

Cultivating a Growth Mindset to Nurture a Learning Organization

Exclusive Interview With:

Kelsey Kates

Global Head of Live Learning Experience

Google



INTRODUCTION

An essential aspect of building a learning organization is encouraging a learning mindset and culture. Kelsey Kates, keynote speaker at Corporate Learning Week in March 2023 and Global Head of Live Learning Experiences at Google, gives valuable insight into how she's maintaining a culture of learning throughout her company. Learn how promoting a growth mindset and ensuring that learning takes place in a psychologically safe environment are key.



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Global Head of Live Learning
Experience
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Q: What are your background and expertise?

It's important to note – and I'm not shy about this – I don't have a traditional L&D background. At Google we're very fortunate to be able to try out different roles. I come from a marketing strategy and analytics background and was able to go into learning and development.

When I started in that analytics role, I was surprised during the onboarding process that at Google they kind of say, "You're smart, you'll figure it out." I felt like that was a cop-out and a bad learning experience. So I sent a note to the directors and said there has to be a better way. I put together a learning plan.

Around six months into my role, I got tapped on the shoulder and was told, "We actually need someone to create some of our analytics learning. Would you be willing to be a subject-matter expert and help within Google?" That was my first formal learning and development experience. I had done a number of trainings and presentations prior, but otherwise had never officially worked in that capacity.

And that changed everything. Now I've had five roles in learning and development, from designing very technical analytical content and launching a program called Analytical Academy, which we've won awards for, to running our strategy training, to upskilling our facilitators and most recently looking after our live learning experiences. I've also taken a few classes on the topic and am currently enrolled in a neuroscience course at MIT.





Q: What is something exciting you're working on right now, and something challenging?

There are a couple of things we're doing. Having a growth mindset is at the heart of it – that's what we want to achieve. But how do we do that? One of the things I briefly introduced and that we believe in deeply is role-modeling.

A manager can't just say, "Take this training by XYZ date." Instead, when we're running programs, we have our leaders take them first. Then they can say, "I've secured spots for us in so-and-so programs. I took these programs myself." Even a skeptical story is great, such as, "I didn't think I was going to learn anything, but here's how this actually showed up for me." This is really, really, really important for the organization. We're diving into leader-led communications and role-modeling of learning, and that's one area I feel really strongly about.

The other thing is debunking what learners feel and think they need to do. We think we know things without learning them, and that's such a fallacy. How can we debunk that? How can we talk to ballerinas or actors or writers – or anyone in a profession where most of what they do is practice – and promote the idea of deliberate practice and learning things over time, and create a normalcy around that as adults? The importance of practice is not something that's unique to kids.



Q: What are the biggest issues that you see in the L&D space right now?

I struggle to see the whole L&D space because my world is quite myopic to Google. I like speaking to my peers. I think these issues do extend beyond the walls, but I just want to acknowledge I don't empirically know that.

I think we're still not good at differentiating the "have to do" from "get to do" with learning, particularly in the corporate learning space. There will always be cases of "have to," particularly with compliance – like with privacy or certain onboarding training, where it's less about actually learning and more about checking a box to prove you've done something.

At Google, at least, I don't think we do a good enough job differentiating between what it takes to do your job and where's there an opportunity for development in a way that's like, "Holy cow, my company is paying for this, and letting me do this, and what a beautiful privilege this is to get to learn in this way!" We need to do better with how we talk about and promote those things differently so that in the learner's mind we can create a culture of learning where it's a privilege and not an obligation.



Q: Has how you've approached learning within your organization changed throughout the time you've been working in L&D?


The team I work in is called Mastery. We look after all the learning for Google on the business side – so for more than half the company. We were initially created because we were told internally that folks in business didn't know their products well. Our mandate was to help them get to know their products and be able to prove that.



I remember being in a room where we were cheering that 98% of our audience of thousands and thousands of people were taking eLearnings that they were required to take. And in my mind, I was like, I'm so embarrassed because I know these people are waiting until the end of the quarter to take these courses.

They're getting in a room with 10 other people and taking these eLearnings together until they get the multiple-choice answers right.

That's not learning, we're fooling ourselves! Today, we try to be much more deliberate about the actual transfer of knowledge and actually applying and demonstrating skills. How can we create an environment for measuring and incentivizing competency vs. completion?



Q: Looking at competency vs. completion, how do you typically measure the outcomes of the courses?

As a former analyst, I can't help but wear my analytics hat, and I feel lucky to have a good rapport with my analytics counterpart. We do a couple of things. One, we use the Kirkpatrick model. We measure things on the lower side, like reach, engagement, and CSAT. But we also consider what we've done, the evolution there, and what's a diagnostic metric vs. an optimization metric. So I don't necessarily need to optimize to get to 100% CSAT on what I'm doing. I need to be at a threshold where learners feel challenged and are learning, and that shouldn't necessarily be 100%.

What I want to look at is an optimization metric over time. One that's easier to measure through self-reported data is confidence lift – pre- and post-surveys on the different learning programs. Before the program, we evaluate the learner's skills. After the program, we evaluate them again with the manager, and then again after a lagging time frame so we get a better understanding of their competence.

We're also working really closely with the business to understand what our leading indicators in professional and business performance are, so we can correlate them with skills performance. For example, one of the programs my team looks after is coaching for managers, and we can see that managers who take part in this program actually have a higher manager score than those who don't take part.

Q: What is your favorite book, either personally or professionally?

The one that comes to mind actually speaks to the culture of learning, even though you wouldn't necessarily think of it as a learning book: *Switch* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. It has a lot of salient examples, both personally and professionally, of how to change things that feel systemic. Whether that's brand perception or gender inequalities in Africa or poaching in Latin America, the book discusses how to connect with people at scale on an emotional level to drive change.

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a woman with long, dark, braided hair leaning over a white desk. She is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a gold bracelet on her left wrist. Her right hand is resting on a white keyboard. In the foreground, a laptop is open, and a tablet is visible on the left. The background is a plain white wall. A blue rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing white text.

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