

Learning teams: A path to continuous improvement

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

“What if we are less surprised by human error and failure and instead became more interested in learning?”

– Bob Edwards,
HOP Coach

What is a learning team?

It isn't just another committee. A learning team is a way to solve workplace issues by harnessing the knowledge and experience of your biggest asset—your employees.

At their core, learning teams are a group of individuals gathered to generate solutions. The most necessary ingredients in a learning team are the workers who perform the tasks being discussed, but a team should also include someone who does not perform the tasks regularly to offer a fresh perspective. Consider including a supervisor or manager if it won't hinder the process. There should be a way to communicate findings so they can be addressed.

Make sure you have a learning team coach—this person will facilitate the discussion, keeping everyone on track and making sure you follow the process. How do you get to be a good learning team coach? Practice! Be willing to learn and change things that don't work at your organization.

Learning teams support a learning culture that follows a continuous improvement process. Learning teams can be used after a near miss, injury, or incident. More importantly, they can be used for any workplace issue or problem.

Why do they work?

Learning teams understand the benefits of engaging employees who perform the work, versus only involving management. This approach generates solutions that help businesses succeed.

Improving engagement and instilling pride in all employees' work are other bonuses of learning teams. Including employees in the decision making process boosts their level of ownership, increasing buy-in and improving job satisfaction.

How do they work?

Learning teams work through a process:

1. Do you need a learning team?

Sometimes a resource will solve a problem and a learning team isn't needed. The first step is to evaluate your issue to see if a team discussion is the right strategy for generating solutions.

2. Session one

The first meeting of the learning team is the journey to discovery: defining the problem or issue by looking only at the work space and the work process. There is a tendency to jump in to “fix it” mode, but you want to resist that urge. In this step, you can use the brainstorming technique to gather everyone's ideas and thoughts. Encourage everyone to share their ideas

about their work environment and their work process, including frustrations and challenges. You can use tools like flowcharts, photographs, videos, or other creative ways to analyze the issue. Remember, learning teams can be used post incident, but don't use the incident as the starting point in session one. Instead, look at the environment and process to identify issues or problems.

3. Soak time

Have you ever heard the phrase "sleep on it" when making a decision? That's because your brain will work on a problem, even when you aren't consciously aware of it. This is a critical step for the learning team process. You can make the break short, but there should be some time between meetings. The ideal time? About a week.

4. Session two

This is the solution step. You don't want to lose sight of what is working well, so be sure to include it. Also address whether you need to test the idea with a prototype or a pilot project before you try it

everywhere. In this step you will:

- Make a list of what you want to do, in order of priority.
- Create an action/implementation plan.
- Develop a plan for communicating to everyone.
- Find a way to measure success.

5. Tell the story

While this is part of the communication plan you developed in session two, it's important enough to break out as a separate step. Sharing successes is another great way to celebrate employee contributions. If it wasn't successful, that's just another part of the story, and another opportunity to begin the learning team process again.

Why do they work?

Learning teams are a great way to engage employees in workplace challenges. Every organization can benefit from this strategy, which is a path to continuous improvement that really works.

Ground rules for an effective learning team:

- Get the right group of people
- Ensure there's enough time and space for meeting
- Encourage open and honest communication
- Work to find points you can all agree on
- Listen (so you can learn)
- Let the team solve the problem
- Remember the importance of soak time
- Develop ways to measure success



Content adapted from Bob Edwards, the HOP Coach.

Activity ideas

- Form your own learning team. Is there a workplace issue you would like to solve? Use the techniques in this handout to form your own learning team.
- Use a learning team for a workplace incident. How did it work? Did you generate some good solutions?
- Find out more about learning teams. They are used in several environments but can be very successful in safety. Here are a few places to learn more: www.bit.ly/2TGfaQy (Safety Solutions); www.safetysdifferently.com (Sidney Dekker)