Four Key Strategies to
Invest in Growth

BY JENNIFER RECLA

Imagine it's the start of the workday and you have a few moments to yourself to think, get organized, and plan your day. You notice a note to yourself: "Make more time for learning and development." You know this is important and wonder if you can spare an hour this morning for growth.

Then the emails start coming in, the messages start piling up, and your first meeting of the day is fast approaching. "Learning" is put on the back burner once again. You want to invest in growth, but there never seems to be enough time.

But what if "learning" was already built into your calendar and integrated into your team engagements?

This article presents some best practices from my experience with leading teams in the learning and organizational development space over the past decade. Before diving into the specifics, it's important to understand some basics of developmental psychology and why being intentional in our growth is critical to our success.

INTENTIONAL GROWTH IS KEY

Developmental psychology focuses on studying how individuals grow, develop, and change across their lifespan. Child development, marked by physical, cognitive, and emotional milestones, is supported by structured learning environments in schools. In contrast, adult development is more nuanced and less linear, characterized by abstract thinking, emotional regulation, and the ability to navigate complex social dynamics. Work environments often prioritize productivity and outcomes over structured learning and growth, making it challenging to set aside learning time.

However, not making space for individual and collective growth can lead to a lack of innovation, poor performance, and lower results. By consistently working on ourselves, we contribute positively to our relationships, model growth, and create a supportive environment in which others can thrive and achieve positive outcomes.

Although we know that growth leads to better performance, it's not easy to consistently make time to work on ourselves. I've found that several common barriers prevent us from prioritizing growth.

BARRIERS TO INVESTING IN GROWTH

Identifying which barriers are holding you and your team back from growing will help you determine the best solutions to combat them.

Finding time. One of the most common barriers is simply not having enough time. Busy schedules, demanding workloads, and personal responsibilities can make it challenging to prioritize learning.

The solution is to identify activities to stop, pause, minimize, or automate to create space for learning. Block your calendar weekly for dedicated thinking, planning, and learning time. Limit distractions during this time by turning off email and instant messaging.

Prioritizing others. Many individuals, especially those in leadership roles, prioritize others' needs first. While supporting others is important, neglecting individual and team growth can lead to burnout and stagnation.

The answer is to establish the top priorities, goals, and values for yourself and your team. Use that information to shift your focus to items that matter most, instead of what seems most urgent. Develop healthy boundaries for you and your team and learn the art of saying no strategically.

Overcoming a lack of resources. Limited access to resources such as time, money, or educational opportunities can hinder our ability to invest in development opportunities.

The solution is to get creative with how you learn and grow. Your resources may be limited, but there are numerous free or low-cost ways for development. You and your

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team can volunteer or speak at conferences to get free or discounted tickets, get books from the library and conduct book club sessions, sign up for free trade magazines, or listen to podcasts.

Feeling settled. We believe that we've reached the position we want so we don't need to continue to grow. We get comfortable and settled in our current roles and routines. This can prevent us from seeking out new learning opportunities.

The solution is to cultivate a growth mindset on your team. Encourage others to step out of their comfort zones and embrace failure and challenges as growth opportunities. Approaching work with this mindset will accelerate progress and enable you and your team to navigate setbacks more effectively. Cultivating a growth mindset is so important that I dig deeper into this concept next.

DEFINING A GROWTH MINDSET

Reflecting on my professional journey, I can see that leaning into a growth mindset is a critical success factor in leading and growing teams. While I was vaguely familiar with the concept of a growth mindset early in my career, I didn't fully comprehend its depth. Initially, I believed my love for learning was evidence enough of possessing one.

However, a growth mindset goes beyond mere enthusiasm for learning. It's about embracing challenges, viewing failure as a steppingstone rather than a roadblock, and continually developing one's skills and intelligence. It involves being comfortable with failure, accepting imperfections, and embracing the journey of continuous improvement.

As you embark on your journey with the four keys for investing in growth, I encourage you

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to start by embracing and strengthening your growth mindset. I recommend Carol Dweck's book Mindset: The New Psychology of Success to explore this concept more.

FOUR KEYS TO INVEST IN GROWTH

Now that you understand the importance of and barriers to growth, let's explore four strategies for managers to invest in both individual and team growth. These keys can be integrated into your work calendar as soon as today.

Establish a formula for team meeting check-ins. By adding a standard check-in to the beginning of your team meeting agendas, you can foster connection and create a space for individuals to share their current state and ask for help. Implementing this with my former team opened the door to honest and open conversations and better support of each other's workload.

Team members may feel resistant, but I encourage you to experiment with it and ask for feedback. You can start small with one question from the sample below or rotate questions at each meeting. Using pictures, emojis, or an emotions wheel can help prompt individuals to share.

Sample check-in:

- ✅ How are you doing/feeling?

- ✅ What is your big goal for the week?

- ✅ How can we support you?

- ✅ What is one thing you learned this week?

Engage in professional and career development conversations. In establishing regular professional and career development conversations, in addition to your regular 1:1 meeting with direct reports, you can focus solely on your employees' progress toward their development goals. They should drive the conversation, but you may need to prompt them with questions.

In my previous team, we conducted these sessions quarterly. We tied learning directly back to work goals and career growth progression frequently throughout the year, leading to deeper discussions and increasing the likeliness of the team reaching their goals.

Sample questions for your direct reports:

- ✅ Is there anything you want to focus on related to professional or career development in our conversation today?

- ✅ Check-in on progress toward professional development and business goals: What is going well? What could be better? How can I support you?

- ✅ How have you utilized your strengths this quarter?

- ✅ Review career plan: Are you progressing toward your vision? Are there any new challenges/barriers?

- ✅ How are you applying what you learned from this past quarter?

> *The key to developing others starts with developing ourselves, and by getting our house in order as a learning team, we can elevate the learning experience and drive impactful results for our organizations.*

Schedule retreats for fostering cohesion and innovation. Time together as a team is critical for collaboration and connection. Creating quarterly connections as a team to dig into strategy and create deliberate space for team learning allows you to connect in person offsite—although virtual connections can be very effective if that is your only option. Develop the agenda collaboratively with your team with clear objectives for what you hope to accomplish. Obtaining an outside facilitator or educator to lead the team learning portion of your agenda can enrich the experience.

A variety of strengths-based tools can be used for these engagements, such as Gallup's CliftonStrengths, Insights Discovery, or the Table Group's Working Genius tool. These type of tools can help you and your team create a common language for working more collaboratively and having a more focused approach to growth.

Sample retreat agenda:

✅ Strategic plan review: What's on track? What's behind? Where do we need support?

✅ Brainstorming: We've identified three gaps in our workflow. Let's discuss solutions and map out a plan to close these gaps.

✅ Team building: Conduct a team strengths assessment, discuss the results, and develop an action plan for team integration and application.

Establish dedicated peer-to-peer learning and problem-solving time. After conducting a psychological safety assessment with my former team, we identified a need to be more deliberate with learning among team members. This led to the development of a safe space to promote collective learning and connection among peers without their leader. Team members shared their best practices and could dive deeper into topics relevant to their day-to-day operations.

Ask one of your team members to lead the coordination of these engagements. The group collectively manages the agenda and rotates who facilitates or teaches certain aspects. The agenda should include opportunities for skill development, collaborative problem solving, and feedback.

Sample peer-to-peer agenda:

✅ Project check-in (as needed): Briefly describe the project you are working on; share a milestone or challenge; share support needed from the group or ask for feedback.

✅ Main topic examples: Best practices in using AI; training on how to use new software; debriefing learnings from a recent conference.

✅ Lessons learned: Sharing of lessons related to a recent project close.

✅ Next schedule: Who's got a topic? A project or initiative they want feedback on?

Integrating these four keys into your calendar and agendas lays the foundation for a positive learning culture. Growth becomes part of what you do instead of one more thing. When you sit down at the start of the workday, morning beverage in hand, "development" is already built into your work.

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MEASURING IMPACT

The four keys help you build growth time into your calendar, but how do you know you're truly making an impact? We saw tremendous growth internally over my five years with the learning and development team at Colorado Access, and it had a positive ripple effect on our organization.

Here are a few examples of the impact we measured:

- Organizational engagement with professional development increased by **36%**.

- Organizational satisfaction with our programming increased by **41%**.

- Our team grew from five to seven members.

- Team trust reached **83%** favorability.

- The team had a **0%** turnover rate.

It's important to establish key metrics that identify your team's growth and the impact on the broader organization and your customer base. For your team, establish three or four key metrics. These could include employee engagement scores, team trust and psychological safety ratings, retention and promotion rates, and skills-based assessments.

For the organization, establish three or four key performance indicators. These could include customer engagement scores, productivity measures, error rates, and project milestones. Use these measurements as guides to tweak your four keys to ensure maximum effectiveness and impact.

With these strategies, you can build intentional growth into your leadership practice. Share and discuss these four keys and best practices with your team in your next meeting and ask for feedback. How do they want to structure individual and collective growth moving forward?

Recognize what's getting in the way of nurturing your growth. Set aside time and space for learning. Lean into creative solutions, experiment along the way, and tap into lessons learned to help you continuously improve. The key to developing others starts with developing ourselves, and by getting our house in order as a learning team, we can elevate the learning experience and drive impactful results for our organizations.

Jennifer Recla is a coach, mentor, learning consultant and designer specializing in navigating tough conversations, finding purpose, conflict management, resiliency, communication, time management, mindset, and strengths-based leadership. She uses a variety of assessment tools to help individuals and teams leverage strengths and find the most effective and impactful ways to work together.

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