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Picture a company cafeteria with overhead projectors, pads of paper, and pencils on all the tables. Is this the sign of an organization in desperate need of more conference rooms? No, it's the cafeteria at Siemens Power Transmission and Distribution, designed by senior managers to help employees capture what they learn during casual conversations and impromptu knowledge-sharing sessions.

Now picture a meeting during which everyone describes the biggest mistakes they've made during the past year. Is this some kind of support group? Sort of: It's a gathering of WD-40 Company's global brand managers, who take the opportunity to share their "learning moments," the times when they mess up and learn something as a result.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 70% of learning experiences in the workplace are like the examples above: informal or accidental, not structured or sponsored by an employer or a school. This kind of learning is pervasive, continuous, and profoundly social. It happens wherever people do their work: on a shop floor, around a conference table, on site with customers, or in a laboratory.

Informal learning can support the day-in and day-out culture building and skills development needed in an economy fueled by distinctive information and sparkling innovations. What we learn informally can move ideas through the organization and help everyone in it create something new.

Despite such a noble responsibility, informal learning receives little attention. Perhaps that's because it appears to be the way it sounds: ad hoc, unplanned, and unmanageable. Although you cannot usually schedule informal learning, you can encourage it in the people around you. It might sound paradoxical, but you can create an organization-wide "discipline" of informal learning without destroying its spontaneity. Here are some steps to get you started:

Acknowledge It in You.

Ask yourself where and when your most valuable learning takes place. Is it usually at a formal event or might it be during a walk around the block, a friendly argument with colleagues, or a hard look in the mirror? Become mindful of every impromptu opportunity. The next time you share war stories with acquaintances, notice that you're probably learning what to try the next time you're in their situation. Announce to the organization that you're learning from many means and are dedicated to creating a culture in which everyone learns every day. Challenge colleagues who tell you that you've something to learn by asking, "How can I learn it now?"

Uncover It Around You.

Gartner Research estimates that the typical knowledge worker spends more than 25% of his or her time in face-to-face encounters. For a CEO, the figure reaches 95%. When people interact, the question isn't, "Is informal learning going on?" but "About what?" Ask people what they discovered today that would enable the company to outshine its competitors tomorrow. Invite them to share lessons they'd like everyone to learn. Get a sense of where and when informal learning happens. Wander down hallways and listen. Get involved in conversations, whether with direct reports or with colleagues you barely know.

Liberate It in Others.

People are natural learners -- asking, observing, searching, speculating, and experimenting all the time -- but many adults have little confidence in their learning abilities. Circulate learning-style assessments to help people understand their strengths and ask the training department to offer follow-up discussions on learning techniques. Ask the research group to publish search tips and librarians to help people find what they need.

Access It Wherever You Can.

Find opportunities to disseminate the information already in your organization. If you use a knowledge base, ask someone to edit materials and find new items to include. If you have an intranet, establish guidelines about how to represent information and how to link it so that people can find it. Encourage people to publish the department job aids and cheat sheets they create for themselves. Assemble frequently asked question lists and make them available in a format that everyone can add to and edit.

Promote It with New Practices.

Find and encourage new ways and times for people to talk about the work they share. Post a whiteboard near the water cooler, in the stairwells, and by the printer or copy machine so that people can capture conversations where they hold them. Provide a guide to informal learning opportunities as part of your everyday meetings and new-staff orientations. Create 10-minute overlaps between shifts so that people can get to know one another. Encourage people to send instant messages to colleagues across the enterprise or those they can learn from around the globe.

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