



# Learning about learning

## Mateo's three insights

A GovLab story



# About the authors

**Kevin Chrapaty** is a former GovLab fellow and a senior consultant in the Federal Technology practice of Deloitte Consulting LLP. Chrapaty has supported clients in the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Department of Health and Human Services. His work focuses on helping clients solve complex problems through the proper application of technology. Before joining Deloitte, Chrapaty graduated from the University of Maryland with a BS in information systems. He enjoys traveling and pairing food with bacon, and is a proud member of the #Learn2Code movement.

**Andrew K. Stein** is a senior consultant in Deloitte Consulting LLP's Strategy & Operations practice. He has served clients in the private, public, and non-profit sectors for more than six years. Today, Stein works with Deloitte Consulting Innovation, which trades in new ideas, businesses, and platforms. Using powerful collaborative software, he designs and facilitates strategic conversations. Stein holds an MBA from Emory University and a BA in mechanical engineering from Brown. He enjoys improv comedy and city biking, and makes a decent goat cheese quiche.

# Acknowledgements

We are so grateful to the many individuals who helped make our story come to life.

Special thanks to our sponsors: PJ Rivera, manager with Deloitte Consulting LLP, who supported us all along the way and challenged us when necessary, and Tony Demarinis, a principal with Deloitte Consulting LLP, who inspired us and helped shape our lessons.

We are also thankful to our GovLab leaders: Shrupti Shah, GovLab Director, who gave us freedom to forge a new path; Bill Eggers, director of Deloitte Global public sector research, whose energy and passion drove our team; Carmen Medina, specialist leader with Deloitte Consulting LLP, for her creativity, wisdom, and encouragement to be rebels; and Tiffany Fishman, manager with Deloitte Services LP, who helped us all along the way and pushed us across the finish line.

We would like to thank the many experts who took their time to inform our research and help us sculpt our vision, including Erv Lessel, director with Deloitte Consulting LLP; Amy Titus, director with Deloitte Consulting LLP; Graham Johnston, senior manager with Deloitte Services LP; Elizabeth Mariani, specialist leader with Deloitte Consulting LLP; Ramona Pierson, CEO of Delcara, Inc.; and Max Stier, President and CEO, Partnership for Public Service.

Lastly, we would like to thank our GovLab colleagues for supporting a culture of innovation that encouraged us to take the first step outside of our comfort zone, and then never look back.

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# Foreword

Stop me if you've heard this one.

*Q: What word strikes fear in the heart of employees everywhere?*

*A: "Training."*

You know it's true. People usually dislike training. Some of us consider it only slightly preferable to a root canal. The word brings back memories of stackable chairs, feeble PowerPoints, and a painful struggle to stay awake.

Which is another way to say that most training is not particularly effective.<sup>1</sup>

Yet consider this fact: People *do* like to learn and improve.<sup>2</sup> We're built that way. When we learn something new, our brains release dopamine, a feel-good chemical that tells us we're doing the right thing.<sup>3</sup> (As Winston Churchill said, "I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.")

The basic contradiction here suggests that much of the time, effort, and money devoted to training and education is being, well, wasted.

Fortunately, you can take steps to make sure your employees actually learn what they need to know to be effective, in ways that make it a positive and productive experience.

This story is a call for managers to rethink their approach to employee training and development.<sup>4</sup>

• • •

Mateo is a program manager at a fictitious government agency. Let's call it the Office of Departmental Coordination (ODC). Mateo's programs are struggling, and he can't pinpoint the reasons. In desperation, he starts thinking hard about his employees' ability and knowledge—and the professional development they've received. Along the way, he learns three things:

1. Most performance problems are caused **by learning gaps**.
2. People learn best when their training is **tailored** to their individual needs.
3. **Great training empowers learners**, giving them the tools and conditions they need to learn effectively.

A great deal of adult learning research supports these ideas.

More broadly, Mateo's journey echoes an ongoing debate about how to lead and develop employees. Training departments, with their focus on classrooms and workshops, are giving way to learning and development professionals who seek to nourish human potential at work. (It's not a small difference.)

But this story is for managers, not trainers. Why? Because managers have the most to gain from better performance—and the most responsibility for their employees' growth. Managers, not trainers, best understand their programs' goals, the skills required, and their teams' expertise and needs.

Because managers are the main customers of training, they must be engaged partners with the training organization. If you're a manager and you know Mateo's three insights, then you can insist on learning and development that engages and transforms.

Please share this story to amplify the call for change. And please enjoy learning a few new things—it's how we're wired.

**Kevin Chrapaty and Andrew K. Stein**

Washington, DC

# Learning about learning

## The “or else” conversation

It had *not* been a good Tuesday so far, and it was showing no sign of improvement. Which was why Mateo found himself walking to a small, shady park near his office instead of the subway. He needed some time to think and calm down.

As a supervisor at the Office of Departmental Coordination (ODC), Mateo embraced his mission: to bring agencies together to tackle shared challenges. But he had struggled since his promotion, and his program metrics were a drumbeat of bad news: a 90-day backlog and low stakeholder satisfaction. A reengineering push and a few team pep talks hadn't helped.

The conversation he knew was coming had finally happened that afternoon. His boss, Janet, had told him that she was on the hook for a \$5 million cut in her budget, and Mateo's programs were likely targets. He *had* to improve his metrics in the next six months, or Unfortunate Things would happen.

His only hope was something Janet had said as he walked out of her office. “Look, Mateo, if

I'm going to fight for you, then I need to see an action plan by the end of the week.”

Mateo sat on a park bench, faintly stunned. What kind of action plan could he develop by *Friday*? How was he going to turn his team around and save his job?

Then he met a teacher. The best teacher he had ever known.

## The teacher

Out of the corner of his eye, Mateo first noticed gray hair under a scarf. He hadn't even seen her sit down beside him. From a small plastic bag she tossed some yellow pellets at the few gray pigeons nearby.

“I must have tried dozens of different kinds of birdseed,” she said. He looked up; her voice was firm and kind. “This one's their favorite—mostly millet.” She turned to him. “I haven't seen you here before. What's your name?”

“Mateo.”

“My name's Rose Weston, but please call me Rose. I taught English for thirty years, and ‘Mrs. Weston’ was how my seventh-graders knew me.”

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**LEARNING** is a holistic and ongoing process of personal improvement and development.

**FORMAL LEARNING** is the traditional training approach (usually a classroom event).

**INFORMAL TRAINING** includes all other ways we learn, such as on the job and through our exposure to mentors, peers, and new ideas.

**PERFORMANCE** is the successful achievement of one's mission targets. Unmet targets indicate **performance gaps**.

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# “98 percent of organizations with strong learning cultures report strong employee productivity—37 percent more than their peers.”

— David Mallon, “High-impact learning culture: The 40 best practices for creating an empowered enterprise,” Bersin by Deloitte, <http://is.gd/bersin2>.

“Middle-schoolers? That must be like combat!” Mateo, thinking back to his own early teens, felt a little horror at the notion.

Rose chuckled. Two more pigeons landed with another scattering of birdseed. “Wasn’t too bad. People think teaching is all about control.” She shook her head. “Most students just need a push in the right direction.”

Mateo felt himself unclenching a bit. “You know, Rose, I wonder what you’d do in my spot.” She nodded, eyes on him. “I’m a program manager. My job’s in trouble,” he said. “My team and I aren’t hitting our targets. There’s this big gap between what we’re being asked to do and what we *can* do. We’ve got problems all over the map. And I need a plan to improve our performance. In three days.”

## Learning is more than training

“I see,” she said, tossing another handful of seed. “Well, all I can tell you is that I tried to teach my kids how to handle the challenges in life—seeing patterns, reading between lines, expressing themselves. Every day I prepared them for adulthood, bit by bit.” She turned back to Mateo. “So how do you prepare *your* students?”

“You mean my *staff*?” Mateo grinned.

“Training, of course! My agency is very proud of how much we invest in training.”

“Too narrow,” Rose said. “Don’t focus on what the *trainer* does, think about what the *student* does.”

“Students . . . well, learn?” Mateo furrowed his brow. “Training, learning—they’re the same thing, right?”

Rose shrugged. “Tell me—of everything you know that makes you good at your job—how much did you learn in a classroom?”

“Probably not much. Maybe 20 percent.”

Rose feigned shock. “Just 20 percent!”

“Yeah—the rest I picked up on the job or from colleagues.”

“But didn’t you just say that you prepare your own staff through formal training?”

“Well, when you put it like that, it does seem odd to focus on classroom time,”

Mateo said.

Rose nodded. “It sounds like *formal* learning is your professional focus. And yet you learned about 80 percent of what you know *informally*—on the job or from colleagues. Any idea why that is?”

“Because, well, informal learning is relevant to what I’m doing at the time, I guess. And because I get to see what works with my own eyes, and get feedback right away about what I’m doing wrong.”

“Practical experience and immediate feedback. Very interesting. And so what would be a good way to develop your team?”

“A . . . new focus on informal learning,” Mateo said, as much to himself as to Rose. “I like it. We want to help them learn outside of the classroom. And so I need to figure out exactly what they need to learn—and how to integrate it into their jobs.”

“And how would you do that?”

Mateo sat back, eyes far away. “Well, it really helps when I give my team daily feedback and new stretch roles. When we changed our event planning process last month, we coordinated desk-side coaches and job shadowing. And every week or so, we have a group lunch to talk about each of our challenges and share advice.” Mateo paused. “There are a lot of kinds of informal learning, when you think about it.”



“That’s right,” she said. “But I have to warn you. Although I said it’s not about control, it *does* take planning. ‘Informal’ doesn’t mean ‘unorganized.’”

They sat in silence while Mateo thought about ways he could bring more informal learning to his team. After a few moments, Rose stood and emptied the last of her birdseed on the sidewalk.

She turned to him. “You said you’ve got problems ‘all over the map,’ yes? Then maybe you should discover what these problems have in common. Let’s call that your first challenge.” She smiled and ambled off.

“Rose, wait!” She turned to face him. “I, uh, really appreciate talking. Maybe I’ll see you again soon.”

“I feed my birds every day,” she said with a smile.

As she strolled away, Mateo stared after Rose. He had his “first challenge”—were there more? And what could his team’s problems possibly have in common?

## That first challenge

As soon as Mateo got to work Wednesday morning, he called his deputy Daniel into his office and explained Janet’s ultimatum. Daniel took his usual seat, notebook open and pen in hand.

“You know the score, Daniel,” he said. “Janet isn’t happy. Our backlog of requests is getting worse, and the satisfaction surveys are still mediocre.”

Daniel winced. “Yeah, our metrics show some serious problems. A professor I had called them ‘performance gaps.’ Makes it sound fancier, anyway.”

“What do you mean by a performance gap?” Mateo asked.

“Just that we’re bad at something we should be good at, in order to accomplish our mission,” Daniel said. “So, as the first step to fixing the problem, you have to figure out what those somethings are.” Daniel sat up straight. “Look, can I try something? Just a few quick questions. Indulge me.”

Mateo leaned back. Daniel was full of ideas. “Go for it.”

Daniel flipped through his notebook. “Let’s start with the survey results. First question: Why are we getting bad feedback from our facilitated sessions?”

Mateo frowned. “The participants must not feel that their time is being spent well, that they’re not seeing tangible outcomes.”

“Why is that?” asked Daniel.

Mateo frowned a bit more. “Because our facilitators aren’t matching what they do with the groups’ actual needs.”

“Why is that?”

“Maybe because our facilitators aren’t really understanding their needs before planning the sessions.”

“And why is that?”

**“80 percent or more of corporate learning is found to be informal.”**

— Peter Henchel, Institute for Research on Learning<sup>5</sup>



# “Mission needs should drive learning from the start, and performance is the best yardstick for success.”

— Preston Brown, “Making training strategic,” American Society for Training and Development, April 30, 2012, <http://is.gd/astdev>.

“Because . . . they haven’t *learned* how to determine group needs in a deep and insightful way,” Mateo said. “It’s just something they haven’t learned yet. The root cause of this problem is some kind of ‘learning gap.’”

Daniel grinned. “All I did was ask ‘why’ four times. I bet we’ll find learning gaps at the bottom of a lot of our problems. Sure, our 90-day backlog may involve some process issues, but isn’t even a process fix a type of *learning*? People *learning* how to perform their roles better?”

And with that, Mateo had his first insight: **Most performance problems are caused by learning gaps.**

As Daniel scribbled some notes, Mateo considered the point. If his problems were due to learning gaps, then there were a lot more of them than he could handle on his own. He thought of the deadline again and felt queasy.

*Mateo’s first insight: Most performance problems are caused by learning gaps.*

## The second challenge

“Learning!” Mateo said to Rose, back on the park bench. “I’m convinced now—it’s all about learning. Our problems are due to things we don’t know or can’t do yet.”

“Of course,” Rose said. “And what’s your next challenge?”

“Well, obviously I have to get my team up to speed. I’ve got to close these learning gaps,” Mateo said. “I guess I’m going to be talking to the training department, but I’m not sure exactly how to approach the whole mess.”

“Well, one thing *is* for sure. You’re going to need to partner with those trainers,” Rose said. “You can’t do it alone and neither can they. Start by getting their help.”

She turned away and scattered more birdseed. Two stray pigeons wobbled back toward Rose. Mateo said his goodbyes and walked toward the subway, lost in thought. The training department had never exactly been his favorite part of the agency, and he wasn’t looking forward to the conversations he knew he’d be having.

## Jeff is a pretty nice guy, as it turns out

Fortunately, Jeff from training seemed like a pretty nice guy.

“Jeff, you’ve got to help me,” said Mateo. “I need to improve my team’s performance—and I need a plan, fast.”

It was Thursday morning, and Mateo was sitting across from Jeff, a branch chief in the training division. “My programs are at risk. My job, too!” It didn’t seem like a time for understatement.

“No problem, Mateo,” Jeff said. “That’s what we’re here for, with classes and e-learning.” Jeff was easygoing, like a tour guide always answering the same questions. He pointed at a stack of booklets in the corner. “Grab a catalog and pick a workshop.”

“I’m not sure something off the shelf will work this time.” Mateo described his idea—that his performance problems were probably due to learning gaps. “I’m not sure what I need, Jeff, but I’d like your help. I know my mission, and you know how to help people learn.”

Jeff gestured to the open chair opposite his desk, grinning. “Most of my clientele just

“Many leading organizations are shifting responsibility for learning from training and HR divisions to managers—and to the learners themselves.”

— Kineo, *The new learning and technology architecture: Ten trends from leading companies*, 2012, <http://is.gd/kineo>.

grab a catalog and move on. But tell me your troubles and I'll help you out the best I can.”

Jeff listened as Mateo explained his programs, his team, and the ultimatum.

At the end, Jeff sat back, hands folded behind head. “You're in a bind, all right. But look, all I can offer is what I have. And right now we don't have the resources to customize a training plan for your program's missions.”

“I actually think we could *save* money, if we do this right,” Mateo said. “Would it cost less if we design a learning plan to focus on more informal learning?”

Jeff looked thoughtful. “On-the-job learning? Shadowing, that sort of thing? Yeah, it could be cheaper. We could replace those workshops with more learning outside of the classroom.”

Mateo smiled. “It just seems better and cheaper to have my employees take on a stretch or shadow role in event management than to organize a big training session.” Jeff nodded. “So can we do this? Will you help me put together more on-the-job learning?”

“Be glad to.” Jeff stood and shook Mateo's hand. “But the next step is to make the plan. So . . . what do you want your ‘learning plan’ to look like?”

Mateo paused. “I . . . Let me get back to you on that.” He grabbed his stuff and left Jeff's office.

He knew where he was headed next.

## The second insight

“So, Rose, how do I make a learning plan?” They were back at Rose's bench that afternoon, though Mateo suspected it was the pigeons' bench; Rose just paid rent in birdseed.

Rose smiled. “Well, maybe you should ask, ‘What does great learning *look* like?’ Do you remember our conversation yesterday about formal and informal learning?”

“Yeah. You said formal training is a waste of time!”

“Not exactly—I *was* a teacher! But formal instruction is not easy. Tell me: If you're going to learn a new skill from someone, what has to happen? Do you just sit back and listen to a lecture?”

Mateo scrunched his face. “Well, if I get experience that's close to the context in which I'll be using it—like a simulation or hands-on exercise—it'll stick in my mind better.”

“So it has to impart *relevant* experience,” Rose said. “Keep going. Your smartphone—tell me, how did you learn to use it?”

“My brother-in-law was staying with us, and he showed me how to customize settings and download apps.”

“So it was *timely*, then. I mean, you were learning things you could use immediately.”

“Yeah. It was great to have him there to explain it right when I needed to use my phone.”

“And his instruction was *accurate*, I assume?”

“Yeah, he knew what he was talking about.” Rose nodded. Mateo pursed his lips. “*Relevant*, *timely*, and *accurate*. You're saying these are the elements of great learning?”

Rose nodded again with a big grin. “What would you call it all?”

“Well, we want the right content, the right fit, and the right timing.” Mateo was thinking out loud. “Fit . . . match . . . precision. I guess you could call it *precision learning*.”

Rose repeated “precision learning” to herself and then nodded. “Right-o. But don’t forget the thing that pulls it all together. Your brother-in-law was there with *you*, answering *your* questions and telling you what *you* wanted to know, when *you* wanted to know it. Don’t forget that. Great learning is tailored for the *individual*.”

Mateo’s smile quickly froze. “Okay, but how do I know the right content for each person? The right timing?” Mateo clenched his jaw. “Seems like way more than I can handle.”

“Well, you’ve made a good start, Mateo. You understand the *problem*—learning gaps—and you understand the *solution*—precision learning, tailored for the individual. But you haven’t talked with your employees. You’re like a salesman with a great product who hasn’t talked to his customers yet.” Mateo nodded. “This is your third and final challenge. Go speak with your customers.”

Mateo stood, his mind swimming with new ideas. What would he say to them? And Janet’s deadline was tomorrow—could he develop a plan in time?

**Mateo’s second insight:** *Great learning is “precision-made” for each person—accurate, relevant, and timely.*

## The third challenge: At the team meeting

“. . . and they could cut our programs!”

Friday morning. Mateo had just finished reminding his team members about their urgent situation—the backlog, the satisfaction scores, the ultimatum. Solemn nods all around the old conference room.

“But I may know what we can do about this,” added Mateo. He explained everything he’d thought about in the past week—performance gaps as learning gaps, formal versus informal learning, and tailored “precision learning.”

Jeff spoke next. Mateo had asked him to come to represent the training division. “It

sounds like your performance challenges are mostly needs for learning, right? So it’s just a matter of figuring out the right mix of formal and informal.”

Remembering Rose’s advice, Mateo addressed his team, “Let’s say you’re *my* customers when it comes to learning and development. You’re my customers, and I’m serving you. So tell me: What can we do for you?” Mateo fiddled nervously with a pen; he’d never had this kind of conversation with his staff.

Caroline, a senior program analyst, offered the first idea. “Our backlog is too big because we don’t have enough facilitators,” she said. “Maybe the rest of us could help pick up the slack . . . if we knew how.”

Jeff held up a finger. “That I can do, in facilitation workshops!”

“But we need the learning to be just like the real thing,” Mateo said. “Jeff, can we skip the lectures and make workshops that simulate real situations?”

“Sure.” Jeff grabbed a marker and wrote *Simulation-based workshops* on the whiteboard.

“Great!” Mateo turned back to the group, “What else would help?”

Mateo’s deputy Daniel raised his hand. “Personally, I’d like to watch some of our best facilitators at work, see what they’re doing and ask them for tips.” Jeff wrote *Job shadowing* on the board.

Daniel added, “And I’d, uh, really like to have your feedback when I actually start facilitating on my own.” Jeff added *On-the-job coaching* to the board.

Caroline spoke up. “I know our intranet files pretty well. I could run a lunchtime session to show the team how to locate and update our planning templates and records.”

“That would be great, Caroline,” said Daniel. “I can never find anything on there, and it really slows me down!” Jeff wrote *Peer learning* on the board.

For the next half-hour, the team reviewed its performance metrics and spotted learning gaps that could cause performance problems. The group brainstormed formal and informal

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## ON THE WHITEBOARD

### Learning plan elements

1. Simulation-based workshops
  2. Job shadowing
  3. On-the-job coaching
  4. Peer learning
  5. Stretch roles
- 

**“Frequent feedback can lead to improved learning. In one study, rapid feedback boosted performance 27 percent.”**

— Terence M. Hancock, “Use of audience response systems for summative assessment in large classes,” *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 26, no. 2 (2010), <http://is.gd/tmhancock>.

learning activities that could help close each gap.

Mateo looked at the whiteboard and turned to Jeff. “Don’t look now, but we have the outline of a learning plan.”

Jeff frowned. “Not to be Debbie Downer, Mateo, but who’s going to run all this? I don’t have time, and given the programs you’re running, neither do you.”<sup>6</sup>

Mateo turned to his team. “Here’s an idea. Why don’t we put *you* in charge of your learning?” Everyone nodded.

Jeff’s jaw dropped. “You’re just going to let them self-direct? Are they going to develop their own sessions?”

Mateo paused, then slapped the table. “Absolutely. On my team, everyone helps everyone learn everything.” With that, Mateo had his third insight: **Put the learners at the center and empower them, with the**

**tools and conditions each needs to learn most effectively.**

Jeff looked a little stricken. “But there’s the instructional design and the ADDIE model process and the level 3 evaluations . . .”

“It’s going to be okay, Jeff,” Mateo said, with a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “You’re still our man for designing classroom training. But I want to move fast. Our mission demands it.” Mateo was wound up. “And this may be our answer. I need a little autonomy on this one, Jeff.”

Daniel piped up. “And, uh, how do we ensure no one screws up?” A few other team members shot looks at him.

Mateo suddenly realized he didn’t *have* any concrete ideas on accountability for an autonomous project. Maybe this idea wouldn’t work after all.

Jeff interrupted the silence. “Mateo, when you called your team ‘customers,’ it gave me an idea. I once worked in corporate sales, and we used *customer profiles* to track our clients. We could do something similar for all learners, a kind of ‘learner profile’ that tracks each person’s goals and progress.”

“And what if those profiles tracked our skills and experiences?” Daniel said. “A 360-degree view of each of us as a learner. Since we’re all different. Would that make you feel better?”

Mateo was not convinced just yet. “I want each of you at the center, but I’m worried I won’t be involved,” he said. “Maybe we could sit down every month or two to review your learner profiles and plans. It’ll be a joint effort. Autonomy is great, but only if we can guarantee high standards. We’re in this together, guys.”

“A successful learning culture allows employees and managers to drive learning themselves.”

— David Mallon, “High-impact learning culture: The 40 best practices for creating an empowered enterprise,” Bersin by Deloitte, <http://is.gd/bersin2>.





As Mateo’s team headed out, they chatted about creating their learner profiles—and finally making a dent in their performance record. Daniel whispered to Caroline, “I’m actually kind of excited about this.”

*Mateo’s third insight: Learner-centricity—put the learners at the center and empower them.*

## Making it happen

“... and Rose, I even came up with a phrase for it: ‘learner-centricity,’” Mateo said. Rose chuckled.

Back on the bench, Mateo was telling Rose about his talk with Janet. It had gone fairly well—Janet thought that his strategy had promise and offered support to try it out.

“I talked to my staff as customers, and it became clear how to put them at the center,” he said. “Learner-centricity. Now Jeff and I will set high learning standards and give them the autonomy to get there.”

“You know, I could have told you that three days ago, Mateo,” Rose said. He raised his

eyebrows and pulled a face. “But this is how *you* needed to learn.” Mateo began to laugh and Rose joined him.

She studied him for a moment. “I’m proud of you—so far. But you’re not done.” Mateo wrinkled his nose. “Now you have to see your plan through to completion. It may be tough. But if you rely on your three ideas, then you will find your way.”

Mateo grinned. “Implementation, sure. I’ll push my team to follow through on the plan. That’s not too hard.”

“Think so?” Rose said, with a skeptical look. “Mateo, you’re still not getting it. It isn’t enough to just change your class—you have to change the whole school.”

**“Managers who are not engaged in the training process may have little or no knowledge of its content, which weakens post-program support and thus the likelihood that new skills are attained and applied on the job.”**

— Dave Basarab, “How to get line leaders involved with learning,” *Chief Learning Officer*, June 19, 2013, <http://is.gd/Basarab>.

**“Customized learning recognizes that learners 'come from different backgrounds, interests and ability levels.’”**

— Darrell M. West, “Using technology to personalize learning and assess students in real-time,” Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings, October 6, 2011, <http://is.gd/dmwest>.

Mateo knew what she meant—the other managers and supervisors at ODC. He could teach them what he'd learned. Well, it could be done. They'd need to understand their learning gaps and find the right content and timing, always keeping the employees at the center.

Wanting to find a way to thank Rose, Mateo asked, “Would it be okay if I gave you a hug?”

Rose gave him an affectionate squeeze.

## Carrying the transformation forward

*To the left . . . now a little to the right . . . perfect.*

Now that the framed list of the “three insights” hung above Mateo's new desk, it felt like Janet's office was fully his. Although he missed her since she'd retired, he felt confident in his new position.

A lot had changed in six months. The backlog was down to 15 days—still room to improve—and his satisfaction scores were generally stronger. His team had changed, too. Three new employees had joined, and they had taken to learning on the job like naturals; two members had transferred out, evidently not

comfortable with running their own development plans. As the new team was coming together, Mateo found he especially enjoyed the weekly brownbags for sharing challenges and rich feedback.

His programs' dramatic turnaround had gotten attention, too. Other managers began to partner with Jeff and the trainers, now called “Learning and Development.” For his part, Jeff was preparing to deploy learner profiles for all ODC employees. He had mentioned to Mateo that running fewer workshops had freed up the resources he needed.

But, for Mateo, the progress wasn't as important as his new attitude. Whenever a new challenge presented itself, he always found himself looking up at his framed list.

1. **Most performance problems are caused by learning gaps.**
2. **Great learning is “precision-made,” accurate, relevant, and timely for each individual.**
3. **Great learning gives employees the tools and conditions each needs to learn effectively.**

Mateo headed toward Rose's bench that day to thank her again. He found Rose chatting with a woman he thought he recognized—a program manager from the agency across the street.

He didn't dare interrupt the lesson.

# Appendix

## Five common HR objections to a focus on learning and development

**Objection 1: *This is not my job. My job is to deliver specific training modules.***

*Manager's response:* Every division supports the organization's mission, and failure in one area is everyone's concern. Our yardsticks for performance may need to change.

All too often, trainers measure success by whether a given training session seems well received—and not whether it helps to close important performance gaps. They should reset their metrics to actual improvements in performance. And this assessment can often be done more effectively outside of formal learning, in partnership with managers.

**Objection 2: *This won't help. Our performance problems aren't due to these "learning gaps."***

*Manager's response:* If we dive deep enough into the root causes of most performance problems, we generally find a learning gap—something crucial we should have known but didn't. Even "external" constraints such as stakeholders, finite resources, or limited authority often have learning components.

**Objection 3: *We want to invest more in informal learning approaches, but we don't have the resources.***

*Manager's response:* You may not need more resources. Informal learning can eliminate some expensive training. It may take a budget cycle to reallocate training dollars, but better learning outcomes will be worth it.

**Objection 4: *New approaches can be risky. What if we fail?***

*Manager's response:* Our old approach to training is already coming up short, so there's little reason to maintain the status quo.

Even if it doesn't work out, failures can be useful. The trick is to fail small so you don't fail big.

Imagine you're an entrepreneur, and your first product attempt isn't selling. If you act quickly enough, then you haven't lost much and you've learned you need to pivot your approach. You may have to fail several times to find the right approach.

If you take small steps, communicate regularly, and pivot whenever you hit a snag, then the small failures can result in a superior product. From this perspective, failures may not only be acceptable, they can be desirable.

**Objection 5: *Other people (leaders, peers, employees, etc.) will get in the way.***

*Manager's response:* But everyone can benefit. Leadership wants to see mission success; our peers in the agency want their training budgets used effectively; and employees actually want to improve themselves. One trick is to go for "quick wins"—early successes from small experiments to build momentum and to show that your new approach really does work.

# Further reading

Interested in learning more about the ideas behind Mateo's three insights? Here are some of our favorite materials about learning strategy and techniques.

- David Mallon, “High-impact learning culture: The 40 best practices for creating an empowered enterprise,” Bersin & Associates, June 2010, <http://www.bersin.com/Practice/Detail.aspx?id=103312171>.
- Kineo, *The new learning and technology architecture: Ten trends from leading companies*, 2012, <http://www.kineo.com/m/0/learning-insight-report-2012.pdf>.
- Darrell M. West, “Using technology to personalize learning and assess students in real-time,” Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings, October 6, 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/10/06-personalize-learning-west>.
- David Mallon, “Defining informal learning,” Bersin & Associates, 2009, <https://www.bersin.com/practice/Detail.aspx?id=11890>.
- Charles Jennings and Jérôme Wargnier, “Effective learning with 70:20:10: The new frontier for the extended enterprise,” CrossKnowledge, January 2, 2012, [http://www.crossknowledge.com/en\\_GB/elearning/media-center/publications/70-20-10-effective-learning/s.html](http://www.crossknowledge.com/en_GB/elearning/media-center/publications/70-20-10-effective-learning/s.html).
- Tara E. Buck, “The future of education will be driven by data,” *EdTech Magazine*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.edtech-magazine.com/higher/article/2013/05/future-education-will-be-driven-data>.
- Marjorie Derven, “Lessons learned: Using competency models to target training needs,” *T+D Magazine*, December 2008.



# Endnotes

1. According to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, most large and mid-size agencies saw their scores for training and development decline from 2011 to 2012. Source: United States Office of Personnel Management, “2012 federal employee viewpoint survey results,” <http://is.gd/fevs12>, accessed March 14, 2014.
2. Ibid. Nine out of ten federal employees say they are consistently looking for ways to do their job better.
3. Gary Marcus, “Learn something new—your brain will thank you,” CNN, May 10, 2012, <http://is.gd/garymarcus>.
4. 56 percent of managers believe that employee performance would not change or would improve if learning and development were eliminated today. Source: Corporate Executive Board, “CLC learning and development,” <http://is.gd/LDimpact>, accessed March 14, 2014.
5. Charles Jennings and Jérôme Wargnier, “Effective learning with 70:20:10: The new frontier for the extended enterprise,” CrossKnowledge, January 2, 2012, [http://is.gd/70\\_20\\_10](http://is.gd/70_20_10).
6. Jeff’s objection is based on interviews with several government managers who said that they wished they could train their staff better, but that they either did not know how or could not find the time.

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## Contacts

**Shrupti Shah**

Director, Deloitte GovLab  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 571-814-6753  
shrshah@deloitte.com

**Kevin Chrapaty**

Senior Consultant  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 703 302 9120  
kchrapaty@deloitte.com

**Andrew K. Stein**

Senior Consultant  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 571 447 3586  
astein@deloitte.com





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