

“WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, FIRE ME?”: KEEPING EMPLOYEES ENGAGED THROUGH CLOSURE, OUTSOURCING, AND LAYOFFS

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Abstract

In 2005, First Allmerica Financial faced a critical challenge: how to retain 250+ employees that had been given tentative layoff dates up to 12 months into the future. Additionally, the company had to maintain employee cohesion, productivity, and focus while shutting down the entire life insurance portion of its business by selling and converting 200,000+ policies.

Two areas independently realized that learning would play a vital role in helping employees through this difficult time. In this case study presentation, we share how the Life Insurance Company maintained 98% retention, increased commitment to customer service, and shared years of collective knowledge with the new service provider who, in essence, was taking their jobs. We look at how the Technology Services group increased knowledge sharing by encouraging learning, instituting best practices, and implementing employee dialogue sessions during its own challenging layoff process. Participants will gain practical, proven tools for creating an environment that retains and motivates employees through difficult times.

Materials

In this packet, we share some artifacts from our learning initiatives and ideas that we hope will be helpful as you think about learning in your organizations. Also included is a reading list that we used to inform our efforts.

For More Information

We enjoy talking about organizational learning! If you'd like to receive a copy of the presentation slides, see the organizational learning model, ask questions about this case study, or talk about engaging employees during organizational turmoil, please contact Maya Townsend at maya@partneringresources.com.

Technology Services: Learning Strategy Overview

This document, created by the Technology Services organization, describes the learning strategy, outlines its components, and describes its intended benefits.

The Learning Strategy stimulates the creation and sustenance of a culture that values learning and cultivates intellectual curiosity in service of Allmerica and Technology Services. It does so by:

- Weaving learning into the fabric of everyday life.
- Engaging people in designing and sustaining the components of the learning strategy.

Mission

Increase flexibility, agility, and leadership through knowledge and learning

Vision

A values-driven, high-performing workforce of planful thinkers who take responsibility for collective knowledge expansion

Assignment Based Organization

- Norm and expectation to move from assignment to assignment
- Excitement around moving from assignment to assignment
- People know how to put themselves in for assignments

Rewards & Recognition

- Technology Services recognized nationally for development of innovative solutions
- People rewarded and recognized for learning activities and for helping others learn
- People valued as knowledge resources
- Prestige around learning

Development

- CareerPower used to drive individual careers
- Corporate Learning Services anticipates learning trends
- Expectation to spend time learning/training/reading
- Teams regularly debrief around questions such as "What have I learned this week?"
- Managers are responsible for supporting employees in their learning efforts
- People are proactive in seeking learning; they manage their own development

Sharing & Learning

- Conference attendance and sharing conference learning in the organization
- Running workshops for peers
- Extended leadership meeting often and discussing priorities, goals, and learnings
- Meetings with business partners the norm
- Lots of talking about lessons learned
- Advisor and mentors to peers
- Publishing white papers
- Learning updates are included in status reports
- Knowledge conferences showcase lessons learned and share information

Benefits

- Ability to anticipate and plan for future business needs
- Ability to anticipate and fill competency gaps
- Increased strategic thinking competency
- Contribution to competitive intelligence and thought leadership
- Broaden approach from transactional through consultative
- Development maps for those seeking other roles and or assignments
- Increased energy in the organization
- Increased competency for functioning in a volatile, ambiguous environment
- Compliance with CMM (Capability Maturity Model) Level 3 training Key Process Area requirements
- Empowered, independent individuals
- Further development of values-based, consultative Technology Services culture
- Increased manager accountability for ensuring that individual development and training plans for employees are current
- Shared knowledge across resources

Critical Success Factors

Knowledge

- Creative and open mindset
- Openness to alternative ways to learn
- Knowledge of business and technology environments
- Consultative behavior

Commitment

- Individual commitment to learning
- Cohesive partnership between Corporate Learning Services and Technology Services
- Communication
- Technology Services leadership commitment
- Managers support for learning and knowledge transfer
- Manager accountability for development and skill advancement

Time

- Individual commitment to learning
- Learning time allocated within project plans
- In compliance with training plans and procedures document

Tools

- Talent identification and development
- Measurement of learning quality, employee commitment, employee performance and bottom line dollars
- Knowledge ability and consistent use of tools e.g. Learning Management System, CareerPower, Retain, Niku

Technology Services: The Idea X-Change Charter

The Idea X-Change is the learning environment created by the Technology Services organization. This document provides the rationale and vision for the space.

Purpose

The Idea X-Change provides an engaging, creative incubator for innovation and learning

Rationale

Technology Services is actualizing its vision of being a flexible, consultative, forward thinking, leading technology organization. To this end, it is encouraging leadership behaviors such as innovation, collaboration, risk-taking, partnering, portfolio management, and thought leadership. The space provided to leaders is not conducive to these behaviors. Instead, company space is good for routine activities: firing off emails, making calls, conducting hour-long meetings, and writing memos. It is not good for creativity, collaboration, or research. The Idea X-Change provides a forum for people across the company to convene, think, create, collaborate, and learn.

Benefits

- Central repository for products of intellectual capital (project plans, best practices, etc.)
- Increased interactions among people across company
- Increased sharing of best practices across company
- Supplies creative meeting space
- Encourages innovation, reflection, creation, and collaboration
- Demonstrates organizational commitment to innovation and growth
- Provides a haven to employees seeking to reflect, think, or brainstorm
- Values learning and sharing

Guiding Principles

- Fun
- Thoughtful
- Creative
- Engaging
- Interesting
- Comfortable
- Useful

Attributes

- Library of periodicals
- Toys (strategic thinking toys, kinesthetic toys, building toys, etc.)
- Modular seating (rolling chairs)
- Large white boards with multi-colored markers
- 1 - 2 small round tables
- Flipcharts and markers
- Art supplies
- Conference phone
- 1 - 2 computers with printer
- Windows

The Technology Services Organization: Pulse Group Method

The Technology Services organization used Pulse Groups to build relationships between line employees and organizational leaders as well as to learn about the “buzz” in the organization about change. It’s a simple, effective method for opening up communication and building relationships between organizational levels.

Purpose

- To understand current issues and concerns among employees
- To gauge employee satisfaction with employment in the organization
- To identify ways in which to improve quality of work life in the organization

Participants

8 - 12 people (non-managers) from across the organization

Participant Preparation

Interview 2 people using the worksheet sent with your invitation to the meeting. Take no more than 30 minutes total for the interviews. Bring the responses of your interviewees along with your own responses to the meeting.

Sample interview questions:

1. Currently, one of the organization’s focus areas is _____ (Thought Leadership, Portfolio Management, CMM, etc.). In your mind, what is _____ all about? What questions do you have about _____?
2. What is it that excites you about coming to work at our organization?
3. If you were to write the *Wall Street Journal* headline to describe life in the organization, what would it be?
4. If you could immediately wish for and have granted three wishes in order to make the organization a great place to work, what would they be?

Session Outline (3+ hour meeting with working lunch)

10:00 Participants sort, analyze, and prioritize interview themes.
12:00 1 - 2 leadership team members arrive. Group reviews and discusses priorities.
1:00 - 1:30 Session ends

Follow Up

1. Use information to help craft messages sent during communication meetings and address employee concerns.
2. Share outcomes of Pulse Groups at communication meetings.
3. Send an email follow up to participants summarizing the outcomes of the meeting and encouraging participants to report back to the people they interviewed.

The Life Companies: Learning Environment Team Charter

The Life Companies created a cross-functional, multi-level Learning Environment Team to guide learning activities in the organization. This document provides the learning policy, the objectives for the team, key deliverables, and important milestones.

Learning Policy Statement:

The Life Companies is dedicated to maintaining an environment of learning for our employees. The company is committed to providing the resources necessary to support an environment of continuous learning.

It is the responsibility of every leader and manager to encourage their employees to actively participate in learning and to provide the time and tools necessary to achieve such learning. It is the responsibility of every employee to seek learning opportunities through engaging in discussion with their manager.

It is our commitment to "Educate U 4 Life."

Description:

The Learning Environment team's mission is to support an environment that is conducive to learning; energizing employees through continuous learning, skill development, and knowledge enhancement. The team is committed to sustaining an environment where people want to share their knowledge, are encouraged to share their knowledge, are invited to expand their own knowledge, and are not afraid to take a risk due to fear of failure.

Objectives:

- Advocate an environment that is conducive to learning and encourages active participation in continuous learning
- Promote an environment unique to the Life Companies that encourages and values the development of a broad array of skills and knowledge
- Manage institutional knowledge through cross training and proper documentation of procedures

Deliverables:

- Develop calendar of learning events that is aligned with Life Company business themes (e.g., Career Pathing and Development)
- Facilitate the identification of Institutional Knowledge within Life Companies
- Measure and report on the progress of eliminating Institutional Knowledge

Key Milestones:

- Communication of calendar of events. (Q1: Stress Reduction, Q2: Careers and Development)
- Quarterly updates to leadership on status of management's work on Institutional Knowledge

The Life Companies: Learning Environment Team Deliverables

Over time, the Life Companies' vision for the Learning Environment grew. As the vision grew, the list of deliverables increased in number and in sophistication. This document describes key deliverables in more detail.

Allocating Time & Dollars for Learning

The Learning Environment Team will create a policy statement clearly articulating the Life Companies dedication to training our employees. This policy will reference our managers' responsibility for the employees' learning, including the importance of ensuring resource availability to support that goal.

Creating Spaces for Learning

The Learning Environment Team interviewed employees across The Life Companies organization and found that the issue most commonly raised was "finding a space" conducive to learning. The team, therefore, recommends the following spaces for learning:

Learning Labs - These are 8X8 cubes already located throughout the second floor; some of which have alternate uses (labs, etc.). There have been 5 such labs identified, spaced throughout the second floor. The primary use would be to allow employees to get away from their desk and do on-line or book learning in a quiet place - discouraging the many interruptions that occur today when trying to learn at your own desk.

The Learning Space - Creating a hospitable and inviting space to encourage learning and development for the employees of The Life Companies. The team has established the name for the environment: *Educate U 4 Life*. The space would be utilized for the following: small group training; industry, focused, and generic study groups; self study groups; mentor-mentee training; library of industry periodicals, books, etc. Additionally, the space would include materials related to our values such as posters, a recognition board, a thank you board to acknowledge mentors, and a wall of quotes minimally. The space will be colorfully decorated and a ceiling sign will make it visible from all angles of the second floor.

The Learning Environment team will hold itself responsible for the room and its continued use for learning (preventing it from becoming a conference room).

An Open House for Launching the Learning Environment

The Learning Environment and Career Pathing Teams will plan an open house (to be held in the Educate U 4 Life Learning Space). This will be a time to have folks see the space, understanding its uses, get information on the Learning Labs, sign up for learning groups, see the career paths we've developed, perhaps meet a career guide, and finally walk away with some "school" supplies (giveaways promoting the Learning Environment and Career Path Teams).

The Life Companies: Sample “Educate U for Life” Calendar

The Life Companies sponsored events in the Learning Environment that addressed a wide variety of topics. A sampling of these events, usually employee-initiated and employee-led, is listed in this Q2 2005 report.

The Learning Environment Team is pleased to share with you our achievements during the second quarter of 2005. We’ve helped over **100** of our employees reach for “Being Their Personal Best.”

“Humor Your Stress” with Loretta Laroche

- About a half of dozen of our folks learned to laugh at stress! Hopefully they’ve share some of the techniques they learned with fellow employees. This video is now available for team meetings, etc.

“Development Planning for Managers” with Melissa Cotter

- Almost all of our Life Companies managers joined Melissa for a brownbag lunch to learn about development planning for themselves and their employees.

“Cookie Contest” with Laura McCarthy

- Over 35 employees participated in this event. We learned about all kinds of cookies and left the event knowing one or two new faces. We also have a bunch of great cookie recipes!

“How to Win Friends and Influence People” Book Club with Chris Luisa

- Chris had over 20 participants in this book club. Feedback was so positive that we’ll be running the book club again in the third quarter.

“A New Attitude” with Shelby Hill and Kim Parker

- Shelby and Kim had half a dozen participants and not enough time. This event was also very well received and will be run over four weeks in the third quarter.

“Fitcorp Information Sessions” with Diana Paradise

- Diana Paradise spoke to about a dozen of us about fitness and how to get started; and actually demonstrated some “simple” exercises (that even Irene could do!). A similar event is being planned for the third quarter.

“Photo Contest” with Dave Ryan

- This event brought out about 30 photographers across the Life Companies. We thoroughly enjoyed every photo submitted; our judges had a very difficult time choosing the winners! This event may be run again in the future due to its popularity.

“Qualified Plans in a Nutshell” Focus Group Kickoff with Linda Cristo

- This focused study group educated 40 plus Life Companies employees on qualified plans; feedback has show that the material was helpful both for our work education and for our personal understanding of plans for retirement.

“Self Esteem: The Power to Be Your Best” with Shelby Hill and Pat Finnegan

- Shelby and Pat had a dozen participants for facilitated video sessions. Feedback was very positive. This program may be run again in the future due to its popularity.

Reading List

The Technology Services organization began its learning strategy by engaging in a collective effort to build knowledge about organizational learning. The following readings were included in our research. Starred items were particularly helpful to us in our work.

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About the Presenters

Irene Brank is the Director of Life and Annuity Operations for the Life Division of The Hanover Insurance Group. Irene has held financial and operational leadership roles within the organization since joining it in May 1999. She has led key initiatives such as the launch of a new administrative system, Sarbanes-Oxley certification, and the creation of a Learning Environment for the Life Division. Irene has directed the operations areas since the company discontinued manufacturing life and annuity products in 2002. She has managed the division through downsizing, rightsizing, process redesign and reorganization, and, finally, the conversion of its life and annuity products to an outsourced relationship. Prior to joining The Hanover Insurance Group, Irene was the Vice President of Administration and Finance for a leading area property and casualty insurance agent. She can be reached at ibrank@hanover.com.

Maya Townsend, founder and lead consultant of Partnering Resources, helps clients form an accurate picture of current challenges, imagine possibilities for the future, and mobilize energy for change. She specializes in helping leaders reach across the “white spaces” to develop solutions that stick. She serves as an advisor to Gartner, the leading technology research and advisory company, on change management best practices. Her work is regularly published by CIO.Com, *Mass High Tech*, and other industry publications. She teaches leadership, strategy, and alignment at Northeastern University and Boston University Corporate Education Center. Maya served as an internal consultant to the technology group at The Hanover Insurance Group from 2001 to 2004 before launching her business. She continues to work with The Hanover in its efforts to develop its learning community. She can be reached at maya@partneringresources.com.