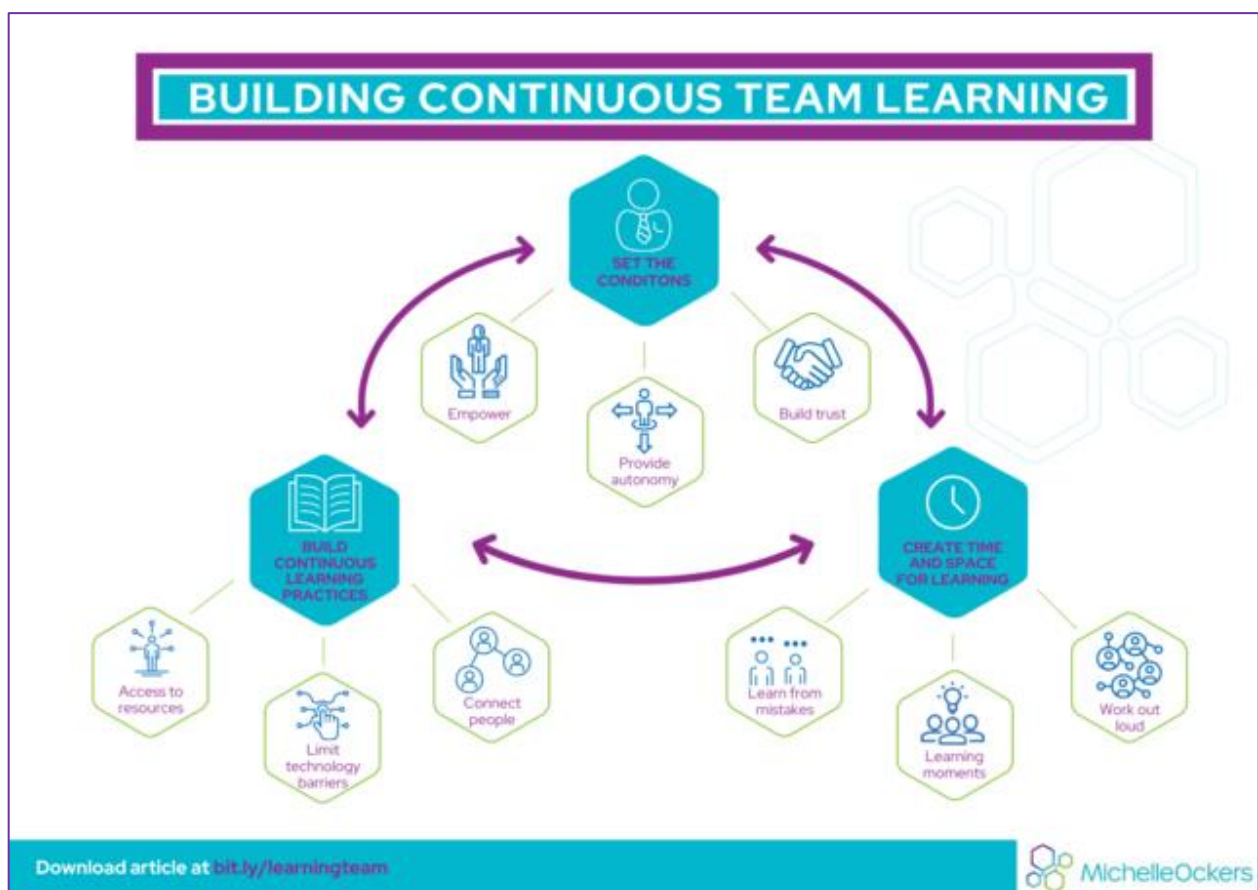


## How Learning Leaders Can Build Continuous Learning for Their Teams

By Michelle Ockers. June 2019.

One of the challenges that learning leaders often ask me about is how to create an environment of continuous learning for their team. That means learning that doesn't only happen within an allocated time frame or a formal course. It's about helping your team to learn through everything they do. How can this be achieved?

I've put together a list of three high-leverage things you can do to foster continuous learning for your team.



### (1) Lead your Team in a Way that Creates Conditions for Learning

You don't launch a sailing boat unless the conditions are favourable, otherwise your boat may be on the ocean but it's not going to get you where you want to go. Similarly, you may understand adult

learning theory and practices better than anyone else in your organisation. However, unless you create optimal conditions chances are your team just won't get far with continuous learning.

The first step to doing this is to build trust. Trust is critical as it facilitates an environment where people feel safe to share insights, discuss mistakes and be vulnerable and open to learning. Building trust doesn't come by being an infallible leader. In fact, it's the opposite. To build trust in your team you need to be a leader who shows up with humility, curiosity, interest and vulnerability. Role model the characteristics and learning behaviours you would like your team members to adopt. Satya Nadella,<sup>1</sup> the Microsoft CEO, is a great example of a leader who exemplifies these characteristics.

One of the key places to start is to bring your whole self to work, not a professional caricature of yourself. Be human and share more about what is going on for you both personally and professionally. Dr Amy Edmonson is a lead researcher on building psychological safety in teams. She identifies humility as a critical leadership quality. For more on building an environment of psychological safety listen to the HBR Ideacast podcast with Amy Edmonson<sup>2</sup> or read the transcript.

Empower your team and provide autonomy. Encourage them to experiment, learn from mistakes and make discoveries. Provide them with freedom to make decisions and get their work done within clear guidelines and boundaries. Often people are unsure whether they have permission to try things and make decisions without referring everything to their leader. Don't leave them wondering.

Stay connected to your team. Touch base with all team members regularly, especially if they work remotely or off-site. If you are remote set up a routine of regular team check-ins online using your collaborative software or a messaging app. This can be as simple as a daily post from everyone about what they're working on, little wins and what they need help with.

## **(2) Create Time and Space for Learning**

This is all about creating 'learning moments.' As professionals we often rush past learning opportunities in pursuit of a goal or deadline. As leaders we can press pause and help people reflect and notice the things they are learning, as well as share their expertise. This can be done by asking questions like:

- How did you do that?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.intheblack.com/articles/2018/06/01/satya-nadella-transforming-culture-microsoft>

<sup>2</sup> <https://hbr.org/ideacast/2019/01/creating-psychological-safety-in-the-workplace.html>

- What did you do differently?
- What did you learn from that?
- What tips would you give others?

Look for opportunities to build learning moments into your operating rhythm, such as at project milestones, regular team meetings or planning sessions. It can be as simple as asking ‘What did you learn this week?’ at the start of a meeting and giving several people an opportunity to respond. Create physical and online spaces for discussion of ideas and insights, problem-solving and design of improved practices and processes.

Celebrating small wins and successes is good to maintain a sense of progress and highlight what’s working well. It’s equally important to encourage and celebrate people learning from their mistakes. Ecommerce giant, Shopify, has regular ‘Friday Fails’ sessions where they get together to discuss and learn from things that haven’t worked. If you want your team to really grow then make it safe and positive to discuss mistakes and use them as improvement opportunities.

In our networked era significant learning opportunities lie outside of organisational boundaries. Encourage team members to connect with others outside of your organisation. Give them permission to work out loud, making what they’re working on and how they are doing it visible to others. This practice helps people build strong networks, gather feedback and connect with others who have relevant interests and experience. Contributing positively in their network leads your people to discover what others are doing and bring ideas and practices in from the outside.

### **(3) Build Continuous Learning Skills, Practices and Habits**

Contemporary research<sup>3</sup> shows that two of the most useful ways people learn are through personal connection and autonomous access to resources.

To facilitate continuous learning help your team members to connect with relevant others. Make it comfortable and easy for people to connect. Remove organisational and technological barriers. Use approaches such as setting up online directories, discussion forums with mobile access, running informal events, and supporting workplace mentoring and coaching. Get people connected and you’ll get them learning.

<sup>3</sup> <https://towardsmaturity.org/2018/12/06/challenging-business-assumptions-about-how-workers-learn/>



The other side of the coin is giving your team autonomous access to resources, largely through the internet. Challenge restrictive policies about internet access and champion improved technology infrastructure. Ensure that your team has skills to search for, validate, and curate resources effectively.

There are other skills required to be an effective modern learner. I discuss these skills and how they can be developed in the Leading Learning podcast episode 187 *Learning Out Loud*.<sup>4</sup> If you are interested in a more closely supported approach, I offer individual mentoring and group programs to build continuous learning skills.

*Michelle Ockers helps build future-ready learning organisations. She is a leading contemporary learning practitioner at the forefront of modernising learning and keeping the profession relevant and impactful in organisations. Learn more about Michelle at [www.michelleockers.com](http://www.michelleockers.com).*



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode-187-michelle-ockers/>