

# EXPERT ADVICE

The most appropriate advisers aren't always atop the learning heap. That ideal adviser may just be a step or two above the learner.

BY RANDY EMELO

When US LBM, a collection of building material distributors across North America, took shape in 2009, organizational leaders knew they wanted to create a culture where success was driven by the knowledge, effort and passion of their colleagues.

One element of this focused on operational excellence, and the Buffalo Grove, Illinois-based organization designed ways to encourage its growth through Lean Six Sigma, which became even more important as the company grew rapidly through acquisitions.

"Our three-day Lean Six Sigma training event has been going on for two years through the University of Wisconsin," said Amy Brown, director of learning and development for US LBM. "Each training group comes together for in-person training as Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belts. We offer these training sessions four times a year, and have roughly 40 people in each class."

The training events have been successful for the company, but participants have asked for ways to stay connected with one another after their three days of in-person training conclude. Learning leaders at US LBM realized there was an opportunity for them to continue employees' development through the use of mentoring and social learning software to support peer learning groups.

"They asked for ways to connect, network and share with classmates after their training, and we wanted to give them that opportunity," Brown said. "They especially need that sup-

port as they go back to their jobs and begin to utilize their new knowledge out in the field. Every time people go through classes, they still need to reach out afterward to people who speak the same language."

## Belting It Out

Using learning groups via social collaborative learning technology provides a powerful way for people to connect, share ideas, ask questions and continue their learning experience. US LBM has begun offering access to peer learning groups for their Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belts that are designed specifically with Lean Six Sigma Green Belts as the group advisers. Green belts are a step up from yellow belts, and Brown said they are an ideal fit since they have already been successful in their fields and in applying Lean Six Sigma principles.

"These peer learning opportunities are something US LBM does that is unique in our sector, and we do it to empower our employees," said Brown.

Many people mistakenly think that learning group advisers need to be the extreme experts in their field. The truth is that the ideal adviser often is one or two steps above the learner. Too much cognitive distance between learners and advisers creates an environment where the extreme expert focuses on "telling" the learners what they need to know, rather than creating an environment that is open to exploring the topic and other possible solutions or ideas.

As peer learning gains ground, learning leaders need to be able to help their employees find the right people to aid their development efforts. People are



often inclined to look for the top expert to answer their questions, but this overlooks an entire middle area of advisers who might be a better fit.

### The Experience Continuum

Learners and experts fall on an experience continuum that spans beginners, practitioners and experts. An extreme expert typically does not make for the best adviser to someone who is a beginner, despite what many people may think. Beginners need advisers who are only a step or two ahead of them in terms of proficiency.

## An extreme expert typically does not make the best adviser for a beginner.

They need the advisers who can show them the basics, teach them a few tricks, and give them a process to follow as they build their skill area. This allows extreme experts to be free to advise those who are more seasoned practitioners on the expertise continuum, but who have not yet achieved expert status. It also keeps the extreme experts from getting bogged down with ineffective learning relationships that do not make the best use of their skills or expertise.

“Learning occurs in all kinds of environments, not just in the classroom,” said Brown. As a result, US LBM continues to explore options for how to bring their Lean Six Sigma trainees together to learn from one another and from their near peers who are a level above them.

Cognizant Technology Solutions also makes great use of peer learning. So-called “learning solution architects” at Cognizant are responsible for learning design throughout the company. They create learning tracks and activities for employees based on individuals’ roles and growth paths. They help people take part in formal learning, and help them find social learning groups and communities that can support them beyond the classroom.

The expectation is that the instructors will continuously review trends in the L&D space, like digital technology options or neuroscience applications, and introduce those into Cognizant’s programs. They also partake in social learning themselves, forming learning networks with their peers.

“We’ve found that social learning can be one of the

most engaging means of learning. Cognizant leverages social learning by infusing a meaningful, purposeful context within which employees seek help, or more importantly, help others to learn in effective ways,” said Hariraj Vijayakumar, global head of learning and development at Cognizant.

The biggest problem organizations face is the perceived lack of experts. Organizations that operate on the assumption that only extreme experts should teach or advise others are missing the power of peer learning to increase their employees’ competency. But when learning leaders begin to apply the expertise continuum model for learning groups, they soon realize that they have a plethora of experts available.

Providing intentional ways for peers to connect in collaborative social learning relationships can help them build support networks and increase the flow of knowledge across the organization. Utilizing peer-to-peer learning can help:

- Create better contextual understanding.
- Give access to advice from people who understand their position in the organizational hierarchy.
- Allow learners to see another point of view that is relevant to their work.
- Establish peer networks for ongoing support as people strive to build similar competencies and skill sets.

### Engaging Learners Throughout the Employee Lifecycle

The employee lifecycle spans from people entering the workforce as new hires and finding their feet as emerging leaders, to honing their skills as experts in a certain field and then one day leaving the company. While each phase is not tied to a specific employee age (meaning employees entering your workforce are not necessarily young, just as people leaving your organization are not necessarily older or retiring), each phase of the lifecycle holds a unique opportunity for organizations to engage employees in learning, and to using their near-peers in learning groups to achieve success.

Here are a few ideas on how organizations can leverage collaborative peer learning to support employee development at all stages of the employee lifecycle.

- 1. Entering:** Onboarding is a natural starting place for peer group learning. Upon entering the organization, employees of all ages need multiple learning opportunities to help them gain the necessary knowledge to perform their new role. Help new employees tap into the knowledge resources of the organization from day one by having them connect with advisers and peers who can help them assimilate culturally as well as gain the right

insights and skills to help accelerate their speed-to-performance.

- 2. Emerging:** As employees mature, some will begin to emerge as natural leaders. Organizations can use learning groups to help make leadership, managerial or similar training stick by allowing participants to connect with their fellow trainees before, during and after the training events. This allows people to learn through each other's applications, successes and failures with the material or subject at hand.
- 3. Expert:** Once employees have developed to the point of being an expert in their area of focus, they can help facilitate the development of others. Experts can take on the role of adviser and engage in learning groups to help other employees increase their level of skill in the expert employees' specific areas of mastery. "Leaders from different operational groups and from US LBM leadership are potential mentors and advisers for our Six Sigma trainees," said Brown. This allows people at different levels, from different functions, and with different focus areas to give back to the organization and share what they know; and it offers

employees the opportunity to learn from these experienced and trusted experts.

- 4. Exiting:** Employees have a vast array of insights to share before they leave your organization. Peer learning groups can be used in support of succession planning or other programs aimed at sharing the tacit understandings and insights of people poised to exit the company. In fact, people should expect to spend 30 to 40 percent of their workday giving back to organizational learning and mentoring networks so that critical competence is not lost when they leave.

Learning leaders need to form learning groups and help facilitate connections between learners and their near-peer advisers. Encourage employees to branch out and look for connections in all areas of the company. Don't allow barriers — real or imagined — to hamper exploration and innovation. Instead, provide the tools to support employees in their efforts as they build a vibrant learning network. This is a practical way to begin to stimulate effective expert learning. **CLO**

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