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FOLLOWING OUR STAR: BUILDING BETTER PRACTICES IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Following Our Star: Building Better Practices in Learning and Development

I've never liked the term "best practices," maybe because it minimizes unique experiences and individual effort as drivers of success. It makes it seem as if there is only one right way to do every task imaginable, and it's already been documented and enshrined. How can any of us see ourselves in that? Reality, of course, is messy. There are many different ways to accomplish outcomes and complete tasks.

It reminds me of some lines from William Stafford's poem "A Ritual to Read to Each Other," a kind of energetic plea for collaboration and to leverage unique experiences.

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

I understand the need to clarify and codify effective practices, but rules and guidelines should be seen as starting points for a discussion. Labeling anything "best" risks shutting down a deeper conversation worth having.

Universities are organizations dedicated to learning and perhaps that's where we can find a model how to have a conversation around those *better* practices that form the core of an organization's L&D agenda. I'd like to offer a model for moving beyond rigid 'best practices' by embracing sustainable learning strategies rooted in engagement, authenticity, and individual development—what I call 'better practices,' rooted in reflection, iteration, and refinement as we work toward new strategies and interventions. Professionals and academics need ongoing development and upskilling to deliver greater value to the people they serve.

Over the last few years, I've prioritized the development of effective teaching and learning strategies for my faculty because I know that ongoing professional development is key to maintaining educational excellence, relevance, and talent engagement. And what I've learned is that sustainable learning strategies tied to continuous engagement are the cornerstones of effective skills development. For me, that means faculty not only gain new skills and knowledge but also retain and apply them over time. They learn to trust the organization, the larger support network we've built together. But most importantly, they learn to trust that they have the tools they need.

Activate the learning!

Designing professional development activities that require faculty to actively engage with and apply new concepts is the gold standard. It's how L&D can ensure that learning is deep and meaningful. But too often, professional development opportunities feel like a passive field trip, or maybe an invitation to click through email in another window. Leaning into

active learning strategies better engages employees by inviting them to fully participate in skill-building.

One way to make this shift is to rethink traditional webinars. Instead of a passive session on using technology in the classroom, for instance, I might organize a “Simulated Classroom Tech Workshop.” In this setup, faculty participate in hands-on, scenario-based activities that let them experience technology use directly. Working in pairs or small groups, they practice setting up new tools, navigating setup challenges, and discussing use cases, so they can immediately apply their new skills to real classroom scenarios.

Tip to implement: Start each workshop session with one clear objective that faculty can immediately take back to the classroom. Set up small groups or breakout rooms for collaborative tasks, encouraging participants to learn from each other. The more directly they can connect the learning with their daily teaching, the more effective and lasting the outcome will be.

Break up the big rocks!

Any L&D professional knows that there’s a lot to know! And while setting clear learning goals is essential, it’s equally important to make complex material manageable and accessible. Breaking down complex strategies and curricula into smaller, digestible chunks allows for gradual skill-building and makes the learning process less overwhelming.

One way I’ve done this is by creating a “10-Minute Training” series—short modules focused on specific, actionable aspects of broader topics like accessibility or classroom engagement. Each module consists of a quick video walkthrough and supporting materials, making it easy to integrate into a busy day. For example, instead of a comprehensive seminar on creating inclusive course materials, a 10-Minute Training might focus solely on captioning videos or using accessible fonts, allowing for incremental progress that feels achievable.

Tip to implement: Develop three to five 10-minute segments for each major topic, each focusing on a single, actionable task. Follow up with an online discussion board or Q&A, where faculty can ask questions and share reflections. These micro-sessions allow for gradual progress and create a structure that keeps the learning process moving forward without overwhelming participants.

Keep it going!

Any learning is only valuable if it’s used and reinforced over time. To make professional development stick, it’s essential to create sustained engagement opportunities that keep the learning relevant and adaptable to real challenges. Continuous engagement fosters a

vibrant learning community, making sure faculty feel supported as they integrate new practices into their daily work.

One way to sustain engagement is by launching a Faculty Support Forum using platforms like Slack or Microsoft Teams. This online community gives faculty a space to continue discussions from workshops, post questions, and share experiences. To keep the conversation active, I also host follow-up sessions, such as quarterly Q&A webinars, where faculty can revisit core concepts, troubleshoot challenges, and share what's worked well in their classrooms.

Tip to implement: Set up a monthly “Spotlight Session” within your online forum, focusing on one topic from recent trainings. Encourage faculty to post one challenge they've faced and how they addressed it, building a sense of shared purpose and support that helps sustain long-term learning.

Closing the Loop!

Sustainable learning strategies, supported by multiple engagement forums, create a robust system for ongoing L&D that benefits both individuals and organizations. By combining various learning strategies with diverse platforms, we can address all aspects of professional development while accommodating different schedules, learning preferences, and levels of comfort with technology. This flexibility ensures that all employees have access to the resources and support they need to thrive.

But this is about more than just implementing effective practices. It's about fostering a culture where individuals feel empowered to bring their unique skills and experiences to the table. Stafford's reminder to honor individuality and resist patterns imposed by others challenges us to create L&D programs that are as dynamic and multifaceted as the people they serve. When we align learning with authenticity, we unlock the potential for deeper engagement and more meaningful growth.

By weaving together sustainable strategies and authentic engagement, we not only support continuous learning but also ensure that no one "misses their star." Instead, we create a model for *professional development that celebrates individuality, builds trust, and drives lasting success*. I invite readers to choose one of these strategies—whether a 10-Minute Training, a spotlight session, or a hands-on workshop—and try it. Start small, but start somewhere. That's how we build better practices!

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