More Praise for

ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development and
ATD’s Action Guide to Talent Development

“Elaine Biech has that rare ability to translate complex, cutting-edge knowledge into actionable, transformative steps. She has done it again here, shaping the expertise of the world’s best thinkers on talent development into a comprehensive, practical guide for unlocking human potential and driving organizational performance.”

—John R. Ryan
President and CEO
Center for Creative Leadership

“Given the ever-evolving nature of talent development, I sit better at my desk having ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development by my side. Whatever that next challenge or opportunity, look here first.”

—Chris Ernst, PhD
Global Head, People and Organization Potential
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

“I can think of no one better to guide talent management professionals through the basics of creating a trusted, business-like organizational resource than Elaine Biech. Elaine, along with her amazing ‘mega sidebar’ contributors, offers a forward-looking, multi-cultural perspective that makes ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development an essential read for both new and experienced talent managers.”

—William (Bill) Shea
Director of Corporate Relations-Europe,
Harvard Business School Executive Education

“Elaine Biech has outdone herself. ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development is the most comprehensive source of wisdom and guidance in the field today. In it Biech offers a holistic view of talent development, beginning with the organizations’ learning foundation and ending with the future direction of the workplace. In between are all the resources you’ll need to strategize, plan, design, deliver, fortify,
and measure your talent development efforts. Personally curated by the industry’s leading authority, it is at once practical and artful, rigorous, and easy to navigate. This book is a masterwork and a stellar achievement, and it is destined to become the professional standard of excellence. Five gold stars for the book and very high fives for Elaine Biech.”

—Jim Kouzes
Co-Author, The Leadership Challenge
Dean’s Executive Fellow of Leadership,
Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

“Prepare your organization for the future with this strategic guide for talent development. In a message that is both sobering and empowering, Elaine Biech, the world’s leading training expert, offers a complete blueprint for organizations committed to innovation.”

—Kimberly Cline, JD, PhD
President, Long Island University

“ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development is a valuable resource for any talent professional looking to get smart on how to lead talent development in today’s organizations—a crucial textbook for someone new to the profession and a helpful review for seasoned talent practitioners.”

—Liz Wiseman
Executive Advisor, Researcher
Author, Bestsellers Rookie Smarts and Multipliers

“Ever practical and pragmatic, Elaine Biech offers easy-to-implement, innovative approaches for starting and improving a TD effort in your organization. If you purchase only one book about talent development this year, this should be it.”

—David M. R. Covey
CEO, SMCOV
Co-Author, Trap Tales
“ATD’s Action Guide to Talent Development is in my opinion the seminal and most comprehensive text on the subject of talent development. This practical guide to developing and implementing your TD efforts is a must-read, especially in these times of record low unemployment and an increasingly fungible workforce. Elaine Biech draws from her vast experiences working with best-in-class organizations around the world, and synthesizes them into a well-thought-out actionable framework. Her emphasis on building a learning culture and positioning the TD function as a strategic partner is spot on!”

—Michael R. Cunningham, PhD
Chancellor, National University System

“In the world of training and development, the inner circle knows that Elaine Biech is an endless fountain of energy, enthusiasm, and applicable knowledge. Your talent department will be in the absolute best hands as they follow her scrupulously thought out road map to success.”

—Juliet Funt
CEO, WhiteSpace at Work

“ATD’s Action Guide to Talent Development is an encyclopedia and kaleidoscope for talent development. The holistic view from the ecosystem, the future, and business perspectives provides a profound resource for TD professionals to develop into true trusted advisors. I learned from Elaine not only about the design and delivery of programs, but how to understand and articulate the business context with foresight and insight to engage with business executives to help them navigate the challenges by building organizational health and sustainability through talent.”

—Pamela Wu
Director Global People Development
VMware Beijing
“As a team builder and leader throughout my career, the core and essential elements for success are identifying, recruiting, training, and retaining the multi-disciplined team required. ATD’s *Foundations of Talent Development* clearly and succinctly focuses on each detail as only Elaine can, illuminating what others take for granted. This is why she is always a critical part of the development of every team we build spanning the past 20+ years.”

—Rear Adm. Gib Godwin (ret.)
President, BriteWerx Inc.

“If you only have one book on talent development on your shelf, make sure it is *ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development*. The collection of world-class expertise and insights from professionals around the industry cannot be matched anywhere else. A master at simplifying the complex, Elaine has done customers and the industry a favor by putting the most important aspects of talent development in one place in a clear and understandable package!”

—Will Brown
Talent Manager, Office of Naval Research
For Shane and Thad,
who helped me understand
the value of practical implementation
IMPLEMENTING TALENT DEVELOPMENT

TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS ARE TRUSTED ADVISORS WHO PROVIDE GUIDANCE

1. Clarify Your Organization’s Learning Foundation
   - Understand the Learning Culture
   - Leaders Champion Learning
   - Instill the Value of Lifelong Learning
   - Discover the Power of a Learning Mindset

2. Develop a TD Strategy Aligned With the Organization
   - Build a Business Case for Learning
   - Enhance Organizational and Industry Savvy
   - Expand Talent Development’s Purpose
   - Partner With Business

3. Create a TD Operational Plan
   - Align Talent Development to the Organization’s Needs
   - Manage the TD Function Like a Business
   - Balance Services and Budget
   - Leverage Technology for Learning

4. Reinforce a TD Mindset That Supports Today’s Learner
   - Cultivate Your Organization’s Learning Culture
   - Refine How Your Organization Learns to Perform
   - Expect Managers to Develop Their Employees
   - Inspire Employees to Own Their Development
Nurture Innovative Design and Delivery

Select the Most Effective Formal Learning

Encourage Learning From Others

Sustain Learning on the Job

Empower Employees to Learn

Enable Social Learning

Coach Managers

Foster Persistent Self-Learning

Anticipate the Workplace of the Future

Develop the Workforce for the Future

Reinvent Talent Development for the Future

Guide Your Organization’s Future

Demonstrate the Impact of Talent Development

Identify Evaluation Methods

Start a Meaningful Evaluation Process

Plan for the Future of Evaluation
Contents

Foreword ............................................................... ix
Acknowledgments ...................................................... xiii
Introduction ............................................................. xv

I. Identify and Clarify the Organization’s Learning Foundation ............. 1
   1. Understand Your Organization’s Learning Culture .......................... 3
   2. Leaders Champion Learning ....................................................... 19
   3. Instill the Value of Lifelong Learning ......................................... 25
   4. Discover the Power of a Learning Mindset .................................. 37
   5. Clarify Your Organization’s Talent Development Readiness .......... 43

II. Develop a Talent Development Strategy ........................................ 49
   6. Build a Business Case for Learning ............................................. 51
   7. Enhance Your Organizational and Industry Savvy .......................... 59
   8. Expand Talent Development’s Purpose ....................................... 69
   9. Partner With Business to Become Trusted Advisors ..................... 77

III. Create an Operating Plan ..................................................... 95
   10. Align Talent Development to the Organization’s Needs ................ 97
   11. Manage the Talent Development Function Like a Business .......... 109
   12. Balance Services and Budget .................................................. 119
   13. Leverage Technology for Learning .......................................... 129

IV. Reinforce an Organizational Talent Development Mindset ................ 141
   14. Cultivate Your Organization’s Learning Culture .......................... 143
   15. Refine How Your Organization Learns to Perform ........................ 157
   16. Expect Managers to Develop Their Employees ............................ 169
   17. Inspire Employees to Take Responsibility for Their Development .... 183
   18. Promote Talent Development Professionals as Consultants .......... 195
## CONTENTS

### V. Design and Deliver Learning .......................................................... 207

19. Stay on the Cutting Edge of Design and Delivery .......................... 211
20. Select the Most Effective Formal Learning .................................. 225
21. Encourage Learning From Others ............................................... 245
22. Sustain Learning On the Job ....................................................... 255
23. Explore Services Provided by Talent Development Professionals ..... 263

### VI. Fortify the Learning ........................................................................ 275

24. Empower Employees to Learn ...................................................... 277
25. Enable Social Learning ............................................................... 291
26. Coach Managers ........................................................................ 299
27. Foster Persistent Self-Learning .................................................... 315
28. Nurture Your Talent Development Staff’s Development ............... 325

### VII. Define and Measure the Impact .................................................... 333

29. Demonstrate the Organizational Impact of Talent Development ..... 335
30. Identify Evaluation Methods ......................................................... 347
31. Start a Meaningful Evaluation Process ....................................... 359
32. Plan for the Future of Evaluation .................................................. 369

### VIII. Prepare for the Future ................................................................. 377

33. Anticipate the Workplace of the Future ....................................... 379
34. Develop the Workforce for the Future ......................................... 389
35. Reinvent Talent Development for the Future ............................... 399
36. Guide Your Organization’s Future ................................................. 409

### Appendix A. Checklists, Tools, and Templates ................................. 421

### Appendix B. About the Contributors ............................................... 457

### References .......................................................................................... 479

### About the Author ................................................................................ 497

### Index .................................................................................................... 499
Thirteen thousand talent development professionals attended the ATD 2018 International Conference & Exposition in San Diego, California. I had the distinct privilege of interviewing former U.S. President Barack Obama during the conference’s opening general session. In that interview, he observed, “This is a conference of people who are training others, who are teaching others to be their best. You know it’s not just about getting someone to do a task; it’s about getting them to tap into their best selves.”

Developing talent is not just about skill and knowledge acquisition. It’s not just about resources and capital and systems and programs. Developing talent is about people. It’s about helping people achieve more, aspire to more, and create impact through their work.

It’s important work. And it’s not easy.

That’s why this book is so valuable to the profession. Elaine Biech has delivered a gift of depth and breadth and practical usefulness. Her passion for the work of talent development is evident on every page. In this book’s must-read companion, ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development: Launching, Leveraging, and Leading Your Organization’s TD Effort, Elaine shares a more holistic and high-level view of what talent development is, why it matters, and how to make it matter more. The book you hold in your hands now takes the theoretical and makes it imminently practical.

Learning cultures that support talent development are critical to organizations’ ability to compete successfully today and in the future. And understanding the complexities of what “talent development” comprises—especially in today’s complex world—is imperative at all levels of the organization. Elaine helps the reader navigate the ecosystem of what a robust, strategic, and impactful TD function requires, and provides the checklists and action items associated with each part of that ecosystem.
Her invitation for readers to pick up the book and use what they need is quintessential Elaine. There’s a reason she is often referred to as “the trainer’s trainer”—she’s an expert and practitioner who has honed her craft for decades and has seen the profession grow and change dramatically.

Taking her challenge to pick up the book and read any chapter, I flipped to the last section, “Prepare for the Future of Work.” This topic is top of mind for many, and Elaine’s assessments of what we need to be thinking about are insightful. The impact of the fourth industrial revolution will be significant for our profession.

The fourth industrial revolution is characterized by technologies that blur the distinctions between physical, digital, and biological spheres. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are some of the products of this revolution that we are seeing in the workplace now. Forces of disruption and innovation will require new thinking about jobs, how we train for them, and how we upskill workers to be able to meet the demands of tomorrow’s workplace. Some say there will be new roles for trainers that focus on training machines to “think” and “act” more like people, and we know for sure that there will be new opportunities to facilitate work between humans and machines.

This is escalating the importance of change and agility. Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, said that the speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent, and this is being felt in every industry and in every country. He maintains that the changes “herald the transformation of entire systems of production, management, and governance.” The implications for the TD profession are enormous. We are uniquely positioned in organizations to identify skills gaps, create plans and programs to address those gaps, and identify what is needed to be competitive. As a profession, we must be diligent in understanding how technology affects the work happening in our organizations so that we enable and empower the unique value that humans offer in creating cultures that are agile and changeable.

In the 2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report, researchers note a significant shift in how organizations are assessed. No longer is it just about financial performance; today, businesses are “increasingly judged on the basis of their relationships with their workers, their customers, their communities, as well as their impact on society at large.” The report notes the rise of organizations structured as a “network of teams” that work collaboratively across the organization. Talent development professionals need to be able to navigate shifts in organizational structure and facilitate the
building of internal processes and talent pipelines that help organizations operate in a new, more transparent way. Collaborative platforms, which many companies are using purely for knowledge sharing, can expand in usefulness to become collaborative project platforms. Cross-skilling employees may facilitate more agility between teams.

All of this can only exist effectively in an organization imbued with a culture of learning. Elaine shows us how to build that culture, sustain it, and then create an effective TD function on that foundation. She draws on her own wealth of knowledge, but, as is her hallmark, she also includes stories, examples, and insights from around the world. One of the richest aspects of this book is the “wisdom” (Elaine’s term) of the many experts and practitioners captured in essays that are woven throughout.

In chapter 1, Elaine makes this observation: “The most important steps are to make time for learning and create accountability from the top down.” Most talent development professionals—or “advisors,” as Elaine calls us—would cheer this statement and shout a resounding, “Yes! Making time for learning and having accountability is critical for our learners!”

The same is also true for us. We, as a profession, must make time for our own learning. We must make our professional development a priority, or we risk being ineffective or irrelevant to our organizations. The future will not wait for us to make time to learn—we must be proactive about it.

The good news is that Elaine has made the next step in your learning journey clear. Open this book. Read it. Take notes. And then take action. If we all do that, together we will create a world that works better.

—Tony Bingham
ATD President and CEO
September 2018
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A colossal thank you to all of our contributors—all 92 of you! What a team! You responded quickly, happily, and with some of the most exciting and well-written grand mega-sidebars ever! Thank you for making this book a delight to read and practical to implement. You will find all contributors listed in appendix B.

A special thank you to everyone at ATD who recognized the guidance that this book would provide to define the broader scope required of talent development professionals. Thank you to the ATD Think Tank Team: Avra Bossov, Justin Brusino, Kristen Fyfe-Mills, Elizabeth Hannah, Jennifer Homer, Deborah Orgel Hudson, Tim Ito, Melissa Jones, Kristine Luecker, and Jason Sturges, who helped to create the vision and purpose for the book. I am thankful to Maria Ho and her team for the research that filled in the data gaps. Thank you to Kristen Fyfe-Mills, whose brilliant idea to invite me to attend the ATD BEST Awards uncovered extraordinary talent development experts with practical and creative concepts.

Thank you to ATD’s editorial team: Kathryn Stafford, for helping to develop this book to its useful stature. A special shout out to Melissa Jones, who condensed my verbose text and ordered my words into meaningful messages. Thanks to Caroline Coppel, who reviewed the book and ensured all our references were complete. And Justin Brusino, who is as excited about this book as I am—thank you. I appreciate you, Justin, for always delivering the right feedback, at the right time, for the right reason.

A huge thank you to those who relentlessly worked behind the scenes to chase down details, signatures, and answers, and went above and beyond to ensure this superspeed book came in on time: Samuel Hyland, Accenture; Kelly Lombardino and Shaun Martin, CCL; Mara Katsikis and Amy Federman, Conant Leadership; Evan Sinar and Rachelle Thomas, DDI; John Kostek, Hitachi Vantara; Sowmaya A.H., Infosys; Sarah McArthur, Marshall Goldsmith Inc.; Mark Pearson, Pear Press; Kylie McLeod, ROI
Institute; Diane Nakashian, SoL North America; and Renee Broadwell, Debbie Castro, and Howard Farfel, The Ken Blanchard Companies.

Last, but certainly not least, I am bursting with gratitude for Dan, who was more patient, for a longer writing period (72 chapters’ worth!), for a greater cause.
INTRODUCTION

If you are like me, you can never have too many examples, too many tools, or too many checklists. I admit—I am an assessment addict. I’ve never met a checklist I didn’t like. And no one can have too many templates to get a head start. If you can relate, this book is for you. This action guide is a companion to ATD’s Foundations of Talent Development: Launching, Leveraging, and Leading Your Organization’s TD Effort. In fact, it’s more than a companion—it’s an offshoot of the original manuscript.

How This Book Came About
Talent development professionals need to know a lot about a very broad spectrum of topics. And when we are expected to launch a talent development effort for the entire organization, what we need to know grows exponentially. So when I agreed to write the original book, I had to create an intricately detailed map just to maintain my sanity—it’s complicated.

My goal was to present the most important talent development content in one convenient place. There are hundreds of books written on the subject, but my goal was to glean the most valuable content and compile it in one book, arranged in a framework that anyone could understand.

In addition, I wanted to showcase experts and practitioners in the profession who would be willing to share their wisdom in the book. We had an overwhelming response of people who wanted to join the project. And everyone did an excellent job submitting their expert essays (what I originally called “grand mega-sidebars”). In fact, we did such a great job that we wrote a book that was too large for its binding.

Rather than scrap half of the contents we need to know to do our jobs, we divided it into two books—the original and this one. The original book focuses on what a talent development effort is and why it’s critical. This action book focuses on the practical
how. Oh, some of the how is included in the first book, but you will find most of the tools and the actions you can take in this book.

**Why This Book Is Important**

Our profession and traditional roles are changing—dramatically. The time is now to re-imagine our future, which demands employees who require new skill sets and methods that require instant answers. Exciting options for how employees develop these skill sets are available to us, such as AI, AR, and VR.

Like our organizations, we need to be resilient and ready to change quickly—as Faulkner says, to “lose sight of the shore.” Losing sight of the shore, however, does not mean that we forget how to swim! Instead, we need to have a stronger foundation in the basics of adult learning; the basics of learning design and development should be so strong that you don’t even think about them—you act on informed instinct.

> “You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.”
> — WILLIAM FAULKNER

We need to reimagine how we plan for an ever-changing, continuous learning environment. Our plans will be in perpetual motion because learning is no longer bound by a location and time; it is ongoing and persistent. We will be less concerned with programs, instead designing experiences for our employees. We need to be less concerned with specific content, instead helping our employees learn how to learn, how to think critically, and how to partner with the C-suite. Preparing employees to become responsible for their own development and helping managers coach is necessary. We need to be experts in the essentials that cognitive science has uncovered: chunking, spacing, testing, and other techniques that ensure our learners learn quickly, retain it longer, and can implement it immediately.

Yes, there is much more that is covered between these two covers. It is critical that you focus on the future now. Unfortunately, the ATD research report *Learners of the Future* states that only 38 percent of learning functions are ready for 2020 (ATD 2015b).
Is your TD department ready? It’s time to take action now. This book will help you get ready for the future.

**How This Book Is Organized**

Like the original book, this action guide follows the same eight-step framework. The 36 chapters are divided into eight sections, starting with clarifying your organization’s learning foundation and ending with preparing for the future.

The first book introduces the talent development professional as the trusted advisor who provides guidance to the C-suite and support to the entire organization. As the trusted advisors to our leaders, we are responsible for developing talent to ensure the organization achieves its strategic goals. This book continues the trusted advisor theme, providing the *how* to help you fulfill your role.

You can open this book to any chapter and find helpful information. Use the framework graphic immediately following this introduction or the table of contents to guide you to the right spot. Each chapter opens with a call to action to the trusted advisor and then presents “the least you need to know.” Following that is a list of additional items you need to know and general content information about “what you can do.” The book assumes you have at least a basic knowledge of talent development. Each chapter will be different—you might find a list of practical questions to ask your managers, an organizational assessment, or tips for coaching your managers. This is what delivers the “action” in the title.

**Expert Essays**

The most exciting part of this book is that the content is enhanced with examples, ideas, and advice from those who are in the field doing the work. It is filled with informative essays from the unique perspectives of recognized leaders. Lots of content is packed into each essay; you will find practical recommendations and road-tested actions.

- The book taps into the experts in our field, such as Michael Allen, Halelly Azulay, Holly Burkett, Julie Dirksen, Diane Elkins, Jonathan Halls, Cindy Huggett, Jim and Wendy Kirkpatrick, Jack and Patti Phillips, Becky Pluth, Lou Russell, and others.
- The book shares advice from luminary leaders in leadership and development, including Dianna Booher, Douglas Conant, George Hallenbeck, Beverly Kaye, Kevin Oakes, David Rock, Peter Senge, and Jack Zenger.
The book presents lessons learned from ATD BEST Award winners, such as Hayat Varlık Yönetim A.Ş., Hitachi Vantara, Persistent Systems, and TELUS. Other companies such as Accenture and Ferguson PLC are also represented.

It presents the newest thinking from university educators and research groups that we have relied upon for years, including Robert Brinkerhoff, Bersin by Deloitte, CCL, DDI, and Bill Rothwell.

The book’s reach is worldwide—with authors and organizations represented from Canada, India, the Netherlands, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

Each chapter helps you understand what to do as you launch your talent development effort, but these contributors are the ones who make the book stand up and sing with inspirational ideas and how-tos.

Go ahead, open the book to any page. Jump in where you think it will be most beneficial to you or your organization. Whether you work inside an organization or not, whether you work for a large organization or a small one, whether you are launching your first talent development effort or fine-tuning a function that’s been in action for a century—you are sure to find valuable concepts, designs, and ideas. Get started now. Take action.
SECTION I

Clarify Your Organization’s Learning Foundation

- Understand Your Organization’s Learning Culture
- Leaders Champion Learning
- Instill the Value of Lifelong Learning
- Discover the Power of a Learning Mindset
- Clarify Your Organization’s Talent Development Readiness
Implementing a talent development effort requires a solid foundation. Section I lays out a plan to get you started. There are five themes in this section.

1. Identify your organization’s learning culture and what elements you have in place.
2. Define leaders’ roles in the effort and the value they bring as the learning effort’s champions.
3. Describe the rationale for and how to help employees value lifelong learning.
4. Specify an array of learning mindsets and why they are valuable.
5. Clarify your organization’s talent development readiness.

Multiple ways exist to launch and lead a talent development effort, and they all require that several basics be in place for success: a learning culture; leadership that wants to lead the effort; employees who are accountable for their learning; and a learning mindset that is integral throughout the organization. An effective learning organization will view learning as a strategic imperative, expect managers to coach and develop their employees, and ensure that employees have time to reflect, develop, and learn from mistakes.

This section delivers actions you can take to appraise your organization’s readiness, begin your talent development effort, and initiate your trusted advisor role with your leaders.
Your organization’s learning culture is the foundation of the talent development (TD) framework. If your organization recognizes the value of talent development, it must invest in laying a quality foundation that supports the rest of the TD implementation framework.

A survey of more than 2,000 organizations worldwide found that “identifying and developing future talent” was the most important leadership skill over the next three years (DDI, The Conference Board, and EYGM Limited 2018).

You are the trusted advisor to your senior leaders. To fulfill your role, begin by understanding how a learning culture forms the foundation for talent development. Provide guidance for your leaders and take the pulse of the organization to do what’s necessary to expand and enhance your organization’s learning culture.

The Least You Need to Know About a Learning Culture
Most talent development professionals are profoundly aware of the rapid changes in the world and the need of employees to learn constantly to achieve their strategic imperatives. Technology developments, a more mobile workforce, and an expectation of constant learning place an emphasis on how employees learn.

A learning culture has been shown to increase employee satisfaction and engagement. It helps employees address change, and organizations become more competitive.
In *Harvard Business Review*, researcher Boris Groysberg and his co-authors (2018) claim that “a learning culture can improve organizational innovation, increase agility, and enhance organizational learning.”

**What you need to know:**

- Organizations realize that to have a competitive advantage they need to tap into the potential of their employees.
- Learning on the job and informally from others have finally gained attention as legitimate ways to build skills and acquire knowledge.
- Employees are focused on career development, recognize that they need to manage their own development, and expect to learn constantly.

“The single biggest driver of business impact is the strength of an organization’s learning culture.”

—JOSH BERSIN

**What You Can Do**

To keep up with changes in the world, our organizations, and our profession, we need to upgrade our skills. We need to take an active part in leading the change that is occurring. Learn all you can about your organization’s learning perspective from the leaders of your organization. This will help you link talent development to your organization’s strategy.

To work toward a more mature learning culture, you can take a number of steps. Try some of these:

- Communicate with employees the value of taking responsibility for lifelong learning.
- Ensure your leaders know they are responsible for developing employees.
- Introduce the skills required for “learning to learn.”
- Support team and organizational learning.
UNDERSTAND YOUR ORGANIZATION’S LEARNING CULTURE

• Introduce Peter Senge’s concepts of systems thinking, personal mastery, and mental models to individuals.
• Develop a long-range plan and build a community to assist development.

Defining a Learning Culture Isn’t Easy
So, do you have a high-impact learning culture or not? I would not be concerned about the label except for communication purposes. The most important thing you can do is determine what you have to work with. You can diagnose your organizational culture and make changes that affect the learning culture. Even if you do not work on the culture there are things that you can influence, such as beliefs, processes, practices, and encouraging individuals and the organization to increase knowledge, competence, and performance. As you can imagine, there are many opinions about what is needed to build a learning culture; there is no “best” way. There are, however, some things to set you on your way. Oracle (2016) has outlined seven steps you can take to start on the path to building a high-impact learning culture:

1. Integrate learning with talent management in support of capability development.
2. Encourage leaders and management to take ownership of the learning culture.
3. Make learning worthwhile and interesting—prove its value.
4. Encourage employees to take personal responsibility for learning. Demonstrate the organization’s commitment to development, starting during the onboarding process.
5. Embed learning to maximize experiential and reflective learning as they work on real business problems.
6. Institutionalize collaboration, communication, and knowledge sharing by incorporating incentives and opportunities into every learning and performance process.
7. Drive development through redesigned and effective performance management systems, ensuring that performance is discussed on a regular basis throughout the year.
A high-impact learning culture would seem to be the ideal—difficult to achieve, but certainly worthy of the effort. A stellar talent development program can help organizations reach their strategic imperative. A learning culture will help move it to success faster. Whether you call it high impact or not, probably does not matter.

It Takes Time to Create a Learning Culture

Is it possible to create a learning culture? The most important steps are to make time for learning and create accountability from the top down. Individual development plans (IDPs) are the starting point. They help leaders and employees focus on what’s important, at the minimum. They are often ignored because they take time to develop and require managerial time to ensure that employees are accountable for implementation. Managers often forget that IDPs are the best link to tie learning to the organization’s goals. The ATD research report *Building a Culture of Learning: The Foundation of a Successful Organization* found that making IDPs part of a culture of learning requires:

- regularly updating IDPs for every employee
- employee accountability for the learning specific to their IDPs
- nonfinancial rewards and recognition for employee learning.

These all require managers and employees to focus on learning, aligning it to the organization’s goals. Making time does not mean increasing the amount of time available to be invested in attending formal learning events. It will, however, require more time from both employees and managers. It means allowing employees to take more time to learn on the job, such as increasing time to:

- Receive feedback from supervisors and then plan for how they can improve or change what they heard.
- Learn from a coach or a mentor.
- Learn by serving on a team, shadowing another employee, or creating a solution with an employee from another division or location.
- Discuss projects and updates with supervisors on a daily basis.
- Practice and reflect on what happened and what might be done differently in the future.
A true learning culture tolerates mistakes and celebrates creativity. It encourages risks and understands failure. Organizations need to allow time for employees to learn and fail until successful. Finally, a learning culture has a process that employees can use to share what was learned for team and organizational learning. A learning culture is a hallmark of a high-performing organization.

VALUING A HEALTHY LEARNING CULTURE

Holly Burkett, principal of Evaluation Works, shares her perspective of what it takes to create a learning culture. As the author of Learning for the Long Run: 7 Practices for Sustaining a Resilient Learning Organization, she studied dozens of organizations and has knowledge and insight about what it takes to create and sustain a learning culture.

At WD-40, every employee takes the “WD-40 Maniac Pledge,” which is a solemn vow to become, in CEO Garry Ridge’s terms, a “learning maniac.” Ridge, recognized as one of the World’s Top 10 CEOs by Inc., has spoken passionately about how a culture of trust, respect, and continuous learning has accelerated performance by “helping people step into the best version of themselves.” He says, “My job is to create a company of learners” (Taylor 2016).

To underscore his personal commitment to learning, Ridge includes the message “ancora imparo” (Italian for “I am still learning”) in his email signature line. The phrase was reportedly a favorite of Michelangelo, and a signature line used in many of his artworks. In an interview with Forbes, Ridge explained, “Leadership is about learning and teaching. . . . We have no mistakes here, we have learning moments” (Skibola 2011).

Since Ridge assumed leadership in 1997, WD-40’s revenue has grown from $100 million to $350 million (and this through one of the worst recessions in history), employee engagement numbers are in excess of 90 percent, and shareholder value has grown consistently over the past 14 years (Taylor 2016).
What Does a Learning Culture Do?
Organizations with learning cultures encourage employees to continually add knowledge, share information, develop skills, ask questions, take risks, and maintain a growth mindset. Continuous learning is systemically built into daily work, with short, frequent pull-versus-push bursts of information readily available to all employees at the time and place of need. The focus is less about isolated training events and more about building collective talents and capabilities that drive business growth. Like WD-40, other companies known for their learning cultures—such as SAP, Google, Southwest Airlines, and Telus—consistently outperform their peers in productivity, profit, and customer satisfaction, as well as employee attraction, retention, and engagement. They constantly create markets, market approaches, and greater customer value by using learning to stay agile and keep up with change.

While most leaders understand the competitive value of a learning culture, only 31 percent of executives surveyed by Deloitte (2016) said their organizations had a strong one. Making it more difficult is the new normal of a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), where change happens faster than learning strategies can be devised, strategic priorities become moving targets, skills and knowledge depreciate more quickly, and the competition for talent and resources is intensified.

Building Blocks and Best Practices
While there are no quick fixes or magic bullets, there are several things talent managers can do to help leaders build and nurture a learning culture.

Grow Your Cultural Literacy
Executives are increasingly turning to L&D leaders to transform workplace cultures in pursuit of high engagement and performance. Understanding what culture is; where it’s weak, strong, or inconsistent; and how to best align it to strategy is a good place to start. Many organizations use cultural assessments, environmental scans, culture audits, focus groups, real-time pulse survey tools, or annual engagement surveys to uncover multiple perspectives about how cultural elements like L&D, rewards and recognition, and leadership affect employee motivation, performance, and engagement. Here are some factors to keep in mind:
UNDERSTAND YOUR ORGANIZATION’S LEARNING CULTURE

- **Culture is every day.** A learning culture continually interacts with and is influenced by the formal and informal values, beliefs, principles, and practices of the organization where it resides. Leadership behaviors, daily interactions, and routine work processes need to support and reinforce learning as a strategic priority.

- **Culture does not change overnight.** Learning cultures are organic, adaptive, and evolve over time. Talent managers who have successfully grown a mature learning culture say that it takes time (three years or more).

- **A culture does not have to be toxic to warrant nudges forward.** Developing a culture is not a “one-and-done” event, but rather a transformation process in which small, evolutionary steps form the basis for continuous improvement.

- **Culture is not one size fits all.** While valuable information can be gained by researching or benchmarking the learning cultures of other companies, it’s most important to focus on the values and behaviors that work best for your business or industry.

**Develop and Distribute Leadership**

Most employees experience culture through their interactions with organizational leaders. Leadership commitment starts at the top, with the active involvement of CEOs in such roles as leader-teachers, executive advisors, and mentors. Like Ridge, the best leaders are insatiable learners who put a premium on well-developed cultures of learning. Mid-level and frontline supervisors also play an important role as coaches, developers, and managers of multigenerational, dispersed work teams. Many talent managers do not do enough to prime the pump with first-line and emerging leaders. This group needs leadership skills to not only cultivate a learning culture and an engaged workforce, but also grow into positions of greater responsibility within the leadership pipeline. At family-owned Haworth, a Michigan manufacturing firm with customers in 120 countries, any employee seeking future leadership opportunities is eligible for their Aspiring Leader Program. Continuous learning and development is essential to the organization’s goal of 70 percent promotion from within (ATD Staff 2015b).

Bolstering leadership bench strength is a major concern for most executives, with CEOs prioritizing it as one of their top four human capital challenges (Mitchell et al. 2015). To that
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Biech, president of ebb associates inc, a strategic implementation, leadership development, and experiential learning consulting firm, has been in the field for more than 30 years helping organizations work through large-scale change. She has presented at dozens of national and international conferences and has been featured in publications such as the Wall Street Journal, Harvard Management Update, Investor’s Business Daily, and Fortune. She is the author and editor of more than 80 books, receiving national awards for several.


Elaine specializes in helping leaders maximize their effectiveness. Customizing all of her work for individual clients, she conducts strategic planning sessions and implements corporate-wide systems, such as quality improvement, change management, re-engineering of business processes, and mentoring programs. Elaine is a consummate training professional, facilitating training on a wide range of workplace and business
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

topics. She is particularly adept at turning dysfunctional teams into productive ones. As a management consultant, trainer, and designer, she provides services globally to public- and private-sector organizations to prepare them for current and future challenges.

A long-time volunteer for ATD, she has served on the association’s National Board of Directors, and was the recipient of the 1992 ASTD Torch Award, the 2004 ASTD Volunteer Staff Partnership Award, and the 2006 Gordon Bliss Memorial Award. In 2012, she was the inaugural CPLP Fellow Program Honoree from the ASTD Certification Institute. Elaine was instrumental in compiling and revising the CPLP study guides. She wrote the first ATD Training Certificate Program and has designed five additional certificate programs. She was the 1995 Wisconsin Women Entrepreneur’s Mentor Award recipient and has served on the Independent Consultants Association’s Advisory Committee. She is currently on the Association for Learning Providers’ Board of Directors. Elaine is also a member of the Center for Creative Leadership’s (CCL’s) Board of Governors and is the chair for CCL’s Research, Evaluation, and Societal Advancement Committee. She is also a member of CCL’s Executive Committee and the editorial board.

Buy This Book