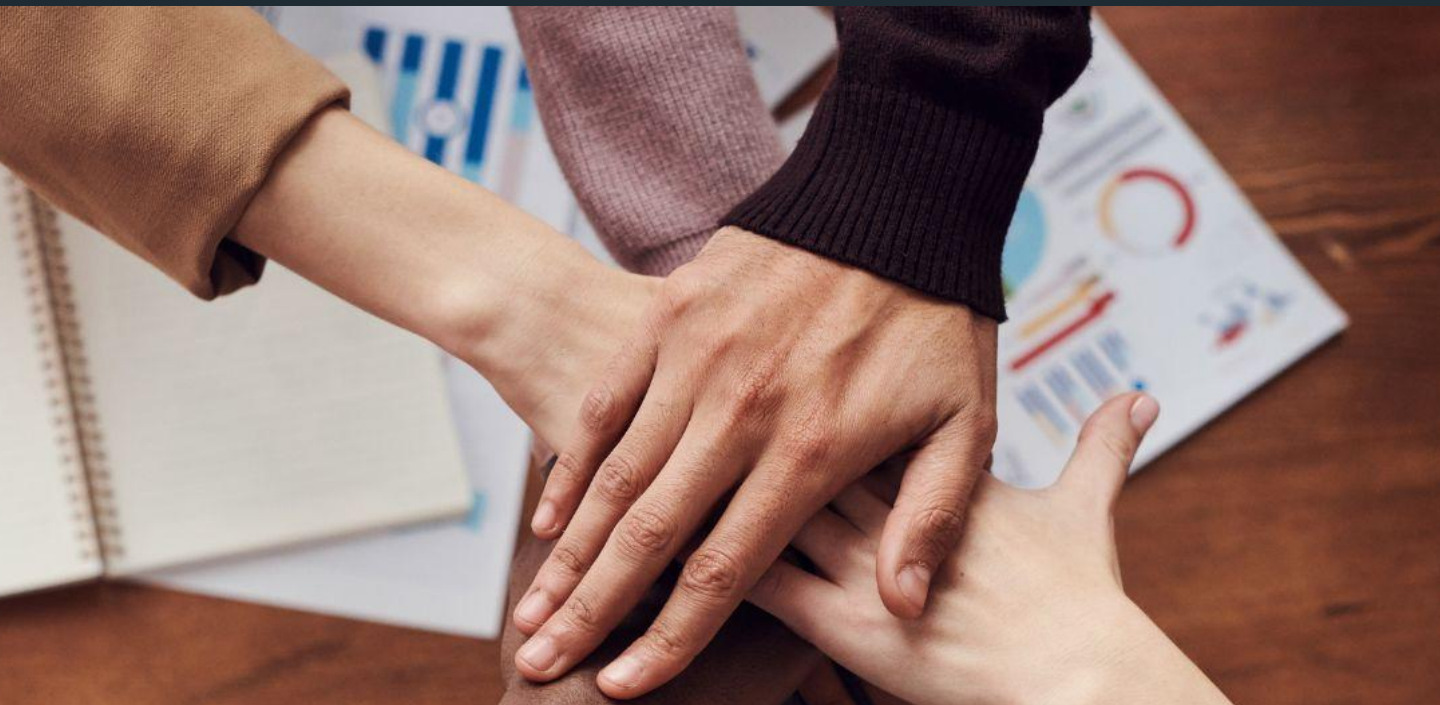Move away from "expert culture" where everyone seeks to look perfect and pretends to know it all.

6.

Create a supportive, affirming environment that inspires employees to make time for themselves and their development.

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Sharing the Burden and Benefits of Vulnerability

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SHARING THE BURDEN AND BENEFITS OF VULNERABILITY

In their book, The Expertise Economy, Kelly Palmer and David Blake document that managers generally feel that sending participants to an expert-led training session will have more value than creating regular opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

This is a misconception. In Harvard Business Review, Palmer and Blake lay out the benefits of learning as a group.

"Peer-to-peer learning is uniquely well suited to the way we learn. People gain new skills best in any situation that includes all four stages of what we call the 'Learning Loop': gain knowledge; practice by applying that knowledge; get feedback; and reflect on what has been learned. Peer-to-peer learning encompasses all of these."

"Peer-to-peer learning also gives participants the chance to share the burden -- and benefits! -- of vulnerability."

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SHARING THE BURDEN AND BENEFITS OF VULNERABILITY

In one-on-ones with managers, many employees are reluctant to ask questions for the fear of being judged. But in a group setting, they don't have to be the ones to speak up first. All it takes is one person being vulnerable enough to raise their hand and ask for clarification to give permission for others in the room to do the same.

When this happens, a true leader will celebrate those who are brave enough to ask questions or share a different perspective, setting the stage for others to do the same.

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Case Study: At Marsh Everyone Is a Teacher. What Will You Teach?

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CASE STUDY: AT MARSH EVERYONE IS A TEACHER. WHAT WILL YOU TEACH?

Joe McSweeny, a President at Marsh Insurance, did a tour of company offices in 2009. He was surprised by what he discovered. Many of the people he spoke with didn't have what he considered basic business knowledge.

"It became evident to me that the broad swath of our colleague base did not understand earnings, and all that goes with that," McSweeny said. "They did not understand how a public company functions or what its purpose is."

For years Joe tried to increase the financial acumen of Marsh employees with limited success. Insurance brokers and risk management experts were reluctant to admit they didn't already know this information. Finally, the company opted to create an opportunity for everyone to get up to speed as a group.

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CASE STUDY: AT MARSH EVERYONE IS A TEACHER. WHAT WILL YOU TEACH?

At the time, PILOT Founder & CEO Ben Brooks was SVP and Global Director of HR at Marsh. In collaboration with key colleagues he created Marsh U, an online community where employees shared knowledge and perspectives.

They designed it to be part Q&A forum, part social network, and part learning platform. What Ben and his team created ended up being more than the sum of its parts. The platform helped drive organic revenue growth and increased measurable employee engagement, while developing the staff's financial acumen.

Seeing the way this project invigorated company culture, Brooks realized that individuals don't do well when trying to change, grow, or learn on their own. We are all looking for opportunities to rely on, work with, and support each other.

"Generally speaking people want to make a difference in the world, and that includes at work,"

Brooks explains.

"One of the best ways to do this is to empower them to help fellow colleagues. Give them permission, create structures and spaces for them to connect, and erase the notion that more years of experience or higher titles are required to help provide wisdom, support and accountability."

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What Happens When We Learn Together

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE LEARN TOGETHER

As far as Brooks is concerned, "If you have employees on your payroll who have neither the willingness nor the capability to help their fellow colleagues grow and succeed, they very likely shouldn't be on your payroll much longer."

If you *do* have employees who embrace opportunities to discover what they can teach and learn from each other, those people are great assets to your company. Here are some of the advantages of learning as a group:

1.

Even the highest-performing employees find ways to consistently prioritize their growth through group accountability.

2.

Thanks to what researchers call "shared cognition" and "transactive memory", group learners retain more of what they learn together, creating sustainable change.

3.

Managers are relieved of the burden and guilt of "carrying all of the water" when it comes to the growth and development of their teams.

4.

HR isn't expected to manage an employee's development, as employees learn to take charge of their own careers.

5.

The organization sees a reduction in the painful and costly turnover of employees who feel stymied due to lack of development.

6.

Staff realizes their current organization is the best place to develop and advance, rather than seeking greener pastures.

7.

Relationships will deepen as employees feel a sense of connection and belonging with each other, even across teams.

8.

Workplace culture inspires employees to become the best versions of themselves.

As *The 8 Step Guide To Building a Social Workplace* author Adi Gaskell reports in Forbes, cooperative interaction, which requires all parties to be willing to be engaged with the ideas of other people, is crucial to getting the kind of diverse teams that have been well documented to boost innovation, productivity, and creativity.

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Conclusion

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LAST WORDS FROM BEN

It's time to move into the future. Transform your culture to one where continuous growth and development are celebrated. Empower your employees to contribute to the growth of their colleagues, fostering deeper relationships at the same time.

PILOT is built to help you do exactly this. Take the plunge! Make everyone at your organization a lifelong learner by getting more information about PILOT's program.

-Ben Brooks, PILOT Founder and CEO

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Learn how to send your employees through PILOT's development program

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