Most Training Fails. Yours Doesn't Have To.

The Science of Employee Development And What Actually Works
The pace of change in business is relentless. AI is reshaping industries. The skills your people needed three years ago aren't the skills they need now.

In this environment, your organisation's ability to help people learn, grow, and adapt isn't a nice-to-have. It's survival.
Yet most companies pour money into development approaches that fundamentally misunderstand how human beings actually work. Not how we'd like them to work. How they *actually* work the messy, neurologically-constrained reality of attention, memory, and behaviour change. As psychologists we are used to applying our understanding of how humans work to practical matters such as optimising the transfer of training to your employees.

If you stop reading now, here are the five things you need to know:

1. **Your people will forget 90% of any training within a week** unless you build in spaced repetition. The forgetting curve isn't optional-it's how memory works.
2. **Working memory holds about four things, not seven.** That twelve-point leadership model? Cognitively impossible to retain.

3. **Leadership isn't an intellectual exercise.** Most training fails because it treats management as a cognitive endeavour when it's actually about doing, being, and relating.
4. **Behaviour change requires supported practice over time.** Coaching, action learning groups, and co-created development plans aren't extras - they're what makes development stick.
5. **You need to diagnose before you develop.** Without understanding what's blocking change for your people, you're guessing.

Still here? Let's get into why.

The First Mistake: Imposing Development From Above

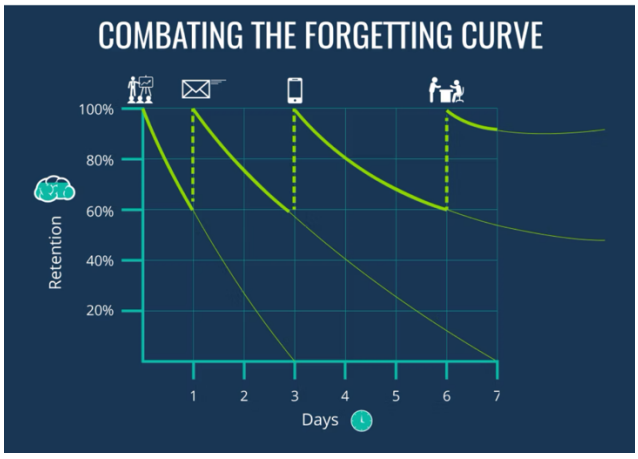
Before we get to how learning works, most organisations make a fundamental error: they decide what employees need to develop and impose it on them.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan) identifies three core psychological needs driving motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Imposed corporate training violates all three. You're told what to learn, in a format that often makes you feel incompetent, alongside people you may have no connection with.

The result? Compliance without commitment. People show up, tick the box, and forget everything not because they're lazy, but because the conditions for motivated learning were never present.

What to do instead: Co-create development goals with your people. Find out what *they* want to work on, where *they* feel stuck. The IKEA Effect tells us people disproportionately value what they helped create. A development plan someone built themselves has intrinsic worth; one handed down from HR is just another mandate to endure.

How Human Beings Actually Learn



Here's an uncomfortable statistic: within one week of training, your employees will have forgotten approximately 90% of what they learned.

This is Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve one of the most replicated findings in cognitive psychology, dating back to 1885. Yet organisations continue investing in one-off workshops as if human memory works like a hard drive.
It doesn't. And pretending otherwise is expensive.

Attention: The Bottleneck Nobody Accounts For

You've probably heard of Miller's "magical number seven" the idea we can hold around seven items in short-term memory. It's one of psychology's most cited findings. It's also wrong. Research by Nelson Cowan (2001) revised this to approximately four chunks.
Imagine you're running a leadership session with eight core competencies. Your participants nod along, take notes, feel inspired. But cognitively, they've been overwhelmed since competency five. By the end, they might remember the first two (primacy effect), the last one (recency effect), and whichever had the most emotionally resonant story. The rest? Gone before they've left the room.
What to do instead: Ruthlessly prioritise. If everything is important, nothing is. Identify the critical few behaviours that will drive the most significant change and break the training down into bite-size chunks.

Memory: Why the Forgetting Curve Changes Everything

The forgetting curve isn't a curse; it's a design feature. Information encountered once signals "probably not important." Information encountered repeatedly, at increasing intervals, signals "essential."
Any learning intervention worth its budget should include structured follow-up at day 1, day 7, day 30, and day 90. This isn't optional it's the difference between temporary exposure and genuine capability building.

The Testing Effect: Why Teach-Backs Transform Learning

Here's something counterintuitive: being tested on material is significantly more effective than re-studying it. The act of retrieving information strengthens memory traces far more than passive review.
Most L&D gets this backwards. Participants sit through presentations, receive handouts. It's all input, no output.
This is why we build teach-backs into our programmes. Within one week of each session, participants must teach what they've learned to another team or their managers. Not summarise. Actually teach it.
This multiplies learning through retrieval practice (preparing forces you to reconstruct the material), elaboration (you think about how to explain it), social accountability (knowing you'll teach focuses attention), and the generation effect (producing information creates stronger memories than consuming it).

Implementation Intentions: Turning Insight Into Action

Even when people remember what they learned, there's still a gap between intention and behaviour. Implementation Intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999) address this.
An implementation intention is a specific if-then plan: "If situation X arises, I will do Y." Meta-analyses show this roughly doubles the likelihood of following through.

Why? The brain doesn't respond well to vague aspirations. "I'll delegate more" requires conscious decision-making every time. But "If someone brings me a problem they could solve themselves, I will ask what they think before offering my view" is a pre-loaded response.
What to do instead: Every development session should end with specific implementation intentions. Not "what are your key takeaways?" but "what situation will you encounter this week, and what exactly will you do differently?"

The Knowledge-Action Gap: Why Knowing Isn't Doing

Knowing what to do and actually doing it are processed by different neural systems. You can intellectually understand that delegating is important while your limbic system screams it's terrifying.
Most training treats leadership as a cognitive endeavour. Learn the model, understand the framework. But actual leadership is about doing, being, and relating. It's navigating a difficult conversation while your heart rate spikes. It's building trust through thousands of micro-interactions no framework can script.
You can't think your way into being a better leader any more than you can think your way into being a better swimmer. At some point, you have to get in the water.

What to do instead: Build in mechanisms that bridge insight and action:
Coaching between sessions provides space to process what happens when someone tries new behaviours the resistance, emotional triggers, gap between intention and action.
Action learning groups small peer groups (4-8 people) meeting regularly on real business challenges. Each member brings a genuine problem; the group asks questions rather than jumping to advice. You're accountable to peers who'll ask what happened, learning from others' challenges, and practising in a psychologically safe environment.
Co-created development action plans. Living documents built collaboratively, with specific commitments about what to try, when, and how to know if it's working. When people own their development goals, accountability feels like support rather than surveillance.

The Safety Paradox

Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety has transformed how we think about team performance. But there's a paradox most L&D professionals miss.
The Peltzman Effect shows people adjust behaviour based on perceived safety often offsetting intended benefits. Drivers with better safety features take more risks.
Something similar happens in development. Create a perfectly "safe" training environment and people practice new behaviours there. But the real world isn't safe. The difficult feedback conversation has actual consequences. If all your practice happened in cosy conditions, you haven't prepared for moments that matter.
What to do instead: Create *productive discomfort* enough psychological safety to take risks, but enough real-world stakes that learning transfers. Practice being uncomfortable in conditions that are genuinely uncomfortable.

The Missing Piece: Diagnosing What's Getting in the Way

Everything above describes how humans work. But there's a question most organisations skip: what's specifically blocking change for *these* people in *this* context? Most organisations invest in development, see limited results, and conclude either that their people can't change or the training was poor. Both miss the point.
This is why we developed **ChangeAbility** — a psychometric tool diagnosing actual barriers to adaptability. Co-developed with Dr. Nigel Guenole, it measures both *inner preferences* (how people feel about change) and *demonstrated behaviours*(how they act), across five dimensions: **Change Humility** — recognising limitations, being open to growth

- **Change Vision** — seeing and communicating compelling future direction
- **Change Championing** — leading others through resistance
- **Change Empathy** — understanding how change impacts others
- **Change Results** — driving measurable outcomes with resilience

The tool asks people to identify why differences between their preference and behaviour exist and whether they are personal OR organisational blockers. The gap between preference and behaviour is where development efforts die. Someone might value innovation while consistently blocking new ideas. Without diagnosing these disconnects, no amount of training helps.

The Bottom Line
70% of organisational change initiatives fail, largely due to employee resistance and lack of management support. Not usually because people are change-averse - 74% describe themselves as sceptical but open to being convinced.
The failure happens because organisations don't take the cognitive and psychological realities of human behaviour seriously.

Evidence-based business psychology offers a different path: one that respects how attention and memory work, designs for the knowledge-action gap, addresses emotional resistance, and diagnoses blockers before investing in solutions.

It's more work than booking another workshop. It's also dramatically more likely to produce results.
Want to understand what's actually blocking change in your organisation?

Here are **five clear, senior-leader-friendly takeaways**:

- **Design development around how the brain actually works.**Attention is limited, memory decays rapidly, and behaviour change is effortful — development only works when it accounts for these cognitive realities.

- **One-off training creates insight, not capability.**Without spaced repetition, retrieval practice, and follow-up over time, most learning is forgotten and never translates into performance.

- **Leadership is behavioural and emotional, not intellectual.**Knowing the model is irrelevant unless people practise new behaviours in real situations, with support through discomfort.

- **Motivation comes from ownership, not imposition.**Co-created goals, self-directed development, and peer accountability outperform top-down programmes every time.

- **Diagnose barriers before prescribing solutions.**Sustainable change requires understanding what's actually blocking behaviour — at the individual and organisational level — before investing in development.