The Psychology of Learning at Work: What Great Leaders Do Differently

In organisations today, the desire for a 'learning culture' is almost universal. Businesses invest heavily in training programmes, e-learning platforms, coaching, and content. But while intent is high, impact often lags. **Why?**

Because learning doesn't live in course catalogues. It lives in context. And that context is shaped powerfully and persistently by leadership.

A landmark 2024 literature review by Fredrik Hillberg Jarl, published in *The Learning Organization*, synthesised 40 top-tier studies on how leadership affects workplace learning. The conclusion is both simple and profound: leaders don't just influence learning; they create the very **conditions that make learning possible or not**.

At *The Work Psychologists*, we see this play out time and time again. Talented individuals are sent "away" for development coaching, courses, training. But they're not broken. The development isn't the issue. It's the context they return to. A manager who doesn't ask what they learned. A team that doesn't value growth. A system that rewards output but neglects reflection. Learning collapses in the absence of reinforcement.

We need to reframe the conversation. Learning doesn't happen *to* individuals it happens *between* people, shaped by leadership behaviours, relationships, and systems of meaning. Let's explore what the evidence and our own experience tells us.

Leadership as the Learning Environment

Jarl's review identifies three consistent mechanisms by which leaders influence learning: **role modelling**, **relational support**, and **meaning-making**. These aren't "nice to haves". They are critical levers in whether learning takes root or evaporates.

Role Modelling

People learn by watching others especially those in positions of power. Bandura's social learning theory tells us we imitate behaviour we believe is credible or aspirational. In the workplace, that's our leaders.

Jarl's findings confirm this: **authentic, ethical, and servant leadership styles promote deeper learning engagement**, while avoidant or laissez-faire styles actively undermine it.

Deloitte's leadership development labs offer a compelling example. When senior leaders began to openly share their own learning journeys discussing mistakes, asking for feedback, and reflecting publicly middle managers followed suit. Teams reported greater collaboration, stronger initiative, and improved performance. The leader's behaviour became a catalyst.

Relational Support

But modelling alone isn't enough. People need to feel supported and safe. Jarl's review shows that when leaders show trust and belief in their people's potential, learning behaviours like feedback-seeking, experimentation, and resilience increase significantly.

At *The Work Psychologists*, we frequently work with teams who have brilliant training resources but stalled learning. The missing link? Psychological safety. If the culture punishes mistakes or ignores effort, no amount of content will unlock development.

Google's "Project Aristotle" reached a similar conclusion. The highest-performing teams weren't the smartest they were the most *psychologically safe*. Leaders created spaces where people could question, test, and challenge ideas without fear. Learning flourished as a result.

Meaning-Making

The third element and perhaps the most neglected is how leaders help people make sense of what they're learning. True development isn't just about exposure to new ideas. It's about **connecting those ideas to lived experience**.

Jarl's review highlights the importance of "negotiating meaning" where leaders work with individuals and teams to reflect, process, and apply learning in real time. Without this, even the best training becomes inert.

That's why we use **teach backs** inviting individuals to reflect on and share what they've learned not just as a recap, but as a way to deepen understanding, embed new thinking, and connect insights back to real work and the wider team. This aligns with what we know from psychology. The **Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve** shows that without

reinforcement, we forget up to 70% of new learning within 24 hours. So when someone returns from a brilliant coaching session or course, but their leader doesn't ask about it, reflect on it, or create space to apply it? That learning fades fast.

In our client work, we often see employees return from development energised, only to encounter indifference. The silence however unintentional sends a clear message: "We're back to business as usual." And with that, the spark dims.

Leaders as Learners (and Learning Architects)

One of the most powerful findings from Jarl's review and something we've long observed in our practice is that **leaders who foster learning in others are learners themselves**. This doesn't just mean attending leadership courses. It means actively modelling curiosity, reflection, and growth.

These leaders don't assume they know what people need. They ask. They test. They adapt. That's why at *The Work Psychologists*, we developed the **Changeability Psychometric** a tool that helps organisations understand *how* their people learn and change, based on their unique team dynamics, cultural context, and psychological drivers.

Instead of guessing why a team resists change or fails to embed learning, leaders can use Changeability to:

- Identify the specific conditions that enable or inhibit learning
- Understand how people respond to uncertainty, complexity, and organisational shifts
- Tailor interventions based on real-time insight not generic frameworks

In other words, **we move from reactive leadership to strategic learning design**. Great leaders don't just learn. They build the conditions in which learning becomes contagious. This is echoed by research from McKinsey, which shows that organisations with learning-oriented executives are more adaptable, innovative, and successful over time. Leaders become not just decision-makers, but **cultural architects of growth**.

Building a Culture Where Learning Sticks

So what does all this mean for organisations?

If you want your people to grow, invest in your leaders first. Not just with technical skills, but with the awareness and capability to:

- Model learning behaviours themselves
- Create safe, trusting relationships
- Help others reflect, connect, and apply what they've learned

This is how learning becomes embedded. Not through mandates or modules but through moments, relationships, and meaning.
Ask yourself:

- Are your leaders genuinely learning and sharing what they learn?
- Do your managers reinforce development or treat it as a one-off event?
- Are you designing learning to match how people actually change?

If not, no platform or programme will deliver the outcomes you want. Because learning doesn't need to be louder it needs to be **led**.

Final Thought

If learning is the engine of organisational growth, then leadership is the ignition. It's not the volume of content that drives development. It's the quality of the culture that surrounds it. And that culture begins with how leaders show up every day.
So before you invest in more training, ask yourself: **Have we equipped our leaders to make learning possible, meaningful, and lasting?**
That's where change begins.

Key Take-aways

- **Leadership, not content, drives learning.** The culture leaders create determines whether learning thrives or fades.
- **Leaders shape learning through role modelling, support, and meaning-making.** Their behaviour sets the tone for how people grow.
- **Learning fades without reinforcement.** Without reflection and follow-up from leaders, new skills are quickly forgotten.
- **Leaders must be learners too.** Curiosity and self-development in leaders inspire the same in others.
- **Invest in leaders first to build a learning culture.** When leaders model, support, and embed learning, it becomes part of everyday work.

Further Reading & Resources

- Jarl, F. H. (2024). *The impact of leadership on workplace learning*. *The Learning Organization*, 31(3).
- **The Work Psychologists – Changeability Psychometric**
- Deloitte (2024). *Human Capital Trends: Thriving Through Disruption*
- Google's Project Aristotle
- CIPD (2023). *Learning at Work Survey*

- Ebbinghaus, H. (1885). *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*
- McKinsey Quarterly: *The CEO as Chief Learning Officer*