



# L&D'S ROLE in Employee Engagement

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Ensuring employees have the tools,  
resources, and processes needed  
to support professional development

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# L&D'S ROLE in Employee Engagement

Ensuring employees have the tools, resources, and processes needed to support professional development.

Each year, countless surveys reveal employees' level of engagement with their companies, often bemoaning the fact that organizations aren't doing enough to maintain their workers' interest, connection, and loyalty. And that may very well be the case. But it's not just the company's responsibility—employees also must take responsibility for their own career development and their own engagement with a little help from the Learning & Development (L&D) function.

Maintaining employee engagement isn't easy, but it can become easier, as *Training* magazine's

Training Top 10 Hall of Fame companies know.

Success depends, in large part, on listening to what matters most to employees, and then acting to the extent possible to ensure those needs are met. Employees want challenges, opportunities to grow, and recognition in the form of certifications that matter in their profession. Top 10 Hall of Fame companies recognize their role is to provide support while also working through change management issues and pushing leaders to be able to motivate their people.

As such, their employees have no doubt that they are in control of their own development plans, and that they can turn to their L&D function for resources.

This white paper explores the strategies Training Top 10 Hall of Fame organizations use to engage their employees at all levels throughout the company, in good economies and bad. Case studies explore their approaches to onboarding, engaging middle managers, aligning engagement to business objectives, developing relevant learning modules, and building an improvement-driven culture.

## What Is Engagement?

Organizations define engagement differently. Some rely on measurable metrics such as increased products to market or improved retention. Others define engagement by individuals' discretionary efforts, such as arriving early and staying late, helping colleagues without being asked, attending organizational events, or wearing the company logo. Still others define engagement as actively seeking information that affects their industry and their role in it.

As one Hall of Famer notes, employee

### CASE STUDY: Scorecard

New hire engagement is sufficiently important that it merits the same level of structured support as any major capability initiative. We work with business leaders to define the metrics that measure success—essentially Kirkpatrick Level 1-4 measurements. We measure engagement annually, quantified on a five-point scale, and publish those scores to all officers.

If scores are low for a manager or a team, L&D convenes a group meeting. We begin by discussing what elements have high scores and why, and then develop strategies to maintain those scores. Then we discuss low-scoring areas. We've noticed that a leading cause of low-scoring items is misalignment of definitions between the leader and the team and among team members.

To correct that, we developed an "Engagement Definition Canvas" that contains one survey question and the five-point survey scale. Team members are asked to agree on broad definitions for the terms used in the question—"senior leader" for example—and then to define behaviors that correlate to each point on the five-point scale. Near the end, those definitions are gathered into one canvas that leaves the team leader with a clear understanding of what is needed to improve engagement in that specific area. We repeat this process for each low-scoring survey question.

engagement is made up of multiple factors, not just one, and when taken together, links directly to results:

- **Teaming:** I belong
- **Stimulating work:** I stretch to the edge of my ability
- **Recognition and rewards:** I am valued
- **Empowerment:** I shape my experience
- **Developmental feedback:** I am advancing
- **Effective communications:** I am in the know

Ultimately, engagement is defined by each organization's specific needs.

Regardless of what definition is used, it is crucial to develop metrics to ensure it is aligned to the business interests of your organization and its customers. Tying metrics to engagement freed one Hall of Famer from tracking ROI data that wasn't requested, wasn't believed, and wasn't used.

Another Hall of Famer uses an annual Talent Survey to take the pulse on its employees' perspective. The company combines four specific questions into what it calls its annual Employee Engagement Index:

1. Overall, I am extremely satisfied with this company as a place to work.
2. I would gladly refer a good friend or family member to this company for employment.
3. I am proud to be an employee of this company.
4. I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company.

It's also important to realize that organizations change and activities that once supported engagement may no longer be relevant to the company today. For example, one organization found no correlation between training and customer satisfaction levels, reaching sales quotas, or other meaningful data. A subsequent review showed it was doing exactly the right things to ensure engagement—for the business as it existed a

few years ago! The lesson was to refresh its engagement strategies, and quickly.

Enhancing engagement also may require considering the values of the Millennial generation. As a group, they value technology, so migrating learning opportunities onto apps can boost engagement.

Even for categories of employees, motivations and expectations vary. For example, motivations for career executives are different than for call center employees

### CASE STUDY: Show, Don't Tell

"Show, don't tell." That's the foundation of our approach to sales training, and it's responsible for increased sales within only a few weeks of deployment.

Relevant, customizable online coursework supported by role-playing, real-world experiences, and coaching helps sellers connect with their clients, increasing pipeline opportunities, closing more deals, and increasing customer and partner satisfaction. Specifically, the program pairs sellers with managers to show sellers how to focus on solutions rather than products and, therefore, have more productive discussions with decision-makers. Participants also have access to "Super Coaches"—sellers nominated by their field leaders who are trained to conduct deep-dive practice and coaching sessions.

That pairing is supported by four 45-minute video-based online courses focused on priority solution areas. Each video includes an executive interview about the importance of strategic solutions, a role-playing scenario demonstrating the strategy in action, a role-relevant knowledge check, and additional resources.

The coursework was developed with the involvement of the alliance managers responsible for relationships with business groups; the curriculum manager, who is responsible for content development and quality control; the project manager; multiple vendors; and stakeholders across multiple business groups and segments.

Because the courses are integrated into existing events, sellers spend more time selling and less time traveling to workshops. It is deployed globally and can be adjusted quickly in response to changing strategies and conditions.



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who expect a good working environment and plan to change jobs in a few years. Therefore, be highly critical when examining your motivations for increasing engagement and what engagement means to you—particularly during the early stages of an engagement effort.

Increasing employee involvement in their careers or in the company must not be an end in itself. Instead,

engagement should be a tactic in a larger strategy, for a greater purpose. That greater purpose typically is defined as the success of the business. Even for nonprofits, that means profitability. As one Hall of Famer explains, “We know that if we don’t have engaged employees, we won’t have engaged customers. Engaged customers means repeat business and word-of-mouth advertising. So, for us, engaged employees + engaged customers = profitability.”

## CASE STUDY: Onboarding

Market performance correlates directly to the success of the onboarding process, defined as the degree to which employees assimilate into the corporate culture. Therefore, onboarding continues for one to two years.

Each Monday, throughout the world, our new employees begin a general orientation that covers the corporate history, vision, strategy, and employee benefits. This is followed by an online “Welcome Experience” with self-paced learning experiences that must be completed during the first 90 days of employment. Afterward, the onboarding process is segmented by function. Engineers and recent college graduates constitute the two largest categories.

The Welcome Experience occurs in a virtual world depicting a futuristic headquarters. From the lobby, employees may enter various rooms to learn about their region, business segment, and their particular roles. This ensures employees have the same onboarding experience regardless of geographic location. Importantly, the virtual experience is augmented with personal interaction with a regional advisor who knows the local strategies, teams, and facilities to help new employees integrate more easily.

Additional functional orientation is provided for certain groups needing specialized information. For example, engineers access information about roles and responsibilities, as well as the soft skills they typically didn’t study in college, such as collaboration strategies and time management. Each online element lasts 15 to 30 minutes. Onboarding continues with 10 monthly, one-hour online chats. The process traditionally has targeted individual engineers, but we are beginning to send entire teams through orientation together. An engineering boot camp also is being formed for ancillary groups.

## What Employees Want

Many of the determinants of engagement faltered during the economic downturn. Therefore, surveys provide hard data L&D can present to the board to make changes. Recent surveys show linkages among organizational policies and procedures that help employees gain the type of credentials they need and want to advance their careers.

Overwhelmingly, employees want training experiences that have credibility outside the company and that have meaning on their resumes. That almost always means attending or presenting at external conferences and obtaining certifications in their specialties.

One of the stumbling blocks for managers, however, is that their employees don’t necessarily recognize career development discussions when they occur. That disconnect often has its basis in poor communications. As such, Hall of Famers recommend taking a direct approach. Tell employees their career development is their responsibility, but L&D can help them. Review their aspirations and help them devise a plan to achieve them. It should include what competencies to develop or polish, which courses to

take, and sometimes even the work projects in which they should participate.

## Incentives

In any organization and in any program, some people will always be engaged, and some will not be engaged. Therefore, incentivize outcomes, not attendance at programs.

Sometimes, though, the incentives can be distracting. One Hall of Famer made this realization midway through a three-day class that ended with attendees making presentations to their bosses. “Dollars” were handed out as incentives for various achievements, with an auction of corporate paraphernalia at the end. Midway through, one attendee approached the L&D leader, asked what the “money” was for, then said, “Get the money off the table! I have a presentation to prepare!”

The focus on learning won't motivate everyone every time, however. Different things inspire different audiences. Consultants, for example, love to share knowledge because enhancing their reputations is important to them. Salespeople, in contrast, are motivated by competition. A leader board motivates them—often more than the accumulation of points to buy tangible items.

Gamifying the accomplishments is one approach to increasing engagement. Like a quest in many multi-player games, employees must accomplish certain skills along their learning path to collect badges and complete missions. These outcomes result in skills that, for example, help employees converse more effectively and more knowledgeably about certain topics or enable the organization to compete more effectively against a given competitor.

Because the badges and missions relate directly to things their organization values, when those accomplishments are shared with their peers and managers on an

internal social network, employees gain recognition as experts in certain areas and increase visibility in ways that relate to their performance reviews. Consequently, to employees, accumulating badges translates to job retention and security, making the response virtually Pavlovian.

Before gamifying engagement, talk with leadership about their priorities, to better focus on the areas that matter most.

## Applied Readiness

Some leading organizations focus on building “point-in-time” skills that will be used soon after they are acquired. For example, when one company realized sales velocity was falling and its main competitors

### CASE STUDY: Front-Line Leaders

In 2011, we launched a full-day leadership development program for front-line leaders that simulates real work challenges that affect employee engagement and business performance. Participants select the best decision for the work group, then move to another challenge. At the end of the simulation, engagement and business results are revealed and discussed with the facilitators, who are certified HR Business Partners with employee relations and development expertise.

There is no full business impact analysis, but the program appears to contribute to lower turnover than the industry average. As one participant said, “Strategic thinking and decision-making often is uncharted by our operations leaders.” By exploring the ripple effect routine decisions can have, many of the 7,000 front-line leaders who have participated in this program have reported experiencing a “moment of clarity” regarding the downstream impacts of their decisions.

The program's half-day sequel launches in 2014. It will explore challenges related to “change” and to managing in a metrics-driven environment, as well as the ripple effects routine decisions have on the customer experience. A subsequent business impact analysis will examine behavior change and business/HR metrics such as net promoter score, key performance indicators (KPIs), and employee turnover.



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were winning more of its potential customer base, it created some interventions, including coaching. Pipeline velocity increased 51 percent. This organization also developed a “compete clinic” that has improved wins against the competition by 30-fold. That’s a good value proposition that resonates with sales managers.

Programs like these escalate value because they make people more successful. L&D executives value the programs because they provide numbers that are linked as closely as possible to proving return on investment.

In that situation, individual employee engagement

is directly related to whether an individual still has a job or his or her quarterly earnings. Engagement is self-motivated.

Applied readiness is particularly effective for companies transitioning their business and those with rapid turnover. By doubling-down on near-term results, the organization defines a tightly focused, positive value proposition that resonates with the audience.

## Engage from Day One

Engagement should begin from the first day of employment and continue throughout employees’ tenure with the company. The onboarding process is a good time to solidify engagement. People are in a new environment and are unsure what to expect. L&D, therefore, has the opportunity to reinforce their decision to join the organization, and help them perform effectively in their new roles. Importantly, onboarding shouldn’t end after 90 days. Some Top 10 Hall of Fame companies extend the onboarding process as long as two years to ensure new employees are thoroughly integrated into the culture.

Many organizations measure engagement by retention, but engagement is better considered in terms of whether the organization delivers the experience it wants to provide. Leaders live in a dual world in which they treat employees differently based upon their success. That makes it difficult for managers to keep all their employees—regardless of their current performance—engaged.

One Top 10 Hall of Fame company experienced a huge decline in onboarding engagement when it switched from flying new hires to the corporate headquarters to a virtual onboarding process. Engagement peaked when it augmented the virtual onboarding program with a coach for an employee’s first five weeks. Coaches answered questions that managers should—

### CASE STUDY: Business Alignment

Our objective is to develop the organization and its employees to succeed in the business environment of the future. Rather than attempting to define that future, we foster an improvement-driven culture intent on long-term innovation.

To do that, we recruit the best people with well-rounded skill sets that blend well into the organization, then follow up by promoting a high-performance culture with awareness and performance management training throughout our 24,000-person firm.

We believe every professional experience should add professional capital and confidence. Studies show that high-performing professionals learn best by doing. That means ensuring they have projects and presentation opportunities that stretch their capabilities, cross-functional assignments, and interactions with key management and global clients. Within L&D, we support those experiences with opportunities for ongoing education and professional certification, as well as informal feedback, coaching and mentoring, internal and external networks, and a variety of learning products aligned to business goals.

By taking this approach, our employees develop higher skill levels earlier in their careers. More specifically, we have moved up 14 spots on *Fortune*’s list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For, and outperformed our highest benchmark scores by several percentage points.



but didn't necessarily—address. After adding coaches, employee completion of the action plans encouraged after orientation rose from 17 percent to 80 percent.

## Target Middle Management

In terms of development and engagement, middle managers often are neglected in favor of new hires and senior managers (who, for the record, already are engaged). Yet, middle management engagement is vital, not only today, but for the future of the organization's leadership.

Senior leaders and hourly employees each have many educational options, but middle managers are being given more responsibilities, often without any additional training. Senior executives seeking to transform the corporate culture should spend a lot of time with middle managers to reverse entrenched ideas and practices, including changing the way managers interview job applicants and assess employees, as well as how tasks are performed. This constant reinforcement gradually can change the culture.

A mere 3 percent improvement at the middle management level can ripple throughout the organization, improving performance at all levels—including senior management.

Over five years, a development program focused on middle managers succeeded in raising their engagement scores from three points below the industry baseline to 12 points above the industry average. At the end, those managers may not have become inspiring leaders, but they at least didn't thwart their employees. In response, the L&D tagline changed from "Develop and Retain" to "Develop and Engage." The CEO is considering changing it again, to "Develop and Inspire."

## Engage at Multiple Levels

In terms of engagement, there's a difference between wearing a corporate logo shirt and

actively pitching your dinner partner to join the company. Likewise, there's a difference between engaging people in their own career development and keeping them engaged with the organization. Both are important.

One challenge is that young people in particular may be more engaged with L&D than with their own departments. One Top 10 Hall of Fame company combats that phenomenon through informal "lunch and learn" sessions. For these events, people needn't register in advance or take time from their work, yet still can access the safe haven of L&D. That said, L&D is not responsible for general morale, although it plays a positive role.

Another Top 10 Hall of Fame organization considers the first Friday of the month "Think Friday." Employees are encouraged to attend these Friday

### CASE STUDY: Individual Development Plans

We encourage employees at all levels to design their own individual development plans (IDPs) and make it clear that these plans are the responsibility of the employees. IDP conversations are led by employees and build on the intersection of the employee's goals and skill sets and the organization's business objectives. We believe this approach develops and stretches employees and keeps them engaged.

As L&D leaders, our role is to help connect employees to the resources they need to accomplish their development goals. We include links to development resources in e-mails, and encourage employees to take the next steps—drafting their IDPs and scheduling time with their managers to discuss their plans.

It is the managers' responsibility to coach their employees through the IDP discussions, help secure any needed resources (training, new projects, flexibility, etc.), and check their progress regularly. We encourage employees and managers to revisit their IDPs throughout the year and to adjust them as development needs and business strategies change.

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events in which the CEO, senior executives, and sometimes clients gather to discuss products or offerings, followed by an online discussion. It reinforces the expectation that everyone is expected to be curious about their industry.

"Think Friday" and lunch and learns are big-picture

**In terms of engagement, there's a difference between wearing a corporate logo shirt and actively pitching your dinner partner to join the company. Likewise, there's a difference between engaging people in their own career development and keeping them engaged with the organization. Both are important.**

events that can go a long way toward improving engagement with the organization. But other forms of engagement also are needed. For example, managers should engage in straight talk with employees and ask whether their jobs can be made more engaging. Allowing employees to shadow one another for a day is popular in some organizations, as it fosters learning and encourages empathy with other departments.

## Fostering Individual Development

While L&D works with recruiters, talent management, HR, and other functions that deal with people to increase engagement, its most important constituent is the individual employee. Individuals must realize they control their own development path, aided by the manager and L&D.

From the employee perspective, designing an individual development plan is their opportunity to lead a conversation about their own development, become

re-energized about their work, and make plans to continue to grow and learn. One effective method to advance this discussion between the employee and manager involves a conversation that identifies an employee's perceptions of his or her development and development goals, contrasts them with the

manager's perceptions, and identifies any gaps. The purpose is development—not performance review. Therefore, the employee needs to initiate the conversation and the manager needs to participate in and support those conversations. Yet, leaders still must connect the dots between having the opportunities and making them available for employees.

Even Hall of Fame companies admit that although the tools are available, the basic questions of interests and motivations often remain unanswered. Without crossing ethical boundaries by asking

personal questions, Top 10 Hall of Fame companies do encourage managers to get to know their employees. Learn how they like to work and where they see themselves in five years, for instance. One organization holds half-day coaching sessions to help managers practice those conversations. When talking with employees, a developmental manager may even sit in on the meeting. This is particularly helpful when the employee's goal is to transfer to another group or division.

The Training Top 10 Hall of Fame companies know that engagement itself is not an endpoint. Instead, engagement is a tool that helps individuals and the organization achieve greater goals by aligning learning opportunities with organizational objectives. Therefore, L&D's role isn't to ensure employee engagement, but rather to ensure that the tools and resources are available, and that processes are in place, to support activities to enhance engagement.



# **training** TOP10 Hall of Fame

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## About the Training Top 10 Hall of Fame

Created in 2008, the Training Top 10 Hall of Fame comprises organizations that attained a spot in the Top 10 of *Training* magazine's Training Top 125 for four consecutive years. The Training Top 125 recognizes outstanding employer-sponsored workforce training and development. Top 10 Hall of Fame companies are:

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Farmers Insurance  
General Mills  
IBM  
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KPMG LLP  
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