THE CULTURE OF LEARNING

DON JONES

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Also By Don Jones

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Introduction

I've had a, roughly, 20-year career centered largely around technology learning. I've presented at technology conferences, written more than 60 technology books on varying topics, designed and written numerous classroom guides for instructor-led training, and produced hundreds of hours of e-learning materials. Throughout that career, I've connected with tens of thousands of learners, most of whom were employed in the information technology field. And in many cases, I've met and worked with those learners' managers and employers, who often spend thousands of dollars a year, per employee, on technology education.

A common theme across those employers is how to build *a culture of learning*. It's a phrase used so commonly that Google produces over a billion results when you search for it; turning up everything from scholarly treatises to "6 Ways to Build" clickbait-style blog articles on the subject. There are, in fact, many excellent pieces on the topic, which begs the question: why *another*? Why *this* book?

I've read dozens, if not hundreds, of those pieces and found many of them to be practical, actionable, and, in most cases, fairly concise. But I think too many of them focus exclusively on *why* you'd want a culture of learning or precisely *how* they recommend you build one. Few attempt to concisely tackle the underlying question, though: what, exactly, *is* a culture of learning?

I feel that understanding the answer to that question actually unlocks the *how* and *why* for you. Understanding that answer is what really "changes your brain," in a way that makes all the other answers obvious. Understanding that big, underlying answer also helps you really grasp the full scope of what a culture of learning is, and can be, to an organization. It highlights the real breadth and depth of the topic and shows you how it can–and should–pervade

everything your organization does. *That's* what this book is about. Let's begin.

What Is Culture?

Businesses, I suppose in an effort to make themselves sound more important, often overuse words and use them improperly. I'm somewhat famously opposed to the phrase *on-premise* to refer to technology assets that are located *on-premises*, because the word *premise* already has a perfectly good meaning that is entirely unrelated to asset location. But *culture*, as used in phrases like *a culture of learning*, is actually a really, really good use of the word. In fact, a *culture* is exactly what we're trying to build. The phrase is so common though, that I think a lot of people use it without really thinking about all that it means, which causes them to miss a lot of important and subtle points.

So, what is *culture?*

Culture is a noun. It's best meaning, for our purposes, is something like, "the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group." Or, "the attitudes and behavior characteristics of a particular social group."

When we speak of a *culture* in the social studies sense, we often speak of things like language, food, traditional dress, holiday observances, typical architecture, social traditions, and so on. *Culture* embodies all of those things. As we seek to build a culture of learning, we need to account for those things. We need, in other words, to build a *true* culture, one that encompasses all of the elements usually associated with cultures. It isn't just adopting a set of corporate policies or whipping up some motivational posters. We need the whole cultural package:

- **Social organization**, which describes how we organize ourselves as a group and how members of the group relate to one another.

- **Customs and traditions**, which describe how we behave, what typical activities we engage in, and, in large part, describe what we consider "normal."
- **Language**, which describes how we communicate with one another.
- **Arts and literature**, which describe the things we produce for entertainment and education.
- **Forms of government**, which describe our means of creating rules, along with how we promote and enforce those rules.
- **Economic systems**, which describe our means of assigning value, conducting trade, and so forth.
- **Belief systems**, which describe things like shared values, share opinions, and so on.

You might wonder what something like "belief systems" has to do with a culture of learning. In fact, if we are *truly* building an *actual* culture, then we have to consider everything that culture entails, which includes things like belief systems, forms of government, and so on. The difference between our culture of learning and most human cultures is that our culture of learning will be built deliberately, rather than evolving organically over hundreds or thousands of years. We will *choose* the kind of culture we create.

Each of the following chapters will address one of these seven cultural elements. Each chapter will help you understand how these elements contribute to a successful, self-sustaining, and healthy culture of learning, and how these elements can address the practical, day-to-day challenges around lifelong learning.

Our Cultural Driver

Before we begin, it's worth a few minutes to define exactly what it is we're trying to solve with a culture of learning.

The ability to learn is the trait that has enabled humanity to survive, grow, and thrive through the centuries. Our ability to learn makes us adaptable and enables us to continually build on the accomplishments of our ancestors and contemporaries. But too often we reach a point where we feel we "know enough" and our learning activity slows or stops. We become complacent. We often forget *how* to learn, as if learning is a muscle that can atrophy with disuse.

For an employee holding down a job, simply knowing what they need to be successful in that job may seem like "enough." After all, if the job is what it is and you already know everything needed to do the job, what is there left to learn? What benefit is there to learning anything more? Why spend the time on learning, rather than on leisure?

For an employer, that attitude can be deadly. While many businesses can continue "as-is" for years and years, most businesses need to continually make small adjustments in order to stay ahead of their competition. Revised processes, new products, and so on all keep a business healthy; and a healthy business can cut its employees' paychecks on a regular basis. But when employees stop learning, or resist learning, then the employer loses agility. The business is less able to react to market conditions, take advantage of market opportunities, and improve itself. Unless the business exists in an entirely static market–which is a true rarity–then the business *must* continue to evolve, which means the business' employees must continue to learn.

So that is both our problem and our driver: businesses need their teams to always be learning, so that the business can always be evolving in a changing marketplace. And even if you're not running a business, the same principles apply: we need to be continually learning so that we can be continually improving. There is no, "good enough;" there is always something better, just within reach.

Our Cultural Goal

Our goal, then, is to solve the problem of continual learning and improvement. We want to create an environment where learning is an accepted, desired, usual part of everyday life. No, more than an *environment*; we want to create a shared expectation that learning is as much a part of daily life as that first cup of coffee, that lunchtime power walk, or the commute home. We want our language, our traditions, our habits, and our shared beliefs to all reflect the value of learning. We want our systems of internal government, our social interactions, and our work products to all reflect a desire to continually learn. We want learning to become as much a part of our workplace as our work itself, not something that we only engage in when we are not working.

Part 1: The Elements of Culture

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Language

Language is one of the first things most people think of when you say *culture* and it's one of the things that most firmly binds a social group together. Certainly, major human cultures feature their own languages–Japanese, Spanish, Russian, English, and so on–but many social groups also concoct distinct languages. The language of an inner-city neighborhood, the language of wine aficionados, and the language of a military servicemember are all examples of how cultures develop their own distinct ways of communicating what is important to them.

What is important to them. That's really the key thing about a language. Humanity's first words were likely a way to communicate the location of a nearby freshwater spring, to warn each other of approaching danger, and to record the tribe's history.

So how can we create a language for a culture of learning?

We start, of course, by adopting our current language, such as English. We then examine the words we use to see if they're contributing to, or detracting from, our goals for our culture. Within a given culture, words can take on very different meanings, ones that reflect the values and intent of the culture itself.

For example, there's an amusing anecdote I like to use to explain why the various branches of the US military often have difficulty working together. Tell the Army to secure a building, the story goes, and they'll surround the building, take any occupants prisoner, and possibly call in an air strike. Tell the Marines to secure a building, and they'll storm the building, lock down any occupants, and raise a US flag on the roof. Tell the Navy to secure a building and they'll turn off the lights, lock the doors, and go home. Tell the Air Force to secure a building, and they'll take out a three-year lease with

an option to buy. *Secure*, for their different cultures, carries very diverse meanings.

Consider some of the words you use to describe learning in your organization. *Training* is a common one. Now, this isn't meant to be an arbitrary "softening" of the language, in the way that people use the word *issue* rather than the more confrontational-seeming *problem*; words have power and recognizing their *intent* is important. For me, *training* is something you do with a dog, or perhaps a dolphin: through repetition and rewards (treats), you condition someone to faithfully repeat a given series of tasks or behaviors on command. You typically expect and desire very little autonomy or initiative from the being that you're training. Is that what you want from *people*, though?

Teaching perhaps conveys a higher mission. To teach is to change someone's mind in a positive way, to give it capabilities that it previously didn't have. But our modern society creates a kind of toxic relationship around the word teacher: we are either a teacher, in a position of authority and respect, or we are a student, occupying a subordinate, largely passive role. It imposes a binary decision: you are either teaching or you are being taught. As we'll explore throughout this book, a true culture of learning doesn't demand that kind of binary choice and instead tries to make learning an everyday part of everything we do.

Mentoring comes up often in organizations. *Mentor* is actually the name of a person in *The Odyssey*, and his student was Telemachus, not "Mentee." For many people, *being mentored* carries a connotation of learning from a learned guru, someone older and with more experience. It again implies a binary choice: you are either a mentor or you are being mentored. We may not *mean* for the word to carry that connotation, but it typically does, and it automatically starts to set expectations when people hear it. Those expectations, in turn, start to invisibly shape our thinking and our behaviors, not always for the better.

Our culture of learning, then, might simply use the word *learner*. We are all learners, every day, all the time. Even when we are sharing information with someone else, we can be learning from them–from their questions, their observations, their comments, and so on–at the same time they are learning from us. Our culture of learning might not feature an "opposite" to the learner. We might not have "trainers" or "teachers" or "mentors;" as we shall see, much of our learning might not even come from other human beings. If we are to be lifelong learners, which is the putative goal of our culture of learning, then we might as well just call ourselves that. This has the advantage of putting everyone into the same boat: nobody is superior or subordinate; we're simply all learners. We're free to learn from anyone, including each other, and we're free at any moment to be the one someone else is learning from.

We also need to broaden our definition of *learning* within our culture.

To go along with our binary "teacher/student" role assignments, we tend to split our days into binary divisions: times when we are learning and times when we are not. We set aside time to go into a classroom, time to watch a "training video," time to read a book, and so on. The concept of "learning time" over-formalizes what learning is meant to be. Learning becomes something we step into and out of, not a pervasive culture that we live within all the time.

While co-directing the IBM Institute for Advanced Learning, author David Grebow said, "We get only 25% or less of what we use in our jobs through formal learning. Yet, most of today's investment in corporate education is on the formal side. The net result is that we spend the most money on the smallest part of the equation." Much of that mis-focus comes from the way we conceptualize *learning* as something that occurs in a fixed time and place that exists apart from the rest of our lives. If we're to be lifelong learners, then learning must be part of our *entire* lives, not merely a small, set-aside fraction of them.

We have to recognize that learning actually happens all the time. Google "David Grebow" and you'll be learning a bit about who he is and what he's done. That's real, actual learning, even though you're not in a classroom. It's the kind of learning that occurs to almost everyone, throughout almost every day, that we don't really recognize and call out as having value. Certainly, formal learning has its place, especially when we're beginning a journey to learn brand-new concepts, techniques, or practices from scratch, but as Grebow points out, formal learning only solves for about 25% of our educational needs. So why place it in such a central position in our culture? Instead, we need to find ways to recognize and elevate the smaller, everyday learning that happens to us all the time. We need to embrace new learning modalities, such as the peer-to-peer learning that happens in hallway conversations or in the break room. We need to recognize that even formal learning can happen in the smallest of sprints, such as watching a five-minute instructional video.

One of the biggest problems many organizations, and their learners, say that they face is simply "making time for learning." That again reflects the binary, learning-or-not-learning division of time that we've accepted for most of our lives. Instead, we have to create a culture that recognizes that you *don't* make time for learning, necessarily; you simply recognize that it's happening all around you, all the time. We have to create a spectrum of learning, with each different learning moment having a different flavor, a different outcome, and a different impact on different people. Our culture's language needs to have specific words and phrases for various points on that spectrum, to ensure they're recognized for what they are. For example:

- **Moment-of-need learning** is when we self-engage in learning to solve a particular need, right at the time we need it. For example, when you can't figure out how to solder two pieces of copper pipe together and you look up a YouTube video where someone demonstrates just that.

- **Peer learning** is when a small peer group–as few as two people- shares information amongst themselves. This is how most organizations' "institutional knowledge" is passed from employee to employee over time.
- **Group learning** is when groups come together for specific, set-aside learning time, without a formal instructor. Project "postmortems" are a good example of this, where teams discuss what they've collectively learned on a recently completed project.
- **Formal learning** is when we set aside a set amount of time for learning a predetermined set of objectives. This is the traditional learning we're all used to, and can involve classrooms, self-paced e-learning, reading, and so on.

These certainly aren't the only kinds of learning on the spectrum and these certainly aren't the words you have to use as you create your culture of learning. The point is to think about *all* the different ways that learning happens and to create a word or phrase for each. Giving them a name gives them an identity and implies that they have value. These names give our culture depth and nuance and help to break down the binary relationship with learning that most of us grew up with.

There's another bit of language we need to tackle, and that's how we talk about *not knowing*. There are almost no positive-connotation words that let us discuss something we don't know. *Ignorance* is literally correct but carries incredibly negative connotations. But if we're going to create a true culture of learning, we need to be able to speak about the absence of knowledge– how else can we rectify that absence?

Human beings are hardwired to feel three times more anxious about the potential to lose something than we feel optimistic about the potential to gain something. It's the basis of phrases like, "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush"–we fear the potential loss far more than we anticipate the gain. For most people, admitting

that they don't know something triggers that "loss avoidance" feeling. If we don't know something, we worry about losing status, losing position, losing respect, and more. So, our culture of learning needs to combat that by adopting positive language, and a positive attitude, around "not knowing." It's not something we can conquer through language alone and it's a concept we'll tackle further on in this book. But you'll definitely need to spend some time figuring out ways to positively describe "not knowing."

Finally, we need to recognize that the whole point of our culture of learning *is* to engender learning and that we have expectations for what that learning will lead to. "We want people to be better able to perform job tasks" may be the ultimate reason we're worried about all of this learning "stuff," but for the purposes of operating our culture, that's too high-level. So how can we describe, in more detail, the *outcomes* we expect our culture of learning to produce?

Recognize first that learning is never complete. Indeed, the whole attitude of, "you've been to class, and so now you are Done Learning" is deeply problematic. Instead, consider using words like *improvement* to discuss learning outcomes. You're not "done," but surely you are "improved" after any learning experience, no matter how small. We might use words like *assess* to describe our process of measuring capability. And we might use words like *timeframe* to describe the period of time we go between assessments. While there's likely an instinctive urge to use "before and after" assessments–take a test of some kind, take a class, and then retake the test–we have to see that as a fallback to the "learning-or-not-learning" binary division that has no place in a true culture of learning. Instead, we define *timeframes* as routinely reassessing capabilities after each timeframe. That kind of language implicitly recognizes that learning happens all the time, even when we haven't been through some kind of point-in-time formal learning event. That kind of language also implicitly recognizes to continuous, never-ending nature of learning, and promises to measure our improvement all the time, at regular

intervals. *Intervals* can also be a good word to use, for that matter.

Language like that helps set organizational priorities to support a culture of learning. When we define *growth intervals*, we're not necessarily reverting to a binary, "learning-or-not-learning" division of time. Instead, we're tacitly recognizing that learning happens all the time, and we start to set organizational priorities and resources toward making room for that to happen. Instead of learning being either some big, nebulous, immeasurable thing or a small, formalized, point-in-time exercise, *intervals* can give us something to manage to, without creating artificial restrictions on what learning is or when it can occur.

How we talk about learning, in every single way, *will* shape how we approach, plan, execute, measure, and value learning. For all cultures, language communicates our feelings on a subject, and having a precise language designed for our culture of learning is the first step in bringing that culture to life.

Key Takeaways

Language is important to culture because words communicate meaning, imply value, and set priorities. In a culture of learning, we need to ensure that we have healthy ways to discuss learning, including ways to continually stress that we are *all* learners, all of the time. We need to ensure that our culture, through its language, recognizes the many forms of learning that we all engage in, all of the time. We need ways to positively acknowledge a lack of knowledge, which implies a need for learning. And finally, we need ways to accurately discuss learning outcomes, so that we can engage in a shared conversation about priorities, investments, and so on.

Social Organization

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