



Restoring Business Trust and Confidence

inSeption

A Prescription for Success: Treating Deficiencies in Employee Training and Mentorship

By **Jenny Minigh**, inSeption Group

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To expedite development of a groundbreaking anti-inflammatory drug, a pharmaceutical company assigned a crucial phase of stability testing to a new employee with limited practical experience. Due to a rushed onboarding process and lack of proper training, that employee mistakenly altered the temperature stability testing protocol, leading to false positive results about the drug's stability. This oversight, discovered weeks later by an external audit, necessitated the repetition of months of work, which delayed study startup by almost a year and led to significant fiscal losses for the company, in addition to nullifying any first-to-market edge over the competition.

Although this scenario is fictional, things like this happen more often than people acknowledge. And what's the most common consequence of such a circumstance? Heidi Klum probably puts it best: "One day you're in. The next day you're out." Most companies do not respond by attacking the root of the problem: employee inexperience and lack of preparedness. Why is this?

THE EPIDEMIC OF DEVALUED TRAINING

On-the-job training starts the first week, when a new hire gets access to the company's learning management system and receives dozens of assignments. After that, training generally doesn't come back around again until the employee gets an automated message saying, 1) the training was updated or 2) it's time for an annual re-up. No dig here—these systems are excellent tools to track employee engagement for quality assurance purposes. The problem is the "training" these systems are providing.

Most training these days has been reduced to self-study: Click here to read this template/guidance/SOP and then sign to acknowledge that you understand. And, if you're lucky (I say that with sarcasm), you also get a quiz to prove you learned.

So many issues here.

First of all, templates, guidances, and SOPs are NOT training. They are documents associated with processes to be followed for quality assurance. Just because someone can comprehend a recipe does not mean they can prepare a dish with the understanding of how to make it consumable.

Second, click-read-sign training tempts employees to click, scroll to the bottom, and sign without even glimpsing the content. And let's be honest, how many of us just click through training as fast as possible so we can get back to our "important" tasks? This is very common, especially during onboarding, when we have hours of training to complete plus tons of newly assigned work—all while trying to acclimate to new colleagues and get up to speed for ongoing projects. A high-pressure situation, indeed.

Furthermore, who has time to read hundreds of pages of tedious "training" that is not immediately applicable to our work? And what happens when we actually need that training? I can't tell you how many times I've needed a refresher and was left to navigate the learning management system for help, most times to no avail. Nobody comes right out and says, "Training is the least of our concerns," but the emphasis and attention placed on proper training often pale in comparison to other job elements.

MENTORSHIP MALNUTRITION

Ask most companies, "how is your mentoring?" and, in their minds, they have effective mentoring support. And it looks like this: every year, you fill out a performance plan with your boss to set project goals for the next year. Then, at the end of the year, you are graded on whether you met those goals. If you did, great job! You might get a bonus, raise, and/or promotion.

Yes, it is true that your boss helped you reach your next step of career growth, but let's be crystal clear—this strategic advancement up the career ladder is NOT the mentorship most people crave and need. In fact, what good is it to be standing on

the next rung if the individual doesn't know what to do when they get there?

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING AND MENTORSHIP

If ever there were a doubt concerning the importance of training and mentorship to a company's success, consider the following:

- **Increased Attraction of Talent:** According to a 2021 Gallup survey conducted on behalf of Amazon: "65% of workers say the opportunity to participate in an upskilling program is an 'extremely' or 'very' important factor in deciding whether to take a new job, and 61% cite it as 'extremely' or 'very' important when weighing the decision to remain at their current job."¹
- **Higher Retention Rates:** LinkedIn's 2024 Workplace Learning Report states: "providing learning opportunities is the No. 1 employee retention strategy." According to the data, a strong learning culture will increase employee retention by 57%.²
- **Higher Return on Investment:** A 2018 report by the Association for Talent Development (ATD) stated that companies offering comprehensive training programs had a 218% higher income per employee than companies without formalized training. They also enjoyed a 24% higher profit margin than those who spend less on training.³

DESIGNING A TREATMENT PLAN

Create the right culture.

Change in company culture must start at the top. Leadership dictates culture via their mindsets, statements, and actions, expressed both directly and indirectly. Words are not enough; they must lead by example and consistency to cement training and mentorship as a priority.

- Eliminate the stigma of mentorship. Today's concept of mentorship is marred by a dichotomous mindset. On one hand, we are told we need to grow in experience and knowledge to reach the next level. On the other hand, we are told if we ask too many questions, we will look incompetent and be passed over for promotions. One way to dispel the stigma is to set clear expectations that every employee will be involved in mentoring, and reward those who engage in it. No matter where we are on our career ladder, we always have knowledge or a skill that can help others. Adopting the "one up, one down, one over" holistic mentoring approach encourages people to always be reaching up toward someone more experienced, reaching down to help lift others, and reaching over to assist our peers. This mindset should permeate all aspects of our life, career and personal.
- Include training and mentorship expectations in all job descriptions. This helps current employees understand expectations and helps human resources recruit like-minded new employees, propagating the change in culture from both directions.

Discuss employee needs and wants openly.

During performance planning and evaluation, both managers and employees should address mentorship needs in earnest, with the discussion rooted in conversations about job satisfaction and aspirations for improvement and advancement. The process should be proactive and organic.

- Don't limit discussions to project experience only. Include training needs in areas of expertise, soft skills (e.g., problem solving, time-management, communication), and new interests.
- Change the metrics for determining growth. Balance the reporting of project completion and initiatives led with analysis of extra learning that was undertaken. Set quantifiable expectations, no matter how intangible the knowledge or skill

goal appears. Add separate metrics for time spent mentoring others, being mentored, and invested in documented training and continuing education.

- Establish specific plans and resources to drive training and mentorship. Training execution can be driven by middle management, but leadership must commit openly to providing its employees with proper resources to succeed. Make it clear that the company will ensure employees are well-supported. If the training needs to span an entire department, corporate-level training should be considered in addition to individual training and mentorship.

Make training and mentorship easily accessible.

The best training and learning resources in the world are useless if no one knows about them. It also may not matter if you tell someone about those resources today, because the stresses of tomorrow could render the list out of sight, out of mind.

- Create a central location for resources. It is much easier to remember and access a central location where help can be found. For example, I've worked with several clients who have an intranet page for each function in the company: listed on those pages are links to training, templates, SOPs, and job aids for different project types encountered within that function. If a company does not have internal resources to build out a complete training program for its employees, it should contract a vendor to create one or consider training through subscription-based services.
- Create a list of expertise. A company's biggest asset is its people. Know your people and their strengths by creating an accessible inventory of subject matter experts (SMEs), including their specialties and contact information. Everyone should be included on the list for something. Even if an employee is not a stand-alone

SME, they can participate and be mentored as part of an SME committee. Make the SME list accessible at the central location for training and mentoring resources to help employees engage and participate.

- Make mentorship opportunities and requests easily accessible. Because everyone in the company should be involved with mentorship, supervisors should take a more active role in pairing mentees with mentors, and employees should also be able to seek company mentorship opportunities outside of these interactions. One strategy is to create a site within the company where people can sign up at any time and “shop” for a pairing.
- Use visual reminders of resource accessibility. The most effective training is just-in-time training, accessible in the moment of need and mostly at the beginning of new projects. Project managers use interactive dashboards to show timelines, Gantt charts, and other project management elements. Why not include links to relevant training on this dashboard, as well? For example, when using project-management software (e.g., SmartSheets or Microsoft Project) to build a project timeline, display the interdependencies of individual tasks and list responsible parties. An “other resources” column also could be added to include links to training associated with specific tasks and SME names for ad hoc questions.
- Make outside learning opportunities accessible. Continued learning outside of the company’s walls is equally important as internal training and mentorship. Without a fresh infusion of at-large industry processes and insight, a company’s collective knowledge and mindsets may stagnate. Over 25 years of experience across several companies in the industry, I’ve had plenty of opportunity to witness the best and the worst ways to improve efficiency and processes or to address company pain points.

It’s my pleasure to mentor others and to share this invaluable experience to make their jobs easier and more productive. Thus, leadership should make outside learning accessible to employees, whether through conferences and other external learning opportunities or inviting external SMEs to provide in-house training.

Allow time for training and mentorship.

No matter how important training and mentorship are, they must never compete for time against other job duties. Simply put, they always lose. Unless time is deliberately carved out, they won’t happen.

- Dedicate corporate time for mentoring and training (e.g., 1 pm to 3 pm every Friday), and make other meetings or activities unacceptable during this time.
- At the beginning of every new project, schedule a one- to three-hour block on the team’s calendar for time to onboard, retrain, and get up to speed.
- Before moving on to new projects, make time to discuss lessons learned and share the information in a group meeting. Allow time for the team to assess projects after they are complete, to examine what went well and what requires improvement.
- Hold monthly or quarterly lunch-and-learns to share information gleaned from conferences, updated regulatory guidances, publications, etc.

WHEN COMPANIES GROW IN KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE, THEY GROW IN SUCCESS.

Investing in employee training and development is not just beneficial for the employees. It also contributes significantly to the organization’s success and competitive advantage.

The inSeption Group Cooperativity Program⁴

is a training, mentoring, SME consulting, and building service for clients. We offer a unique opportunity to serve our clients in a way that makes them stronger and better. To learn more or to contact the author, visit <https://inseptiongroup.com>.

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