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Progress



development

Top of their game

Create a work environment that supports continuous learning

BY KAREN KELLOWAY

I've often thought that our organizations could do better collectively if we modelled our corporate culture on a golf game. There's a respectful ambience, a book of rules, a scorecard, and, most importantly, the expectation that everyone is there to play their best.

In golf we play for ourselves, yet we often step back to study the landscape with our teammates, strategizing on how to avoid the sand traps and what club to use. If you hit a bad shot, your teammates are going to say "good try" or nothing at all. When you hit a great shot, everyone shares in your success. At the end of the game, you sit around to debrief, talking about what you did right and the shots you were most proud of hitting. There's an expectation that you'll go away and work on what didn't quite work. You might practice putting, go to the driving range, read a golf magazine, watch a how-to video, or take a lesson. Whatever you do, the intention is always to improve your game.

So how do we adopt this kind of continuous learning, "playing at the top of our game" mentality into our work environments? Particularly in times when organizations are looking to cut costs?

Rick Fullerton, a senior consultant and a member of the board of directors of the Human Resources Association of Nova Scotia, says that in difficult economic times nearly all organizations cut back on anything that isn't clearly



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linked to the bottom-line results; training, learning, and development tends to be one of those areas. He says the downside to cutting training is that employees may become less capable of keeping up with changing requirements.

To decrease training costs, some organizations are looking to online delivery, virtual classroom training, and e-learning, but going the virtual route isn't always the answer. It might work for standardized training such as an orientation or workplace safety, but learning styles and linking results to business

goals still matters.

“Part of an individual’s growth should include a personal-improvement plan that identifies measures for tracking progress, sets specific targets to be achieved, and incorporates feedback loops,” says Fullerton. You can employ a wide range of tracking tools, such as mini-360 surveys, physical measures (weight or heart rate), job observations (watch me, give me feedback), and more.

Creating a culture in which people are motivated to do their best must become part of the organization’s business plan. It’s a sentiment many in the HR industry share. People development accounts for more than \$300 billion in North America, yet organizations don’t necessarily trust that the investment is going to pay off. To get a return on your investment, no matter how much you spend, the training and development must be linked to the broader business goals.

We need to start moving away from the idea that developing people is some sort of option or add-on. People development must become part of how we

do business. What is the employee good at, interested in, passionate about, and how does this fit into our organization’s success? What would be different if this employee was playing at the top of his or her game? Where are the gaps?

While it’s important for employees to identify what training would help fulfill their desire for career advancement and fulfillment, it’s equally important for the leadership of the organization to not only help the employee link their learning to the big picture but also ensure there’s capacity for that employee to use that newfound wisdom. Otherwise, the employee (and investment) will move to another company that has created the space for that expertise.

To keep your organization competitive, Halifax-based Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette—the company I do leadership development with—advocates building that capacity through three key areas: organizational culture, individual behaviours, and organizational practices. KBRS advises focusing on developing people as a competitive advantage in the same way organiza-

tions focus on managing money, R&D, or closing a deal.

Even though we’re all on our own individual learning tracks, most of us have to interact with others to achieve our goals. Fullerton says if you work as a team, you learn as a team. He says more and more organizations are using small group coaching, peer-learning groups, communities of practice, and most importantly, have managers who lead by example.

If you still aren’t sure how to move forward with integrating training into your individual and team development, you can always hit the golf course for a game of best ball. A tournament that includes two to four golfers competing against other teams, best ball involves collaborating, playing to your strengths, cheering each other on, and strategizing on how to get the best results. Call it experiential learning. 🏌️

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