

It's All About Your people!

EMBRACING
HUMAN-CENTERED
BUSINESS, WORKPLACE
CULTURE, AND
LEARNING DESIGN

BROUGHT
TO YOU *by*



SWEETRUSH



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Introduction

Like any natural disaster, COVID-19 has left behind a wake of uncertainty, fear, and an **urgent need to repair and rebuild**. And as the flood waters rise and fall, we're taking stock of the things the crisis has brought to the surface. Some of these are lovely, like reclaiming our time from lengthy commutes and recommitting to our passions—and the people we love.

Some are destructive and frightening, and have created waves that will continue to rock us for years to come. Our collective mental health is suffering from the months of stress, hardship, and isolation and—at least in the U.S.—our access to care has yet to catch up. The pandemic has revealed the fault lines in so many institutions, from home to office to school, that purport to serve us. For decades, the rules of where and how we've worked and lived have appeared rigid and unmalleable—and now they're cracking.

That's not all bad! And in fact, this shake-up has been in progress for a while. By the time COVID hit, we'd been burning out on long commutes and tough work hours for years. We'd been asking our employers for the flexibility to work from home and getting hard nos—or only slightly better, one-time exceptions—hustling to meet a supervisor's expectation of seeing us at our desks every day.

And then...we had to pivot, virtually overnight. For over a year, so many of us have proven that we work just as well, if not better, from home—despite competing responsibilities for those of us who are caregivers. Our productivity is at an [all-time high](#), and many companies' profits are soaring. Yet most employers seem eager to return to business as usual, circa 2019.

After the reckonings of the past year and a half, we've become far less willing to squeeze our souls back into schedules, settings, and dynamics that don't serve us. **Most of us have little desire to return to normal if "normal" means relegating health, happiness, and home life to the bottom of our priority list.**

Small wonder that we're taking a collective look at the institutions that governed our lives in the "before times" and deciding **which** are worth rebuilding and **how** to remake them. Together, we're asking: *What's next?* And more importantly, we're asking: *What else is possible?*

You might also be asking, *Why now?*

That's a fair question, with the pandemic barely beginning to recede.

The truth is, the need to build better and build stronger is more pressing than ever. COVID-19 isn't the last crisis that organizations and humans will face. New challenges, both global and local, are ahead for us, and they will rock our collective foundations in ways we can't yet imagine. That's why we're looking to join organizations that support our mental health and personal lives...and why [40% of us](#) are still looking to vote with our feet.

We at SweetRush are optimists, so we approach these challenges as an opportunity: to transform, strengthen, and do work that serves one another—and our planet. We don't have all the answers; what we do have is the unwavering conviction that

businesses can be the most powerful and effective drivers of social change.

We also have a business practice that is built upon caring, commitment, and goodness—and we're so glad to see a larger conversation (dare we say collective reckoning?) building around the business value of taking care of people. As a culture-, learning-, and life-centered company, we have the privilege and pleasure of doing good together every day.

But we're not here to congratulate ourselves! Our goal, in this time of liminality and flux, is to help you re-imagine your business, work, and life—from wherever you sit in your organization. That's our motivation for creating this collection of the values, practices, and lessons that have guided us through our 20-year (and counting) adventure.

Of course, this blueprint won't fit every organization. It simply offers a tour of the virtual space where our people share their work, lives, and selves. We hope it inspires you to imagine your own—and then join us in the joyful work of perpetual improvement and expansion.

Our methods, materials, and style will differ, but our purpose is the same:

we're all looking to build a space where humans can be happier at work.

How to Use This Book

We love new ideas! And our first question is always: *How can we **use** these?*

We know we're not alone in looking for concrete applications. It can be difficult to picture how cultural and business transformation will look in our workplace. And many of us are doers who are looking for practical steps we can take to turn ideas into action.

Fellow doers, you're in luck! Each chapter is set up with **Quests**, which are long- and short-term steps you can take to make work work better for you—and your fellow humans. Whether your decisions impact the entire organization, a department, or just yourself, we've got something for everyone.

Disclaimer: This eBook has a lot of content, but there's no Yellow Brick Road leading to life-centered business and work. Ours is just one of many paths you can explore on your journey.

CHOOSE A PATH THAT SPARKS YOUR INTEREST—AND LET'S START SKETCHING!

I want to build an organization that supports happier, healthier, more resilient humans.

Here's how providing the means to help our people reach their potential radiates outward and does a world of good. Start with a shared mission and a few guiding principles to set your people—and your business—up for long-term resilience.

Jump to Chapter 1: Foundations

I want my organization to welcome and include people who live life with all skin colors, bodies, abilities, genders, and relationships.

From recruitment to the daily routines, life-centered leaders boost representation, inclusion, and belonging in their organizations. Learn why diverse teams work better—and how to navigate dissent and miscommunication with resilience and care.

Jump to Chapter 3: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

I want to learn how people work and care for one another in a life-centered organization.

Culture is more than a motto; it's what we do and say every day. Create a space of psychological safety and shared vulnerability to help your team manage, collaborate, and thrive together.

Jump to Chapter 2: Culture

I want to create learning and skilling programs that demonstrate care for people and get business results.

Growth should feel invigorating, not dreary or draining. Discover how a thorough needs analysis and the design thinking method helps you develop high-interest, high-ROI learning solutions.

Jump to Chapter 4: Learning Design



CHAPTER 1

Foundations

I imagine a company in crisis, with leadership literally struggling to keep the lights on. They try to make it work: Employees agree to a 25% pay cut. The C-suite barely draws a salary.

But finances keep plummeting. On a single dark day, 75% of the organization's employees are laid off.

Meanwhile, there are contracts that need to be honored: clients have prepaid for extensive projects, and the company needs to see them through. A skeleton crew stays on to deliver—at a cut-rate salary they won't see for months.

Finally, leadership decides to move out of the pricey San Francisco office space and brings the work online. With the home base dissolved, several team members move out of town.

Where do you imagine this company is today?

Maybe you're picturing unpaid bills, cheated clients, and a door papered with eviction notices. Or maybe you recognize a bootstraps success story: a ragtag team hanging on and making it against all odds.

That story is our story—how SweetRush was rocked by the global economic collapse of 2009. And (spoiler alert!) though we did manage to recover and rebuild, we know that the bootstraps success story isn't attainable for everyone. Good people can work extremely hard and still not succeed.

SweetRush has been very lucky, and we're extremely grateful for our collective luck. But it was thanks to the hard work of the team who donated and discounted their time that we began to stabilize.

By September 2009, we had partnered with new clients and were able to bring our people back: first at half time, then full time. Every year since has brought new additions to SweetRush's team, partnerships, and [industry recognition](#)—all while remaining remote and staying true to our values as a life- and human-centered organization.

At Sweet Rush,
we believe that
lifting up business
lifts up people.

And when we lift up people,
we lift up families, communities, and society.

That's what makes it worth revisiting this vulnerable and traumatic time in our past—and entering this conversation about how to make work work for everyone.

In 2021, we live in a different world than we did just 12 short years ago—one in which the needs of humans and organizations have become even more pressing. And though no one can predict market forces or acts of the universe, we can help you lay the foundations that will place you, your organization, and your employees in a more solid position to weather whatever fortune brings.

Striving to do better, learning, and changing are constants. We're here to share the many stories, results, and lessons learned from our transformation to light the way to yours.

HOW WE THRIVE

SweetRush was founded in 2001, so the [crisis scenario in 2009](#) aren't exactly our origin story, but that year marks a monumental step in our evolution.

How did we regain our footing—and start to thrive?

The short answer: culture. The long one: a life-centered, empathy-based approach to business that invites grace and trust from our team and our clients. But our goal has never been to boost karma or bank favors. Our goal was, to quote our cofounder Arturo Schwartzberg, to feel good. And when we make others feel good, we feel good.

We started small: **one person at a time.**

The Smallest Unit of Culture: The Individual

Now for our real origin story!

From the beginning, SweetRush cofounders Andrei Hedstrom and Arturo Schwartzberg shared the belief that a business should provide the employee with the optimal conditions for life.

Like every living thing, humans need abundance and freedom from suffering. When we have those, we have the energy and bandwidth to immerse ourselves in our craft, grow, and innovate. If we're stuck in survival mode, we can't engage in this deep work.

Models like [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#), [Graves, Beck, and Cowan's Spiral Dynamics](#), and even [Kohlberg's stages of moral development](#), illustrate how meeting these optimal conditions help humans to develop to our full moral, intellectual, and creative potential.

We've distilled these models into three stages of human potential.

Three Stages of Human Potential



Stage 1: Survival

Work is rigid, routine, and falls short of meeting basic needs. Energy is consumed by daily worries about job security, groceries, rent, transportation, health, and safety. Focus is on acquiring resources and stretching them as far as possible.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYER
Adversarial



Stage 2: Security

Work offers little freedom or personal fulfillment but basic needs. Energy is left over for family activities, home maintenance, and occasional travel. Focus is on fitting in time for family, errands, and appointments—and enjoying the little time left over.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYER
Perfunctory



Stage 3: Creativity and Connection

Work is fulfilling, flexible, and provides the abundance to fund education and leisure as well as basic needs. Energy is left over for family, hobbies, and exploration. Focus is on self development, personal connections, and experiences that satisfy curiosity about the world.

RELATIONSHIP WITH EMPLOYER
Harmonious, caring

STAGE 1

An organization that keeps employees in a Stage 1 state via low wages, an authoritarian culture, and lack of autonomy will never see them at their best.

Under these conditions of scarcity and insecurity, the fight-or-flight parts of the brain take control—and make it **physically impossible** to perform tasks like critical thinking, problem-solving, and even impulse control.

Stage 1 living has a price: a “cognitive tax” of the equivalent of 13 or 14 IQ points (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2014). That’s a tremendous loss for the individual, who might never get to demonstrate (or discover!) their dormant creativity and skills. It’s also a loss for the business: employees hamstrung at Stage 1 have little bandwidth to:

- ✓ Engage clients and colleagues with care
- ✓ Collaborate and resolve conflicts
- ✓ Assess outcomes and risks
- ✓ Identify ways to streamline processes
- ✓ Imagine new products and services
- ✓ Learn new skills

And if an enterprising employee **does** identify a way to go above and beyond? They might share it—once. But their organizations aren’t really looking for new ideas, at least not from the people on the front lines.

Sooner or later, employees get the message: thinking and creativity are above their pay grade. They learn to ration their energy and give the absolute minimum while they’re on the clock.



STAGE 2

An organization that offers employees a Stage 2 existence pays them well enough to live in relative security.

With their basic needs met, employees have some free time to engage in family activities, hobbies, and home maintenance. At work, they have sufficient bandwidth to solve problems, meet deadlines, and (usually!) engage others.

Their work conditions span a wide range, from rigid to slightly more accommodating, and employees at Stage 2 find themselves wishing for more autonomy and trust. They wonder, *Why do I have to spend an hour in traffic just so my boss sees me at my desk? Why do I need to ask permission to go to a dentist appointment?*

Any flexibility that is offered tends to be on an ad hoc basis. Under extenuating circumstances, or by grace of a supervisor, some employees get permission to work from home **“just this once”** when the kids are sick or the car won't start. Others are told to use PTO. Some supervisors trust employees to manage their own time; others have to make up every minute of a long lunch.

Because asking for special treatment activates the fearful Stage 1 brain, this lack of flexibility adds a cognitive tax. Even the daily crunch of trying to fit it all in—from dropping off the kids in the morning to the overdue checkup—drops the Stage 2 individual down a notch. Caretakers are especially vulnerable to this kind of daily stress. And in Stage 1 mode, **everyone** is more likely to be short with a client or overlook an error on a project.

Their organizations tend to **reward good work and punish the bad**—and the fear of consequences can make Stage 2 employees reluctant to take risks. That means they're less likely to come forward with issues or big, hairy, audacious ideas that just might work. And though their organizations might avoid some risk, they also lose out on innovation—and the ability to learn and grow from mistakes.

Stage 2 employees lose out on the opportunity to do meaningful work and connect with a greater mission. They care about their work, but they want the project off their plates and on to the next person as quickly as possible.

Going above and beyond? That's too risky.



STAGE 3

At Stage 3, organizations meet employees' needs—and then some. Wages provide the abundance to cover aspirational items such as education, hobbies, and travel.

At work, Stage 3 employees apply creativity to problems and draw connections between their work and the organizational mission.

Stage 3 folks also have better interactions and longer fuses. They're more gracious with clients, and that grace strengthens client relationships and loyalty. They're able to engage with colleagues who are different from them in visible and invisible ways—and cope with disagreements that arise on a team with diverse perspectives. They have the bandwidth to learn and prepare for the future of work. And they're loyal to the organization that helps them **live a good life**, reducing that annual \$630 billion of costly turnover in the U.S. alone (Work Institute, 2020).

Remember that autonomy and trust our Stage 2 friends only dreamed of? These folks have it. Stage 3 employees have full autonomy as to when, where, and how they work. *Need to meet across time zones? Shift work hours? Cover time off?* Stage 3 employees figure it out with their teams—no permission asked or granted.

Because everyone is equally special, there's no such thing as special treatment: the organization never scares anyone back to Stage 1. **But life can.** We all have experiences, good and bad, that derail our capacity to reason and express ourselves. When these befall the Stage 3 employee, leaders and colleagues offer their immediate support and empathy.

Empathy isn't just for the tough times either: organizations that support life at Stage 3 don't punish their people for making mistakes. Managers recognize failure as human—and a natural by-product of pursuing big, hairy, audacious ideas—and stress the importance of learning from them. Failure doesn't knock a Stage 3 employee back to Stage 1 because it's not an existential threat—as long as the lesson is learned and owned.

A group of Stage 3 individuals working toward a shared mission is a happy, powerful bunch. We'll show you how to build a habitat where they can thrive.



“The best way to learn is to mess something up—you won’t ever make that mistake again. We welcome your failures because that’s how we learn and grow.”



—Linda Fleming
Chief Operations Officer

A TALE OF TWO TEAMS

Team 1

A construction team is tasked with tearing out plaster. Their supervisor pays his employees the lowest salary possible while working them as hard as possible. The relationship is adversarial; the supervisor isn’t interested in what his employees know or have to say, and they’re not interested in contributing. The minute his back is turned, his team slacks off.

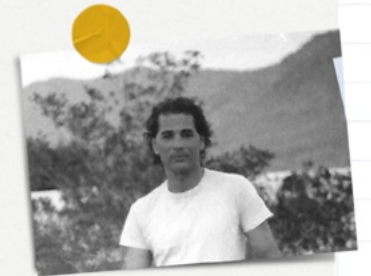
Team 2

A construction team is tasked with digging a ditch for a sewer pipeline. Their supervisor pays a fair wage for the day’s work but he does something odd. He asks his employees for their thoughts on the most efficient way to dig it. Several employees suggest using picks. The supervisor heads off to buy some, and the employees complete the digging in half the estimated time.

What do both teams have in common?

Our own Arturo Schwartzberg, SweetRush Cofounder!

Arturo’s first job was as an entry-level laborer on Team 1. A couple of years later, he had already started his own business—and hired Team 2. As a supervisor, he vowed to treat his employees as thinking human beings, not machines. The result? A better team culture...and infinitely better ideas. Arturo explains, “Leaders have to open the door for everyone to think creatively—and be open to their ideas for change.” Our employees are experts at their work, but we won’t hear from them unless we ask.



Enter Stage 3: The Foundations of a Life-Centered Organization

THINK SYSTEMICALLY AND LOCALLY

At SweetRush, we get to spend every day designing custom learning, guiding our partners through cultural transformation, applying new technology, and matching great people to great teams. We're always talking about hearts and minds—heck, even our logo is a heart.

You might be thinking that it's easy to be human-centered when our entire business is based on products and services that make humans better. What about businesses that do the hard stuff? Businesses where employees need to show up, perform a task, and hit the numbers? Businesses like manufacturing, hospitality, or construction?

Friends, we'll break this to you gently:

we're in the same business.

You already know that your company is public-facing and accountable to a very online global audience. But you should also know that every part of your product, practice, and pipeline impacts human and nonhuman lives around the world. And it's your business to make those lives better.

We get it: it's hard to visualize what our business has to do with the water supply in Syria or a village in Guatemala—and it may feel much less immediate when the bottom line is looming.

But we humans are wired for empathy, and if we could see the people, plants, and animals our business connects us to, we couldn't help caring for them. This isn't just our SweetRush idealism speaking; science supports the interconnectedness of every species on Earth. When we provide abundance and remove suffering for one life, all life benefits. When we leave the Earth better than we found it, we multiply this benefit.

Not our job? Think again.

It's not a matter of doing good versus the numbers; it's a matter of doing good and making the numbers. Leaders of the most successful businesses have found the ROI of focusing on "the big global we": the intricate connections among all people—beyond our own families, social networks, and teams (Conscious Capitalism, "[Philosophy](#)").

"Happier humans tend to be higher-performing."



—**Ashley Munday**
Thrive by SweetRush
Culture Consultant

When we care for our employees, we keep them out of poverty, despair, and the need to fall back on social institutions with too few resources to go around. By caring for our sphere, we care for our society.

And as the place where a majority of humans spend about 50% of their waking time, our businesses play a huge part in employee mental health and quality of life. And because we're much more nimble than our creaking social institutions—we've proved that over the past year!—we're in a unique position to take the lead in caring, supporting, and growing our fellow humans.

"Trust breeds trust—and loyalty."



—**Carolyn Barley**
Manager of Instructional Design,
Society for Human Resource
Management

Here's why we need to do this now.

You've probably noticed that we're in a bit of a crucible. We're being tested by extreme weather and temperatures in some of our most cherished places, a global public health crisis, a global mental health crisis, a global economic crisis, social injustice and unrest, and an all-time high of economic inequity. Our always shaky institutions—at least in the U.S.—can't support all of the need.

It's tempting to tune out, but people and the planet are hurting. And our businesses will be, too, unless we seize the opportunity—and, we'd add, responsibility—to drive social change.

It doesn't have to be all doom and gloom. We don't have to live in fear or be crushed by worry—as long as we take action.

The businesses that are best prepared to survive this crucible are the ones who live in the world responsibly. The ones who support humans and the planet with freedom and abundance. Who maintain a constant Stage 3 for people and step up for them when life knocks them down.

At SweetRush, we're proud to see our people living and working at Stage 3. But we're not proud of how rare a sight it is. Neither are the millions of workers who have already heeded the carpe diem call to change jobs ([CBS News](#), 2021; [Business Insider](#), 2021)—and the 40% who are still looking ([Microsoft Work Trends Report](#), 2021).

What are they seeking? A Stage 3 existence.

Here's how to make it happen.

*"We don't live
in the future state;
we are part of making
the future state happen."*



—**Andrei Hedstrom**
Cofounder, President, and CEO

Start with the Golden Rule

Whatever their industry, and whatever their role, everyone wants to feel engaged and treated fairly.

That means treating others with the same care we want to receive from them or, in more transactional terms, giving as good as we get.

SweetRush's leaders want to enjoy abundance and freedom from suffering, so they provide it to employees. They want grace when they make mistakes, so they show grace to others when they do the same. They want the space to practice their crafts and learn, so they provide that space for others. They want to receive empathy and support from others so—you guessed it!—they make a habit of showing empathy and support for colleagues and other living things.

Because they come from leadership, these actions speak louder and stand taller. They also send the message that the Golden Rule isn't just a nice quote; it's a yardstick we use every day, at every level of the organization.

At SweetRush, we use the Golden Rule to decide:

- ✏ Which projects we take on
- ✧ Which corporations we partner with
- ✧ How to accomplish our work
- ✏ How to behave and communicate with our colleagues and partners

That means turning away prospective partners when our values don't align—and holding one another accountable for our words and actions. These are tough conversations to have! But sharing this fundamental value makes the tough stuff easier.

Here's how to go for the gold.

Remote Work

You already know the story of SweetRush in 2009, so we won't pretend that virtual work was anything but a desperate measure—at first. That's why we relate so well to the leaders who took their businesses virtual over the past year. We pivoted in response to a crisis.

And, as a whole, we thrived. Businesses have been 5% more productive since the 2020 pivot ([Bloomberg](#), 2021). Now, we don't have hard data on SweetRush's productivity after our shift to virtual, but we do know that our team and client roster has grown (exponentially!) since the day we shut the (physical) lights off for the last time.

You might be one of the many leaders standing on the Rubicon and wondering: Should we go back to the way we were?

If you ask us, we'd say an emphatic no. Remote work is the life-centered choice—and potentially a great one for your business.

If you're still thinking of remote work as a perk to be rationed sparingly, and only as roles and functions permit, it's time to update your mindset. Your employees have been doing their job (and then some) for over a year.

"It's sad we have to compartmentalize and spend the better part of our time at work and life exists on the edges."



—Arturo Schwartzberg
Cofounder and Chairman

They don't want to shoulder the Stage 1 stress of commuting, spending the day in the office, and squeezing their lives into the downtime. And now that they've spent 18 months proving themselves, it's time for you to trust them.

They're already doing great work. No one—not your team, your managers, or your clients—will benefit from reintroducing the daily commute. Taking it away has returned a valuable hour (or more!) to your employees every day. That's an hour they spend being a human being instead of white-knuckling it on a highway—truly a great application of the Golden Rule.

The average commute time is nearly
30 minutes each way

Here's how some SweetRushians use that extra slice of time:



This one was popular!
Getting a slow start over coffee or tea



Morning or afternoon workouts



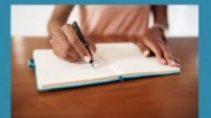
Morning walks



An extra hour (or two) of deep work



Taking the kids to school



Writing



Reading



Puppy playtime



Enjoying me time



Planning the workday



Meditating



An extra hour of sleep



Quality time with the kid(s)



Housework

The results? Renewed, refreshed Stage 3 employees who log on ready to collaborate and create!

Still think working virtually means sacrificing creativity and productivity? Think again! See [p. 124](#) for some of the creative and industry awards our team has earned.

Some leaders resist remote work because of “culture.” We’ve been entirely virtual since that fateful day in 2009, and we get high marks for culture. Like any relationship, maintaining it takes work; in [Chapter 2](#), we’ll share some of the resources and practices that keep our spark lit.

Of course, you need employees who can handle the autonomy remote work offers—and the virtual world helps you find them. Remember that global web that connects us to every living being? Well, it makes tapping into a global talent pool easier than ever. Releasing our geographic ties has helped us bring on the best of the best in the world.

Speaking of global, remote work also reduces your business’s carbon footprint. You also reduce waste from maintaining a building, providing utilities, and generating paper waste from those thousands of unclaimed printouts.

The savings aren’t just environmental: when you stop paying for office space and all of the incidentals, you free up funds for innovation and passion projects. With less overhead and a team of Stage 3 employees, you’ll be able to break ground on those big, hairy, audacious ideas; boost your ROI; and pull ahead of your competitors.

AUTONOMY AND FLEXIBILITY

Employees get frustrated when their organizations don’t trust them to work remotely. That leaves them at Stage 2—and you with an employee who’s giving less because work takes too much of their life.

Of course, remote doesn’t work for every position. Sometimes employees do need to show up and serve the guest or make the thing. Even for knowledge-based roles, remote work may not work all of the time. Some people need—and want!—a workspace away from home.

How to make everyone happy? Give them a choice.

The mass exodus of employees who are moving to more flexible arrangements speaks volumes about the value of autonomy.

If you’re maintaining an office space, offer the opportunity to work there—at least once in a while. If you’re in a construction setting, think creatively about how to offer some flexibility and support. The gesture itself will show your employees that you care. (Remember Arturo’s team and their pipeline?)

If work sites, hours, and processes are written in stone, give employees autonomy around the type of recognition they receive. Sound frivolous? General Mills boosted the engagement and morale of its hard-working manufacturing team by

offering employees three options for receiving their bonuses: cash, time off, or a charity donation ([NeuroLeadership Institute](#), 2021). The amount was modest, but being offered a choice made employees feel valued and respected—and it started a lively internal conversation.

If you want your people to thrive, go back to the Golden Rule. They want the autonomy to manage their work and schedules, just as you do.

Offer them as much choice as possible in when, where, and how they work. Ask them for their feedback and ideas on how to streamline procedures and processes—and listen to what they share. From the custodian to the C-suite, everyone thrives when we feel trusted and respected.

*“If you’re fulfilling responsibilities,
meeting deadlines, and delivering
quality work, how you get there
is up to you.”*



—Carolyn Barley

Manager of Instructional
Design, Society for Human
Resource Management



PERSONAL CARE

Like shoulder pads and smoking sections, cutthroat corporate culture needs to be a thing of the past. But with 75% reporting a lack of empathy in their work environment, it's clearly still alive and well ([Businessolver](#), 2021).

It's never a weakness or an impediment to productivity to choose the most humane path. Because we have our needs met, we have the bandwidth to extend support to clients or colleagues who are going through a rough time.

Andrei and Arturo liken care at work to the “gravitational force” that holds people together in a committed relationship; it's a powerful force, but it can be eroded. That's why an organization should work to continually enrich that force holding its people together.

FINDING THE WORDS

Verbalizing care is an important step, especially in virtual work when cues like gestures and sharing space don't come through. As leaders, we need to get comfortable being verbal with our employees. That's a part of the new leadership training: strong and silent doesn't work anymore.

ACCEPTING CARE AND SUPPORT

Here's the flip side of verbalizing. If someone offers you a compliment, take it! Even if you don't agree that you're funny, or a great speaker, or amazing at Zoom karaoke, the added confidence just might boost your skills. That's a hack straight from Arturo: he finds himself striving to deserve the compliment—and does better in the process.

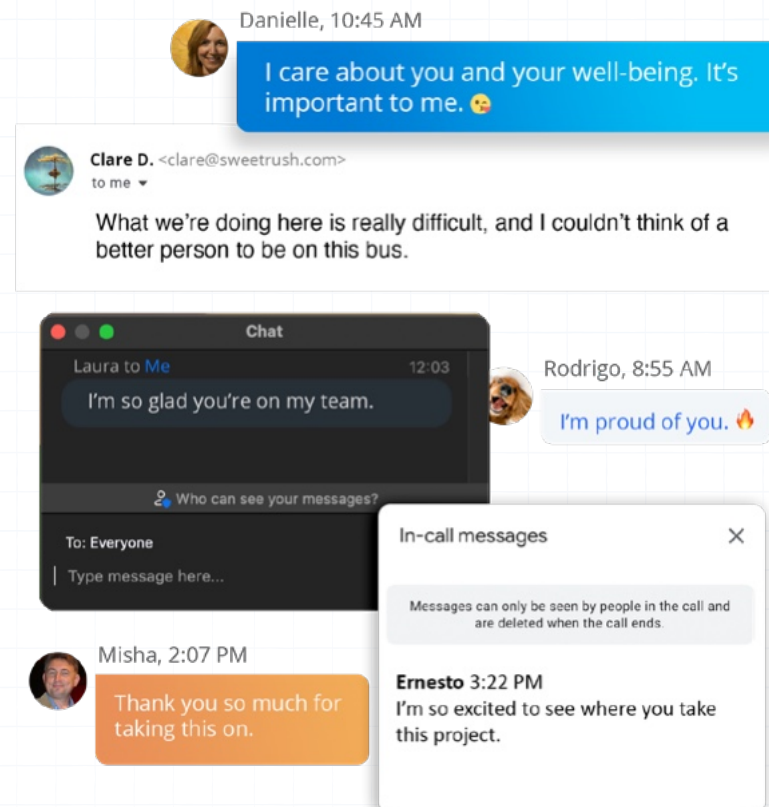
As leaders, we do a lot—and we tend to do it alone. But accepting the occasional offer of help can strengthen our relationship with our peers and employees. All humans feel richer when

we can give to each other—even when we don't have much to give. Ben Franklin observed that we like people more when we help them, and this feel-good effect has been confirmed by more recent psychological studies ([Business Insider](#), 2016).

Practice saying yes—it's a win for everyone.

Overheard in SweetRush: Compliments from Leadership

Here's a sampling from a few days in our life.



RADICAL CANDOR

Practicing care doesn't mean that we don't engage in tough conversations; in fact, it enables tough conversations. That foundation of care has to be solid for radical candor to land.

When we share a space, we share responsibility for what happens there. That means being open and transparent, even about the tough stuff.

Radical candor also helps us reach a greater good. That's why we opened this chapter with a story of the most vulnerable time in SweetRush history. It's painful to recall, but the larger purpose of sharing our knowledge with others makes the telling worthwhile.

Radical candor also means being accountable for our words, actions, and commitments—and it's not just for SweetRush people. We expect it from our clients as well. We want to be partners with clients, which means delivering bad news along with the good, and negative feedback along with the positive. It's hard for some clients to hear that they're going out of scope or that they're negatively affecting the development process.

Radical candor is part of the SweetRush experience ([see Chapter 2](#) for more)—and it's part of what saved SweetRush in the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009. Throughout that challenging time, we kept our clients updated. Even though the news was often hard to hear, they knew that they could trust us to meet revised deadlines and project scopes. That trust—and their grace in accepting what we could deliver after our best-laid plans changed—played a huge role in SweetRush's survival.

Though our client list has grown, we still work with clients who share our values—and who are comfortable holding the tough conversations.

SHARE A MISSION

Back to that business we're all in—the business of making lives better. You'll probably want to narrow that mission down a bit to reflect your industry, but keep it aspirational and inspiring.

For example, **SweetRush's BHAG is to positively impact the lives of a billion people through our craft.** It is an audacious goal, but every project gets us closer. That's a key part of a Stage 3 life—working together toward something meaningful.

Our life-centered initiatives add another layer of purpose with the opportunity to do good in the world. Good Things gives our teams the opportunity to practice their craft in the service of nonprofit organizations that perform vital work in the areas of education, human services, and the environment. Team members count their work on these projects among the most meaningful events of their lives—and make the work experience deeply personal and fulfilling.

In spring 2021, we introduced La Maestra, an initiative that offsets the carbon footprint of every project by planting trees in the Costa Rica rainforest. Our SweetRush-client teams have rallied behind the opportunity to build a legacy with their work.

*“We are building
a forest of knowledge, together.”*

—**Andrei Hedstrom**, Cofounder, President, and CEO

The Big Why/We

If there's one thing the pandemic has taught us about ourselves, it's that we can't isolate our problems—the problem of any human is the problem of **all** humans. And we've got more problems ahead. Hardships due to climate change, social unrest and, yes, the next pandemic—everything hiding in the fine print of our insurance policies—will only become increasingly common. And when they happen, they're going to send us all back to a collective Stage 1, just as they did in spring 2020.

We need to plan now to prevent the reactive decisions of our future fear brains.
And we need to heal the accumulated pain of the past year and a half.

41%

of our employees are burned out ([SHRM](#), 2021).

5M

women—and counting—have left the U.S. workforce and women of color are disproportionately represented in that number ([American Progress](#), 2021).

That's not just a talent drain; it's a major systemic failure.

The pandemic may be the straw that broke so many workers, but work hasn't been working for a long time. It's no secret: women, people of color, caregivers, the differently abled, and the neurodivergent have been discussing the barriers for a long time (see Chapter 3). But too many leaders have not heard the messages our employees are sending.

They'll seldom tell us to our faces, so we need to decode what their actions tell us about our organizations. For example, if we can't keep salespeople, that's not a sales problem: it's an organizational problem with a sales symptom. If our junior associates don't stick around, that's not because young people don't want to work; it's because we're not showing them a path to abundance and growth. Whether they're seasoned employees with years of tribal knowledge or coachable young professionals who could help secure our succession plan, we lose when we lose good people.

And here's a hard truth: It's us, not them.

This Harvard Business Review headline says it all: [Employee Burnout Is a Problem with the Company, Not the Person](#). And that was back in 2017.

About one in three forward-thinking leaders, according to [Accenture](#) (2021), has always understood that supporting the “care and resilience of human workers” goes hand in hand with profits. But by September 2020, 50% of CEOs had come around. It took the pandemic to convince that more skeptical 15% that caring for people yielded real business results.

And now, their businesses are reaping the rewards.

Organizations that supported employees across six mental, physical, social, and financial health measures grew their revenue by over 5%. And that's during the financial and market turbulence of the past 18 months. During a “normal” year, they could expect to see growth in the double digits.

How did the other half do? They suffered a revenue decline to the tune of -4.7%.

Revenue during Covid-19

5% ↗

Organizations that supported employees

-4.7% ↘

Organizations that didn't support employees

We won't call it karma, but there is a direct correlation between doing good and doing well.

Quests

We've shared a lot and you're probably wondering how these practices might look at your organization. That's why we've created Quests, a collection of concrete steps you can take to make work work better.

And though leaders can have the biggest impact, everyone plays a role in the journey toward a life-centered organization. Whether your decisions impact the entire organization, a department, or just yourself, there's something for everyone.

Start your journey below.

C-Suite

HR and Management

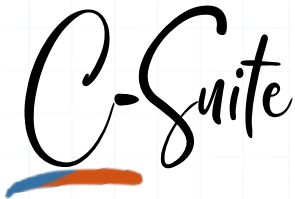
Individual Contributors



“Think about the downstream team.”

—Clare Dygert
Director of Learning Experience Design

QUESTS >



A life- and human-centered organization starts with you. As a leader, you make a lasting impact on the world—and lay the foundations for your employees’ lives and potential.

REFLECT.

Ask yourself Accenture’s [Six Net Better Off](#) questions—and make a study of them. Dive deep into your compensation and benefits packages, policies, and procedures and look for barriers to life beyond work. Where can you incorporate flexibility and choice? Where can you take those annoying “[pebbles](#)” out of people’s day?

TALK TO YOUR PEOPLE.

Not just the managers and knowledge workers, but those on the front lines. Ask them about their lives and work—and listen. What are their priorities? What would make their day easier? What are they worried about? Listen, take notes, and compare it against your formal policies, procedures, and compensation.

LEARN FROM PEOPLE WHO LEAVE.

If they’re on their way out now, talk to them! Find out who—or what—has lured them away and what would make them willing to stay on. If they’ve already left, look for trends: Is any one gender, department, ethnicity, or time period overrepresented? Work with your HR department to identify reasons and potential remedies.

MODEL SELF-CARE.

Limit emails, texts, and calls to business hours as much as possible. Unplug on your days off, and encourage your employees to do the same. Look for employees at risk of potential burnout—a big project, a difficult client, back-to-back travel—and encourage them to take time off. (Author’s note: I’m under strict orders to take a week off after this eBook is finished!)

Speak openly to your team about your self-care habits, and ask about theirs. Encourage them to make time in their day for meditation, exercise, and/or being outdoors.

MODEL EMPATHY.

Thank your people. Sure, they’re just doing their jobs, but it feels fantastic to hear a leader express appreciation for taking on a project or meeting a deadline. Bonus points for sharing how their work has helped you accomplish the company mission (below)!

Tell your people you care. You might think they already know it, but they need to hear it—especially after this past year. It might feel awkward at first, and it’s okay to laugh about it. Then say it anyway.

Ask questions. Don’t just dive into the business at hand. Ask how everyone is doing—and then get beyond the I’m fines by asking about family, activities outside of work, or what they last read or watched. Better yet, ask what’s inspiring them, making them curious, or moving them emotionally.

Think about the downstream team. We owe this catchphrase to Clare Dygert, our Director of Learning Experience Design. It’s a great reminder to consider the humans who will be implementing our projects and any support or resources we can provide. How can we use our position to clear any external barriers?

MODEL CURIOSITY.

Get curious about other lives. From ants to our cave-dwelling ancestors, the natural world is full of wisdom and can teach us about ourselves and our connection to all living things. Andrei is a strong advocate for biological literacy and has found his thinking transformed by nature, particularly the field of mycology. (See “[Curious about how all kinds of lives are connected?](#)” for inspiration.)

Cultivate beginner’s mind. Remember that rush you got the first time you rode a bike or read a chapter book? That’s the thrill of beginner’s mind or shoshin. We experience it often as children exploring the world, but we need to seek it out more intentionally as adults. When we wrap ourselves around a new language, hobby, or skill, we get more than an “aha” moment. Having to work at something keeps us humble—and helps us empathize with others who may be learning and struggling.

CONNECT TO THE MISSION.

Reflect aloud how teams, projects, and clients help you deliver on your organization’s mission. Employees are often so focused on their own projects that they don’t see the larger picture.

QUESTS >

HR and Management

If your leadership team recognizes the value of life- and human-centered business—or is working toward change—many of these actions will be familiar to you.

But what if your C-suite isn't up for a cultural transformation? While we'd encourage you to use your position to advocate for a life-centered business, we also recognize the paradox: change comes from the top—except when it doesn't.

ADVOCATE FOR A LIFE-CENTERED BUSINESS.

Present caring for people as a business opportunity to your leadership. You might lead with the results of Accenture's [Net Better Off](#) study, a success story from your own team—or from a competitor. Share your concerns about the risks of not getting on board with the 50% of organizations that care for the whole person. If your leaders aren't immediately interested, don't give up. Keep studying and discussing it as you would any other professional development experience—and work to engage your peers.

TALK TO YOUR TEAM.

Ask them about their lives and work—and listen. What are their priorities? What would make their day easier? What are they worried about? Listen, take notes, and look for opportunities to offer flexibility. For example, even if your organization has strict policies on the books, you can work with your team to facilitate flexible work hours and time-off coverage.

PROTECT YOUR TEAM.

Being sandwiched between an aggressive leader and a team of employees who need you more than ever can be a lot of pressure. Make a firm commitment not to pass along any aggression and intimidation to your team. And before relaying information from on high, make sure you give yourself the self-care you need. (Although if your leaders use fear tactics to manage their business, you always have the option to vote with your feet!)

MODEL EMPATHY.

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Think about the downstream team. We owe this catchphrase to Clare Dygert, our Director of Learning Experience Design. It's a great reminder to consider the humans who will be implementing our projects and any support or resources we can provide. How can we use our position to clear any external barriers?

In a blame-based environment, it's tempting to get projects off your plate as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, that sometimes means doing the bare minimum before handing it off. Perform your own QA check before work gets passed along, and come back to the team with any issues. Show your team how to share ownership for errors and successes.

BREAK THE BLAME CYCLE.

Finger-pointing is a symptom of a reactive, fear-based culture. Once again, even under pressure, you can choose your team's culture. Refuse to tolerate blaming or shaming, and focus on problem-solving and coaching.

MODEL CURIOSITY.

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CREATE A TEAM MISSION.

Is your mission part of your everyday work, or is it just a line in the employee handbook? If you have trouble finding meaning in the overall mission, create one with your team—and then connect your work to it frequently.

QUESTS >

Individual Contributors

Ready to live, work, and love at Stage 3? It all begins with connection to an organization that provides the necessary conditions for you to thrive. If that's not your current organization, consider a change. In the meantime, try these steps to be the change in your corner.

ADVOCATE FOR A LIFE-CENTERED BUSINESS.

If you're comfortable talking to your supervisor, share your work wish list. What external barriers or [pebbles](#) are preventing you from thriving? What would make your day easier? Which companies in your industry seem to be getting it right?

VOTE WITH YOUR FEET.

If your leaders are among the 50% still questioning the value of a life-centered organization, it might be time to part ways. As you research openings at other organizations, vet their culture, salary, benefits, and even interviews on sites like Glassdoor. Competitive salaries and benefits, and respect for candidates during the interview process point to a promising culture. Make sure to ask about their culture and share what's important to you when you land that first interview.

LOOK FOR CONNECTIONS.

If you don't understand how your role or part of a project fits into the big picture—ask. If you're new to the project, learn about the stakeholders and their mission, your team members, other teams involved in the project, and any context or backstory. Doing so will make you a better contributor and show your resourcefulness and care for the work.

MODEL EMPATHY.

Ideally, your manager—and your leadership—are doing this. If not, start the trend yourself.

Thank your team. It's always nice to hear "Thanks for checking" or "Thanks for covering that" even if it's your job. Appreciating the little things is a great way to lift someone's mood—and your own.

Don't get straight to the point. No one is too busy to say hello. If we have time for a call (or email, or text, or IM), we have time for a friendly greeting. If someone else—including your supervisor—shoots over an ask point-blank, respond with a cheerful "Hi there, how are you?" and wait for an answer.

Take time away. Don't be the person who emails on Sunday morning! Limit your communications to business hours as much as you can—and when you can't, acknowledge the intrusion. When you take a day off, take it off—no peeking at messages or "just checking in." When you're feeling stretched too thin, let your supervisor know so that they can help you plan for an afternoon off.

Think about the downstream team. When you understand where you and your team fit in the big picture, you'll see the importance of setting the downstream team up for success. Don't just check things off to get them off your plate—check in with the folks who pick up where you leave off. Ask them what you can do to make their work easier—and do it. Clarify any complications or special requests. If something goes wrong, own it and focus on a solution—not pointing fingers. Don't get pulled into the blame game!

MODEL CURIOSITY.

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Read/Watch/Listen

- ✍ [Josh Bersin, What's Ahead for 2021? Five Lessons for the Coming Year](#)
- ♦ [Harvard Business Review: Navigating Mental Health at Work Reading List](#)
- ♦♦ [Harvard Business Review: Why You Need to Protect Your Sense of Wonder, Especially Now](#)
- ✍ [Harvard Business Review: Beyond Burned Out](#)
- ♦ [Fast Company: This Is the New Battleground in the Fight to Retain Employees](#)
- ♦♦ [Strategy + Business: Does Culture Really Eat Strategy for Breakfast?](#)
- ✍ [Inc Magazine: The Great Resignation: Why Millions of People Are Quitting \(and How Employers Can Earn Them Back\)](#)
- ♦ [Harvard Business Review: Motivating Employees Is Not About Carrots or Sticks](#)

- ✍ [Harvard Business Review: Research: What Do People Need to Perform at a High Level?](#)

- ♦ [IDEO U: How to Empower Employees Through Empathetic Leadership](#)
- ♦♦ [IDEO U: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work](#)

DEEP DIVES

- ✍ [Accenture: Care to Do Better](#)
- ♦ [Deloitte: 2021 Global Human Capital Trends](#)
- ♦♦ [Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose](#)
- ✍ [Spiral Dynamics Reading List](#)

Curious about how all kinds of lives are connected?

These resources will amaze and inspire you.

- ✍ [Powers of Ten](#)
- ♦ [Fantastic Fungi: The Magic Beneath Us](#)
- ♦♦ [Aeon Psyche: The Fungal Mind: On the Evidence for Mushroom Intelligence](#)
- ✍ [Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures](#)
- ♦ [Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest](#)
- ♦♦ [The Genius of Birds](#)
- ✍ [Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher](#)
- ♦ [My Octopus Teacher](#)
- ♦♦ [The Soul of an Octopus](#)



You get it. We get it, too.

Investing in **culture and learning** is your path to creating a human-centered workplace—one that inspires and enables **growth and innovation, resilience to change, and psychological safety.**

SweetRush has invested in our culture since day one. And we've built a **breadth and depth of capabilities** to help clients like you positively impact your people and your business.

It is all about your people. How you attract, motivate, connect, lead, develop, and retain them.

Our invitation to you: Do this work with people who care about you and your success. A team that creates, innovates, collaborates, reimagines, and delivers results.

Love your craft. Feel like family. Make an impact.



Cultural Transformation



Human-Centered Learning



L&D Staffing



Nonprofit Support



Immersive Technology



SWEETRUSH.

In Service of Life PotentialSM

Learn more: www.sweetrush.com | Get in touch: info@sweetrush.com



In Service of Life Potential

I Love Life. It is simultaneously filled with suffering and abundant in its potential. When life finds a seam, it will burst through and expand. Give a person an opportunity to better themselves, and they will grow toward the light.

I might have always loved life, and watching my daughter grow into the beginning of her womanhood, I can report that she came into this world loving life. Born to love life. I have seen this love of life again and again at SweetRush. And I have learned a bit about how to love life at work.

Serve your people so that they're able to explore and express the truth, beauty, and goodness in them, and they'll do amazing things. The problems of the day not only become manageable, they become fodder to make something of good use. Making things with good people is a lot of fun—and when we have those things, we make a positive impact. What could be better in our work?

People like to make things—so much so that moving rocks and materials around could be said to be a part of our nature. But we don't just push stuff into a shape; we like to bring those shapes to life: Water through the old aqueducts, electric money through the digital world that connects our activities—and now pushing our materials and energy out into space. It seems that we see ourselves inside of what we shape and bring to life.

Sadly, we're now learning that some of the things we make have diminished our amazing planet and its living systems. It's as if these webs of connectivity we are part of are letting us know it's going to get a bit rocky ahead. Suffering is at hand, and more still will come, so now we turn to look for wisdom about how to master our meaning and purpose.

What is it all for?

It's for life—this is the answer we return to when we get into trouble. The new lives that come into our families, the forests that are splendid with awe and mystery, beauty and air. Sweet air—water, too. A drink of water, when you are truly thirsty, is something that makes you understand why all cultures have built temples, great fountains, works of art, and towns to honor the essential nature of water.

Life's power and beauty is also abundant in the ways we relate and connect with one another. At this time, when over half our population is digitally connected, we can talk. Yes, there's the absolutely crazy talk we have been doing on social media, but we can also truly dig deep with people all over the world, sharing solutions, resources, and good will. By the end of the next decade, almost all of us will be connected and interfacing with the next chapter of technology—the metaverse. There we'll discover just how close we can get through the tools we have developed to share more of our personal and collective energy together.

If we have achieved all we have while being motivated by a value system based on coins, **imagine what we can achieve when we're motivated by the truth that life and its potential are the greatest measurements of value?** The answer, of course, is: "Let's see what's possible."

We know a few fundamental things about the potential and value of life. We know that when a life experiences freedom from suffering, it does amazing things. **Freedom from suffering doesn't mean an absence of suffering, but a healthy amount of suffering; and the experience of stretching that is a catalyst for the growth of our potential.**

(continued on next page)

It's also about reclaiming our energy from the times when the suffering has been too much. We know there are fire-works of life potential and goodness when we support others who are suffering—so much so that we build myths and movies about superheroes and award Peace Prizes for it.

We also know that every living thing needs the right amount of abundance: not too much and not too little. **Both extreme abundance and extreme lack of abundance cause lots of suffering for everyone, because it degrades our shared potential.** The indicator of achieving ample abundance is when you begin to serve others' life potential.

I am certain that there is a way for you to work earnestly, with your people, making the things you love to make, that grows life potential. I am even more certain that when you do, you will feel better about yourself and our world. Your people will too.

At SweetRush, we like to make learning and support transformation, using the best technology we can find and a commitment to goodness, truth, and beauty. We like to work with as cool a set of tools, processes, and methodology as we can, too. We like to get intellectual sometimes, and pragmatic all the time.

This eBook is an expression of both the deep and pragmatic work we do: not just our ideas, but our urge to share what we know with you. We can attest that there aren't enough of us to go around. The learning and development industry, once a sort of clean up crew for sexual harassment or workplace injury lawsuits, is in such need to support the large scale transformation in our world that the pounding on the doors of our craft is almost deafening.

I believe that the best of our craft—and SweetRush—is yet to come if we truly focus on what is good for life. This is a pragmatic notion as well as one that makes me happy. **If you are in an industry that is in great demand, then where you put your craft makes a big impact. Put it into what you value most.**

I believe the onus is on us to put our work toward the world we want to see and, for me, that's a living world. For my team, the world is what we choose to work for, and we learn about how to serve it better each year. Our reward is that we get to do more of what we love to do while bringing more people together. We get to know people at other organizations who are making things, moving energy together—reducing suffering and increasing abundance in service of life potential.

If there is a **hopeful, productive, future age**, I believe that it will be called something like the Age of Life Potential, in which people shift their belief systems and mental models and learn new ways to ask and answer: *what more is possible with life at the center? How much splendid diversity of care, creativity, and understanding can we weave into the things we make and do?*

When I look down the line of industries, cultures, and ecosystems with life as the focus, what I see is not only worth working toward, it brings me joy and gives my life value. Serving life potential is worth all I am.

ANDREI HEDSTROM

Andrei Hedstrom
Cofounder, President, and CEO,
SweetRush

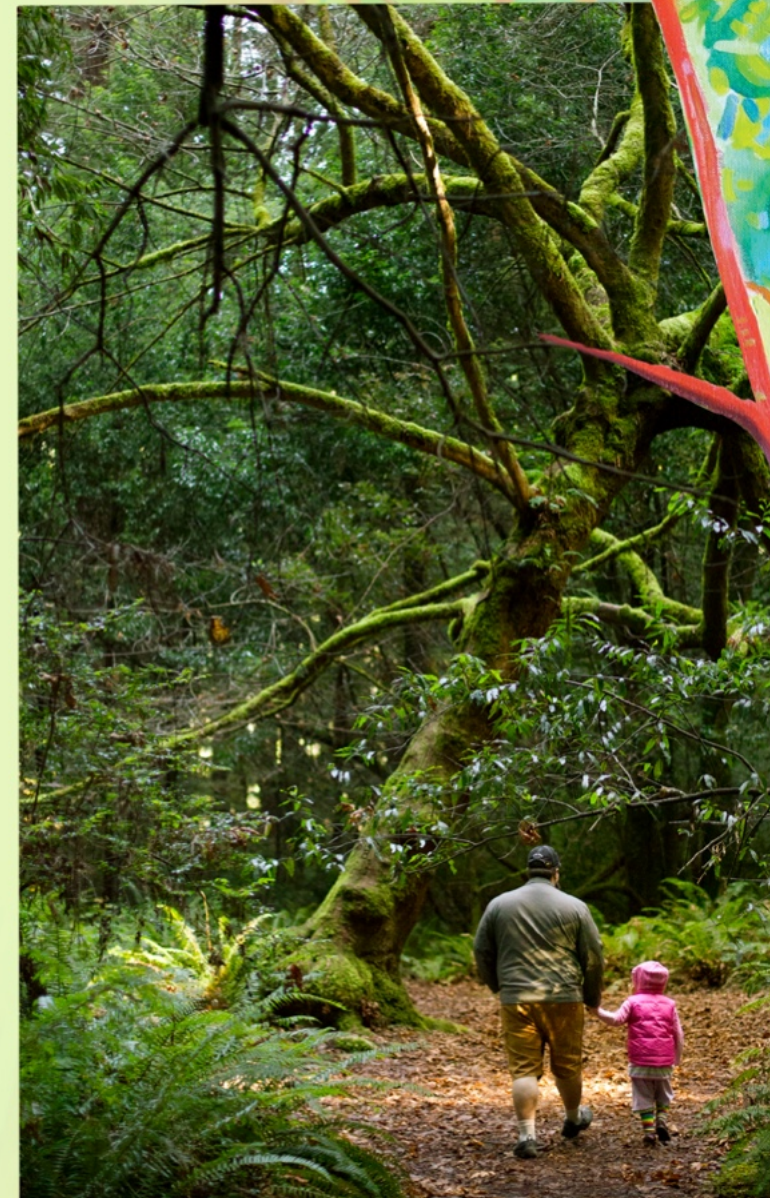


Photo credit: [Erik Borzi](#)



CHAPTER 2

Culture

Early SweetRushians enjoyed an office full of art, plants, and dogs in the Dogpatch neighborhood of San Francisco. They biked to work, ordered burritos from Dos Piñas, and dominated trivia night at Yield. They could always catch Christine ringing the cowbell when they won a new project or Arturo coming back from a run. When they were feeling philosophical, they could lounge in Andrei's mountain-man chair and hash out an idea.

Of course, this colorful hub of activity closed its doors for the last time in May 2009. With only 25% of its staff, SweetRush went into survival mode. Leaders donated their time from afar, and the faithful skeleton crew executed virtually on client projects.

After we stabilized a few nail-biting months later, our first priority was hiring back our people.

We couldn't wait to reunite with our friends and teammates. But we had come to love our zeroed-out rent costs and our newfound flexibility.

The big questions for SweetRush 2.0 became:

- How can we translate the office culture we all loved into our new virtual office?
- How might we ensure that new team members—folks who had never even seen the original office—feel included and valued?
- And, most of all, how might we find even better ways of working and caring for each other to help SweetRush thrive?

You might say we're at a collective Rubicon right now, with thousands of leaders and teams asking similar questions and many looking to start over. A growing number of CEOs are crunching the numbers and seeing the business value of meeting their employees' fundamental needs ([Accenture](#), 2020): in other words, a [Stage 3 existence](#).

In Chapter 1, we talked about how to build a foundation for abundance with our organization's compensation, policies, and procedures. That's an important place to begin. But it's our interactions with others—**from the way we treat time away to the way we engage a client**—that make or break our quality of life at work.

In this chapter, we'll explore how to create norms, habits, and practices that help your team live well together in the space you share. This cluster of behaviors, language, and rituals is what we call **organizational culture**. Ours lives and breathes virtually, so you'll notice that our successes and lessons learned speak specifically to remote work—but they apply to all work. Whether you opt for fully remote, face-to-face, or hybrid work, we hope that the results of our 20-year experiment will help you build the best culture for your people.

Having a hard time wrapping your head around the concept of culture?

Simply look and listen. Gregg Kendrick, Director of Thrive by SweetRush, describes culture as:

"the totality of observed behaviors of the people within the organization."

Those behaviors include what people choose to say—and how they react in difficult moments. If conflict or negativity occur and they're not addressed, they, too, are a part of your culture.



—Gregg Kendrick
Director of Thrive by SweetRush

Why Culture?

Let's start with the good news: creating culture isn't an uphill battle—or a battle at all. **We humans are wired to connect.** The desire to participate in culture comes naturally to us. We all want to be part of a community in which we're accepted, included, and valued.

Culture arises naturally when people get together. Every couple, family, and friend group has its own culture, good or bad, comfortable or uncomfortable.

Now for the opportunity: once our numbers grow to include people outside our immediate circles, we need to be more proactive about shaping culture. We need to consider the comfort and well-being of a larger and more diverse group of people. And we need to ensure that every individual feels a sense of belonging and connection within the larger group.

That takes strategy, intention, and training. Getting this right sets an organization up for long-term resilience and helps it to weather future crises. We owe our collective resilience through the pandemic to the culture we began rebuilding (virtually!) in 2009 and have been refining and growing ever since.

Culture is every experience we share with others in our tribe—from major rituals to watercooler banter. We wanted to create space for every kind of connection—so we built all kinds of meeting spaces into our virtual “floor plan.”



1

ALL-HANDS MEETINGS

Our monthly ritual opens and closes with an on-camera wave (a dazzling sight with 130+ guests!). Thanks to our graphic designers, slides are colorful and meaningful—serving as cues rather than lecture notes. Topics focus on expanding our shared mission and deepening our experience together as humans and practitioners. Recent topics include: favorite moments from our 20 years together, a deep dive into diversity and inclusion, [our new carbon-neutral reforestation initiative](#), and love at work. The team keeps up an active chat throughout the experience, cheering on presenters and sharing reactions. A personal note from Arturo a few days in advance builds anticipation for this internal party.

Our tool of choice: Zoom

2

WHOLE-TEAM ANNOUNCEMENTS

This space is the refrigerator door where we scribble our welcome messages to new team members, birthday wishes, and congratulations about new life adventures. We also post polls, requests for brainstorming partners, and book and movie recommendations that connect to our shared mission.

Our tool of choice: Google Currents

3

TEAM MEETINGS

In the marketing team, for example, the weekly team gathering is our answer to the Monday cube chat. Team members join and share the projects and passions they pursued over the weekend. (Lots of Netflix recommendations change hands here!) Birthdays and other special occasions feature a group game—from Among Us to personalized team trivia. This is also the place where we share our learning from conferences, webinars, and life.

Our tool of choice: Zoom

4

ONE-ON-ONES (1:1s)

These weekly touchpoints give team members face time with their supervisors to discuss ideas, projects, workloads, and life. These 1:1s provide valuable opportunities for team members who aren't as vocal in the larger group meeting to get to know their supervisor. They also help to breathe life and goodwill into electronic feedback and conversations.

Our tools of choice: Zoom and Google Meet

5

TEAM CHAT

Our ever-scrolling message board helps us wish each other a good workday or weekend, ask questions, and share stories, news, photos, jokes—and lots of animated GIFs. With team members in multiple time zones, chats help us catch up with one another on our own schedules.

Our tool of choice: Skype



6

AD HOC HANGOUTS

Anyone who's ever IMed at work can appreciate our version of stopping by a friend's cube. Whether it's an impromptu small-group chat about a project or a fun link, messaging is the perfect tool for a quick exchange—or launchpad for a live call.

Our tool of choice: Skype

7

OPEN-DOOR TOUCHPOINTS

Our leaders are busy—but they set aside blocks of time in their schedules to meet with any individual or team. SweetRush CEO Andrei's calendar describes his Friday afternoon office hours as an opportunity to "connect on current initiatives, ideas, passions, or just to build a better personal connection." It's not just for looks—when new members join the team, he encourages them to reach out.

Our tool of choice: Google Calendar

8

PROJECT-BASED CONVERSATIONS AND COLLABORATION

Most of us have tried the review feature in documents—usually for line edits and corrections. We use it that way, too, but we also use comments for detailed project conversations (sometimes in real time). And because all of our content lives online with us, it's easy to link to other documents in our library or loop in others who can share information.

Our tools of choice: Google Workspace, Jira, Mural, and Confluence

9

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Our eclectic team has all kinds of interests—some unique, some shared. Those with a critical mass—Tabata, yoga, meditation, writing, and a women's discussion group—hold space for regular practice or discussion. With members spanning all departments and levels of the organization, these groups spark connections and friendships among team members who might not otherwise have had the opportunity.

Our tool of choice: Zoom

10

MAKER'S TIME

There are times to gather—and there are other times when we need alone time to sketch out ideas, research new ones, read, learn, and just noodle ([Paul Graham, 2009](#)). And whether it's due to our roles, temperaments, or both, some of us need more maker's time than others. Whether we pace out wicked problems or sketch out potential solutions, we need time away from others to innovate and ideate. We honor our teammates' deep work time—and encourage them to block it off on their calendars.

Our tools of choice: notepads, walks, washing dishes, etc.

Sharing the Space: How We Show Up

Shared spaces are just the beginning—our real culture only comes to life when we show up together. And before we invite everyone to our epic virtual mixer, we need a shared purpose to unite us. We need to understand why we're here together and what matters to us.

We call these whys and whats our **core values**, and these will vary according to our business, our people, and our history. **But whatever our value proposition or origin story, our core values should speak to fundamental life needs: empathy, diversity, or mutual respect, to name just a few.**

Once you land on your own core values, the next step is to decide how they should look, sound, and feel in action. For example, if your core value is mutual respect, determine how that will be expressed in meetings, conversations with clients, and conversations with teams.

After you have a clear picture, consider how that value won't look, sound, or feel. That's not a typo! Considering nonexamples prepares you to identify words and behaviors that don't align with that value.

Of course, recognizing them isn't enough. We need to address those breaches, so that they don't inadvertently become part of our culture—and undermine the very respect we profess to value. And everyone needs to be ready to hold others accountable.

That doesn't mean playing bad cop; it means that everyone, from the mailroom to the boardroom, can respectfully say, "I know we all value mutual respect, and I'm not hearing alignment with that value." The message is clear: the life-centered organization is no place for bystanders.

OUR CORE VALUES

We store our core values, from practical information to philosophical musings in our Values and Culture eBook. This colorful compendium is co-created between leadership and the team, and features art, inspirational quotes, a manifesto in verse, and even a recipe.

We open with three core values.

Economically responsible

We seek to better ourselves as financial stewards both with the work we do for clients and with how we manage our own financial behavior and goals.

We balance the need for profitability with investments in a growing team—and find opportunities to use our profits to positively impact the world around us.

Socially just

We seek to create socially just interactions with our team and clients. We celebrate autonomy, personal growth, and expression as keys to elevating the work we share.

Our love of diversity, confidence in the role of empathy in business, and appreciation of fair exchanges govern our actions as individual contributors and as a company.

Ecologically sustainable

Life is what matters. We see working toward harmony with the lives and living systems around us as integral to our values and goals.



MINDSETS AND PRACTICES

It's also **no place** for hierarchies, fixed mindsets, or egos. And unfortunately, leaders and team members alike bring that baggage with us, unless we learn—and practice, practice, practice!—new ways of thinking and collaborating together.

Only this universal reskilling will help us set the table for innovative processes like Agile, Scrum, and design thinking. (See [Chapter 4](#) for ways to give everyone a seat—and a voice—in the design thinking process.)

“Strong leadership is essential to set the right tone, put policies and practices into place, and role model behaviors that build and maintain psychological safety.”



—**Dané Johnson**
Thrive by SweetRush
Culture Consultant

SET UP FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

We've all heard about the need to bring our whole selves to work. That doesn't mean showing off our bunny slippers, morning faces, and pre-caffeine crankiness; it means creating space for everyone to be a human being.

Not sure if your organization has that space? Ask an employee any employee how their day is going. If their response is anything like, “Fine, thanks,” that's a sure sign that it doesn't yet.

Employees guard their emotions when they don't feel safe.

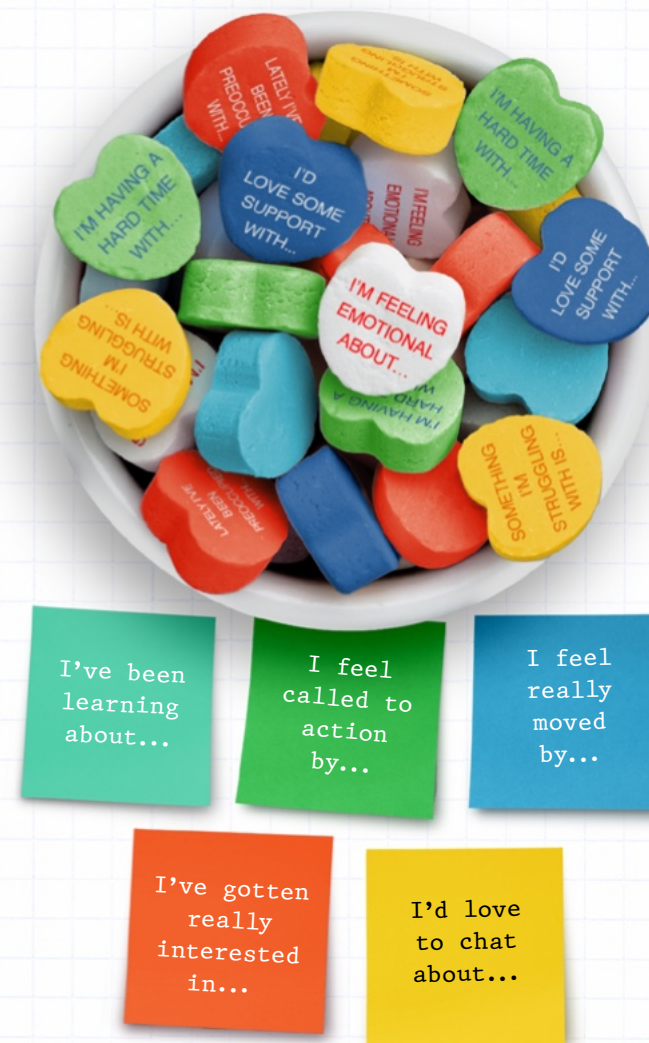
If your organization has a domination culture, they've learned that admitting to being lonely, sad, or scared is viewed as a weakness. Maybe they've learned that talking about their family commitments or hobbies is viewed as a lack of commitment to work. They expect to be punished, not supported.

That won't change overnight. But as a leader, we can create an environment that welcomes psychological openness and vulnerability. But we need to begin—even if it's an echo chamber for a while.

If that sounds scary, you're not wrong! Whether your organization is 10 people strong or 10,000, making yourself vulnerable in front of others can feel...well, vulnerable. But practicing openness doesn't mean getting into our childhood or our deep-seated issues (unless you really want to share!).

Many of us have gotten some practice being open with our teams and supervisors about our struggles through the pandemic. But **openness isn't just for crises—it needs to be part of our ongoing dialogue with each other.** It's also not reserved for negative feelings: being moved by a cause or discovering a new passion also makes us vulnerable.

Whether you're a leader or an individual contributor, try finishing one or two of the sentence starters below before your next meeting. A person who can say, “Team, I feel called to action on this cause,” or “I'd love to chat with you about this book,” is a person who draws others in and invites closeness.



Psychological openness and vulnerability are wonderful—and they're defining features of a life-centered organization. But keep in mind that different people will be comfortable with different degrees of sharing and openness.

Some people who are drawn to life-centered values are sharers; others will feel more private. For neurodiverse, introverted, and highly sensitive individuals, sharing intense emotions can be draining, and they may choose not to spend their energy doing so at work ([Elaine Aron](#), 2021).

But everyone benefits from the environment of psychological safety—even when our participation looks different. For example, a team member might send a supportive email rather than chime in during a meeting. They might prefer a thoughtful card from the team to an exuberant birthday serenade. (We'll delve into some communication practices that will help us understand how to engage every team member later in this chapter.)

Psychological safety means that each of us chooses the way we live the organizational values. We're accountable to one another but never pressured or put on the spot.

RADICAL CANDOR

When we introduced Radical Candor in [Chapter 1](#), we touched on how it makes tough conversations easier—and how it helped us through the dark days in 2008 and 2009. But it also helps us meet one another's needs every day.

By providing a common language, Radical Candor takes the guesswork out of giving and receiving feedback. And though we'd love to take credit for this method, we're heavily indebted to Kim Scott, author of [Radical Candor](#), and Sheila Heen, author of [Thanks for the Feedback](#). Here's how we've distilled their wisdom.

RADICAL CANDOR: A HOW-TO GUIDE

1. Determine the kind of feedback you need—or need to give.



APPRECIATION

To see, acknowledge, connect, motivate, or thank



COACHING

To expand knowledge, sharpen skills, and boost capability



EVALUATION

To rate or rank against a set of standards or expectations

2. Remember that all three kinds of feedback involve both:



PRAISE

What to do more of



CRITICISM

What to do less of or stop doing

3. Follow these steps:



ASK

What can I do differently to make it easier to work with me?



LISTEN

Don't interrupt!



REPEAT

I'm hearing you say X. Do I have that right?



CLARIFY

What do you mean when you say X?
Do you have an example you can share?



REWARD

Thank you so much for your (totally radical!) candor.
I'm going to look for opportunities to act on this feedback.



ACT

Incorporate the feedback into your practice—and ask for feedback on how it went.

RADICAL CANDOR: A HOW-TO GUIDE (cont.)

4. Deliver feedback.



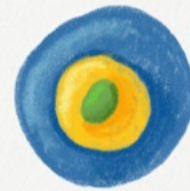
CARE

Establish right away that you care about the person and that your feedback comes from that care. Remember that the recipient may not be expecting to receive feedback—that's why we open with care.



SITUATION

Clearly and concisely describe the situation so that the recipient knows the context.



RESULT

Explain the consequences—good or bad—of the behavior in the situation.



BEHAVIOR

Give an example of the behavior you observed—this is what you want them to do differently, do more of, or stop doing.



REQUEST

Ask the person to commit to a concrete action.

Example:

Care: I can tell you really love that dog.

Situation: This is a very busy city,

Behavior: and if you don't train him to listen to you,

Result: he's going to run out into traffic and get hurt.

Request: Can you commit to taking him to training classes?

Radical Candor Mad Libs

Need to coach someone about these common topics? Start with these Mad Libs.

COMMUNICATION

Care: I know how invested you are in _____
PROJECT OR ROLE

Situation: We have _____,
CONSTRAINTS

Behavior: and when _____ doesn't hear
PERSON

from you about (your progress/ETA),

Result: we risk _____
CONSEQUENCE

Request: Can you commit to checking in with
_____ via _____ every
PERSON COMMUNICATION METHOD

_____?
TIME PERIOD

WORK QUALITY

Care: I know how hard you've been working to
develop _____
SKILL

Situation: I've noticed some _____
QUALITY ISSUE

Behavior: when you perform _____,
TASK OR RESPONSIBILITY

Result: which has caused us _____
CONSEQUENCE

Request: Next time, I'd like you to _____
ACTION

with _____ before _____
PERSON TIME PERIOD OR DEADLINE

to catch any _____ in advance.
QUALITY ISSUE

TEAM RELATIONSHIP

Care: I know how important it is to you to feel respected
by _____
TEAM MEMBER

Situation: I've observed _____
BEHAVIOR

Behavior: when you're _____,
GROUP SETTING OR ACTIVITY

Result: which has caused _____
CONSEQUENCE

Request: Going forward, I'd like you to express _____
FEELING OR NEED

by _____ing with _____ instead.
VERB PERSON

DEFY DOMINATION CULTURE

Once upon a time, during the dot-com bubble, leaders lured the best and brightest with ping-pong tables, chair massages, and a fridge full of snacks.

Sounds nice, right? Who would ever want to leave?

Even before the bubble burst, plenty of people did. What these leaders learned is that perks only work in the short term. They were exciting at first—and then people got used to them and stopped caring.

Carrots (perks) catch our eye initially, but they just don't keep us engaged over the long term. And neither does the stick. A culture of rewards and punishment adds up to a survivalist, Stage 1 dynamic with zero psychological safety.

This type of environment is what Gregg Kendrick, Director of Thrive by SweetRush, calls a **domination culture**: people compete to receive limited praise and escape blame and humiliation. That's exhausting! Eventually, they lose interest and check out.

What does engage employees over the long term is meaningful work that feeds a larger purpose—like that shared organizational mission we talked about in Chapter 1. And we can't leave it up to employees to connect the dots. Leaders and managers need to help employees understand how their role fits into your collective goal of doing good in the world.

Are your people trapped in a domination culture? These following practices will help you break them free.



“Leaders have a **multiplicative** effect
on culture.”



—Gregg Kendrick
Director of Thrive by SweetRush

BREAK FREE FROM REACTIVE MODE

First, a caveat: We can't avoid reactive moments. **We're human, after all!**

What we can do is catch ourselves at that flight-or-fight moment when we're ruled by the reactive parts of our brain: the brainstem and amygdala. When they're triggered, we're **really** convinced that we have to lash out. That makes sense in the wilderness, but it's not so great for a client call.

We need to summon our better self: our wise, compassionate, professional self who **definitely** doesn't swear or throw things. That person lives in our frontal cortex, which controls our ability to make good judgment, assess future risks, and behave appropriately. Unfortunately, our frontal cortex is **so** polite that it steps aside when we feel triggered.

How do we coax it out? These seven steps can help.

Free Your Frontal Cortex

in Seven Not-So-Easy Steps

1. Pause (and maybe mute yourself).
2. Take a couple of deep breaths.
3. Mentally reconnect to your intention, e.g., *"I wanted to share my idea."*
4. Remove any judgment or negative self-talk, e.g., *"Everyone's beating up on me,"* or *"It was a stupid idea anyway."*
5. Mentally name what happened as if you were a scientist observing the scene: *"I shared my idea, but it wasn't being valued at that moment."*
6. Name your somatic reaction aloud, e.g., *"Thinking about taking that risk makes my heart pound a little."*
7. Name the feeling behind it: *"I'm feeling scared because I really want this project to go well."* Make sure that your feeling statement isn't an accusation in disguise, e.g., *"I'm feeling disrespected by everyone,"* or *"I'm feeling that Bob isn't listening to me."*

It's hard to speak about a strong reaction without judgment and blame. Using **somatic language** helps us name our own reactivity without using threat- or fear-based language. **Rather than dehumanize others with aggression, we rehumanize by talking about the human feelings we're having in our human bodies.** And we're doing some of that already when we express "heartburn" over a timeline or "headaches" due to scheduling.

Finally, we need to name the underlying human need. Naming a feeling of fear, joy, excitement, or anxiety helps to reframe the conversation as a connection rather than an ego-driven, competitive exchange. **When we talk about the experience of feelings in our bodies, we become more human and set the table for Radical Candor.**

My chest feels tight when I hear you say that about our teammate. I'm feeling anxious because I care about both of you.

I laughed out loud at your story about your first job interview. I could totally relate!

I got the chills when you talked about how we bounced back from the recession. I feel really inspired by that!

I'm tearing up thinking about what you're going through. I want to take as much off your shoulders as I can.

My pulse was speeding up as I was sketching out some possible solutions. I'm really excited to share these ideas with you.

FREE OTHERS WITH EMPATHIC LISTENING

When someone else is blaming, shaming, or overlooking us, it's hard not to see them as an adversary. At the moment, our impulse is to distance ourselves—and maybe give them a taste of their own medicine.

That may feel like a power move in the moment, with our brainstem and amygdala egging us on. But the superpower here is **empathic listening**. **Empathic listening means hearing the human need beneath the unlovable language and it's nothing short of transformative.** An empathic listener can turn some of the worst conversations into moments of connection.

You'll need an active frontal cortex—and a keen ear to tune into what matters. Instead of getting triggered, allow yourself to wonder: What's beneath those words? What's happening with this person that makes them meet this moment in this way?

Reflect the concern and human need; approach with wonder.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"I wonder if you're upset because you're worried about the security of our network, and we might be vulnerable if we do that."

"That's a waste of my time."

"I wonder if you're overwhelmed by all of these new projects and concerned about them landing on your plate."

"I don't care."

"I wonder if you're frustrated because there have been so many client changes and you're feeling that your designs aren't appreciated."

"It's all (colleague or team)'s fault."

"I wonder if you're disappointed with the number of QA issues that came back to us, and you're worried about our team's reputation."

It can be hard to reach out to someone when they're not at their best. But, like any mindfulness practice, **empathic listening is most necessary in the moments when it's most difficult.** And in the most difficult moments lie the greatest opportunities to do good. A reactive person is a person in pain or fear, a person in need of care. Empathic listening can answer that need—even if they can't appreciate it at that moment.

MANAGING BETTER: VIRTUALLY

Trust is a key element in remote work, both among colleagues and between managers and their teams. A study by Heidi K. Gardner identified two essential types of trust for effective remote teamwork (cited in [Mortensen & Gardner, 2021](#)):

Interpersonal trust:

I believe that my teammates have good intentions and high integrity.

Competence trust:

I believe that my teammates will deliver high-quality work.

([Mortensen & Gardner, 2021](#))

Though trust is a two-way street, there are some mindsets and practices that set you up for remote teamwork success.

Assume Positive Intent

This mindset reminds us that we all mean well—even when emails go unanswered or IMs sound terse. **Rather than read in, believe that the person has a good reason for their actions (or inactions!).** Monosyllabic replies probably indicate that they're in a meeting, and radio silence that they're swamped. Or maybe they have some Stage 1 worries pressing on them, and they've just forgotten.

That's when we call up our frontal cortex—and reach out again. Gently follow up, ask for clarification, or let it go. Choosing not to sweat the small stuff is the ultimate way to demonstrate our confidence in our employees' good intentions. Sometimes an edgy tone is a product of the moment, and we can leave it there.

Offer Autonomy

Here's where we build on that foundation of positive intent. You've got the right people for the job—now let them figure out when and how to do it.

Autonomy is a huge part of a [Stage 3](#) life. **Trust employees to set their own schedule, deliver on projects, and manage client relationships—and you'll get better results.** And extending this trust to your people means that they'll reciprocate: you'll hear from them when there's an issue—and while there's still time to repair it.

Clear the Pebbles

Trusting our team frees us up to spend our energy more productively. One of the biggest values we can add is by removing external barriers to their work. Whether they need access rights, different tools, or a forum to share their work, we can use our influence to get them what they need.

“No matter what you hear, no matter what it sounds like on the surface, please always assume positive intent.”



—Linda Fleming
Chief Operations Officer

These don't need to be major, either—ask your people about the “tiny, incremental, irritating, and painful stuff at work that can wear [them] down” over the course of the day. Social psychologist Christina Maslach describes these as “pebbles” that gradually accumulate and contribute to burnout ([Harvard Business Review, 2019](#)).

Removing the pebbles (and boulders) that inhibit them helps our employees focus on their biggest value-add: practicing their craft.

Find the Root Cause

Fact: People generally want to do a good job.

Fact: They don't always succeed.

These two facts are not mutually exclusive—and they're not a cause to withdraw trust. **When an employee performs poorly, there's probably more to the story.** If they trust you not to penalize them for mistakes, they'll come to you first. For example, if an employee can admit to you that they were short with a client after an all-nighter with an ill parent, you can preempt that angry call and de-escalate the situation.

If an employee doesn't feel safe, they'll hide any missteps—and appear irresponsible. That's a vicious cycle: If you view them as irresponsible, you'll begin to treat them differently. In turn, they'll feel less safe and hide even more.

The bottom line: Assume that employees mean well even when they don't perform well. **Start the coaching conversation with "How are you?" and follow that up with "How are you really?"** Keep in mind that Stage 1 stress takes higher-order thinking off the table—and plan together accordingly. You'll avoid the need for after-the-fact damage control.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Like any relationship, organizational culture takes work. And the work begins long before performance reviews or even onboarding, the moment a candidate peers through our (virtual) window.

The Golden "No"

Great culture and remote work—and contract work, through our [Talent Solutions](#) service—help us attract the best candidates from around the world. But they also attract thousands of others, which means that we have far more applicants than open positions.

That's a great problem to have! It means that we're attracting a rich pool of talent and can make the best match for our own team—or a client's.

But it also puts us in the tough position of saying **"no"** more often than we say yes. In other words, it means that disappointment will be a part of most candidates' experience with SweetRush—and with our clients when we recruit on their behalf.

"When we represent a company looking for talent, we're going to hire someone but reject 1,000 to 5,000 others. One will be happy, but X thousand will be sad."

How we treat the people who didn't get the job is a critical issue in the equation."



—Arturo Schwartzberg
Cofounder and Chairman




Rejection stings. It hurts even more when we ghost a candidate after a great interview or never acknowledge their materials at all.

Mistreating candidates not only hurts their feelings, it undermines our mission to do good in the world. Candidates who feel burned are less likely to reapply in the future, recommend our organization to others, or do business with us. However, they're quite likely to share their experience via Glassdoor, other social media, or word of mouth.

A poor candidate experience also costs us money ([PR Weekly](#), 2020). Even industry leaders feel the pain: back in 2014, Virgin Media reported a loss of over 7,500 customers and \$6 million in revenue due to poor candidate experience ([HR Open Source](#), 2016).

Handling every application with care isn't just the right thing to do; it's the right way to do business.

Here's how to apply the Golden Rule when you're turning candidates away:

-  **Acknowledge applications immediately.** A one-line automated reply is enough to reassure them that their carefully written cover letter hasn't disappeared into the void.
-  **Keep them updated on every step of the process.** Doing so would make 81% of applicants happy—even when the news is bad ([PR Weekly](#), 2020).
-  **Follow up with a personal note to candidates you've interviewed but have decided not to pursue.** Whenever possible, try to provide a reason, e.g., "We loved your enthusiasm, but we've decided to go with a more experienced candidate," or "Your writing sample was strong, but we're looking for a less

academic tone.” If they follow you on social media, they’ll probably see whom you’ve chosen—don’t make them guess what the new hire has that they don’t.

Thank them for their time and interest. Without folks like them, we wouldn’t have such a great pool of talent to choose from. We owe our gratitude to each and every person who jumps in.

Invite every candidate to stay in touch—and re-apply for future openings. Today’s “almost” can become tomorrow’s top candidate—don’t burn that bridge!

Prompt, warm communication adds transparency and humanity to a process that too often feels opaque and intimidating. Our ability to apply the Golden Rule at these vulnerable moments speaks volumes about our character—and our culture.

Print More Golden Tickets

Let’s move to a happier topic: the invited guests. And because the recruiting process is so easy to get right when the news is good, we’re going to take a huge leap over it here. (We’ll return to it in [Chapter 3](#) through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion.)

Let’s assume that you’ve whittled your choice down to two strong contenders. Both seem perfect: they have the right skills, the right experience, the right attitude and, darn it, you like them. You’re just about ready to flip the coin when one candidate expresses a need for flexibility.

DEAL OR NO DEAL?

You’re hiring for a full-time, permanent, salaried role. Which of the following statements are dealbreakers?

- ☐ I can only work 25 hours per week.
- ☐ I can only work six months out of the year.
- ☐ I can work 40 hours over the course of the week, but I need a flexible schedule.
- ☐ I can only work 20 hours through September, but then I can jump up to full time.
- ☐ I need to take a leave of absence in three months.

Trick question, right? The role is full-time, permanent, and salaried, so any one of these statements could be a dealbreaker.

The Golden Ticket goes to the other candidate by default, right? Decision made.

Friends, the position may well be designated in “the system” as a year-round, 40-hour, immediate-start, salaried role. But one of two great candidates has just expressed that this work model won’t work for them. And they’ve been honest with you up front, which speaks volumes about their character.

Sure, we could deliver a Golden No. **But what if we thought differently about scheduling? What if we could get beyond the binary thinking of full versus part time?**

Offer Contract Work

Contract and project-based work is one way to break out of binary thinking and invite more professionals into our community of practice. These options help us meet the needs of professionals who have seasonal or sporadic availability while also filling critical positions on our clients' teams—and our own. If you've attracted a few great candidates who don't want to give up the freelance life, consider changing the role—not the candidates.

Removing these constraints not only helps you get the best talent pool; it opens opportunities for people who need flexibility due to caretaking, health, and family concerns.

And because the bulk—31.65 hours per week on average—of caretaking falls upon women, remote work also helps to keep women in the workplace ([National Partnership for Women & Families](#), 2021). Part of our responsibility as a life-centered organization is to remove barriers that prevent our workplaces from resembling the wider community. The five million female employees who dropped out of the workforce over the past year are a tremendous—and avoidable—loss ([Center for American Progress](#), 2021).

Destroy Binary Thinking

Throughout the pandemic, our major life stressors have been amplified: we've been packed tighter, stretched thinner, and held in a perpetual state of limbo. With the collective burnout we've experienced, our normal rules for vacation time, recovery time, onboarding time, and an eight-hour workday simply do not apply.

That's why we need to move beyond the rigid binaries of full vs. part time and all or nothing. Doing so helps us invite a more diverse group of candidates into our talent pool—and helps us say yes to more of them. That's a big business win, as we'll learn in [Chapter 3](#). And by providing more people with a means of earning money for practicing their craft—and developing it further—we do more good in the world.

“What if you allowed yourself to think differently? There are an infinite number of solutions when you get out of binary thinking.”



—Erin Krebs
Director of Client Solutions

PLAYING THE LONG GAME

One of our managers encountered all three of the following situations over the past year and a half.

How do you think she responded?

Situation 1: A full-time employee needs to reduce their hours to 30 hours per week to manage online schooling for their children.

Answer: “Okay! Thirty hours of you is better than 40 hours of someone else.” Note: This manager had a hunch that parents were more efficient at work because of their time-management skills—and research supports her ([Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#), 2014)!

Situation 2: A full-time employee needs to take a four-month maternity leave instead of the three you initially agreed upon.

Answer: “Okay! Let’s plan a handoff meeting for your projects.”

Situation 3: An applicant for a full-time role can only work 20 hours/week during the summer—but can commit to 30 hours per week in the fall.

Answer: “Okay! If you can be great for 20–30 hours, I’d be glad to have you on the team.”

How surprised were you by the manager's reactions to the situations on the previous page?

A traditional manager might have responded by pointing out the mismatch between the employee and the business need—and cutting ties. **But thinking outside the binary, as our manager did, allowed her to retain her employees over the long term.** Her team of highly skilled, senior-level knowledge workers is hard to replace—but she knows she can count on their loyalty and commitment.

“Yes, it's expensive.”

our manager admits.

“And finding and retaining someone else is more expensive.”

HOLDING ON TO THE GOLD: RETAINING YOUR PEOPLE

In Chapter 1, we talked about the cost of turnover: the glaring red \$630 billion that drains our collective budgets ([Work Institute](#), 2020). And those numbers are going to shift increasingly to that 50% of organizations whose CEOs don't see value in “the care and resilience of human workers” ([Accenture](#), 2020).

Keeping great people saves us money—and when we keep them happy, they're loyal to us. They stick with us, year after year, even as recruiters reach out and shiny new job postings pop up on their feeds. Veterans also help with internal marketing. Their tenure alone speaks volumes, and they're great

storytellers: about our successes, lessons learned, and evolution over time. (If they're anything like our 10-, 15-, and even 20-year veterans, their stories are pretty colorful!)

Veteran employees have what we call tribal knowledge or an understanding of your organization's shared purpose, mission, history, and way of working. It's a type of collective wisdom, and many veterans enjoy passing it down to new hires.

Here's how to keep that knowledge in-house.

Promote from Within

Want a litmus test for your organization's professional development? Count how many junior employees move into management.

Through a combination of stretch assignments and support, we can upskill today's individual contributors into tomorrow's strongest managers. They're quicker studies because they already have the tribal knowledge of their team's opportunities and lessons learned.

Linda Fleming, our COO, has observed that managers who have risen within our ranks are much more likely to be successful. That's due to empathy—and we don't just mean being nice! **It's because they know firsthand how to do the work and which pebbles (or boulders!) need to be cleared to do it efficiently and well.**

In fact, they're more likely to have highly productive teams, and their employees have higher morale ([Forbes](#), 2021). Promoting from within sends the powerful message that great work is seen and valued—itsself a great motivator.

“People who know how to do the doing know how to manage the doing.”



—Linda Fleming
Chief Operations Officer

Future-Prep Your People

Whether our employees are looking to move into management or deepen their practice, we have a responsibility to keep them skilled. Some leaders see the investment in learning as a liability: What if their newfound knowledge makes them more competitive, and they take it elsewhere?

We share the desire to hold on to good people, but keeping their skills in limbo won't help.

Employees who are current in their fields have the tools to do their jobs, perform better, and enjoy greater satisfaction. In fact, many view upskilling and reskilling opportunities as part of their benefits package.

Providing these opportunities is a key responsibility of the life-centered organization. Helping employees adapt to a constantly changing industry sustains our business and the larger ecosystem.

We also elevate the conversation in our industry—and ensure a better talent pool. When we all commit to maintaining our people in a highly effective state, we know that employees who join us bring the necessary competencies with them. This “passport” helps employees transition seamlessly between organizations.

No one likes to lose good employees. But we build loyalty and a much stronger talent market when we make upskilling and reskilling part of our practice.

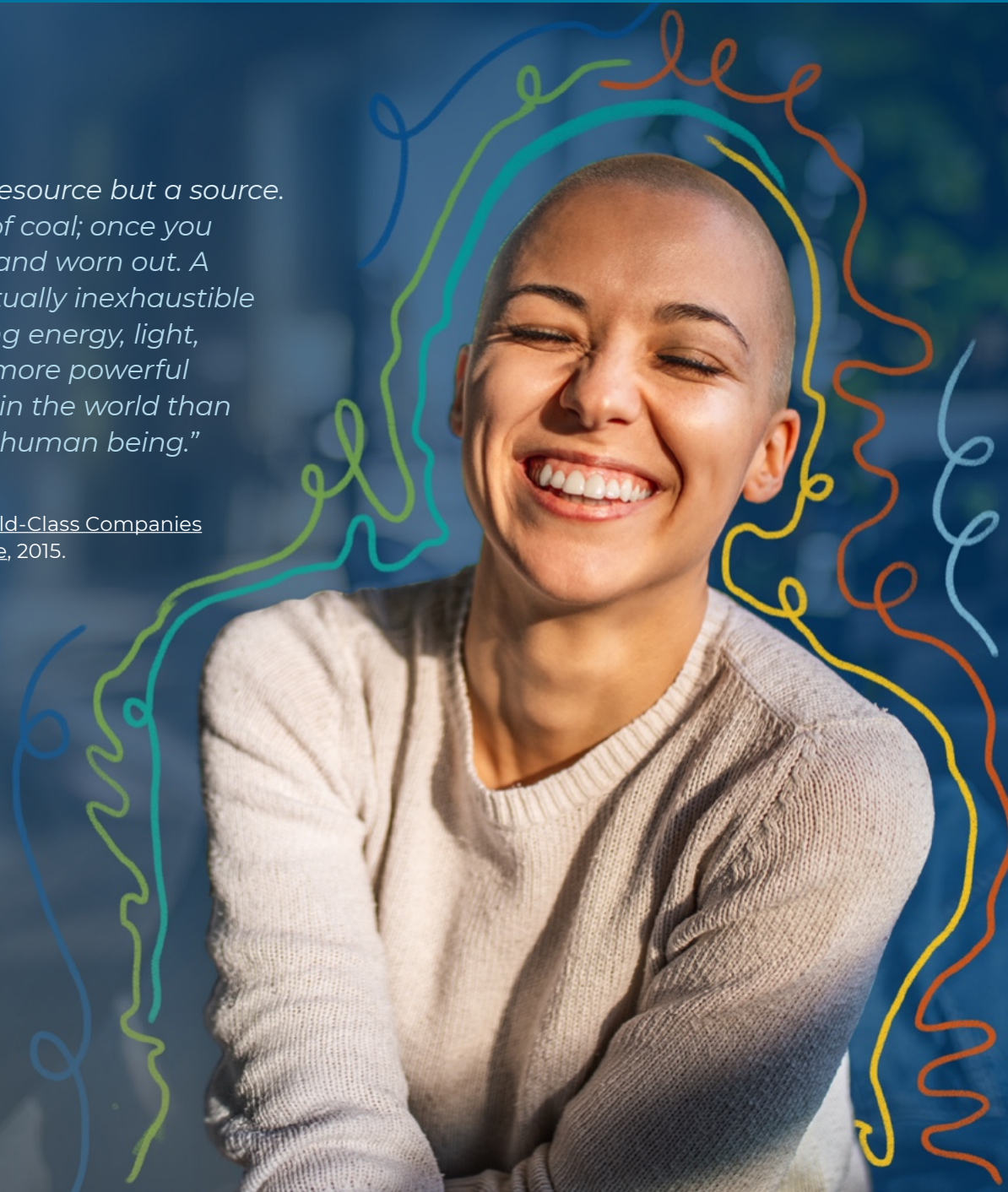
Reskilling > Redundancy

We’ve all laughed (or cried) at the memes of job postings demanding five years of experience in a brand-new programming language. But programming isn’t the only field that changes too quickly for university degrees or certificate programs to keep pace.

In the old days, obsolete employees were let go—and replaced. Leaders viewed workers as a fixed commodity rather than a renewable source. There are a lot of problems with that view, especially as the pace of change has multiplied.

“A human being is not a resource but a source. A resource is like a lump of coal; once you use it, it’s gone, depleted and worn out. A source is like the sun—virtually inexhaustible and continually generating energy, light, and warmth. There is no more powerful source of creative energy in the world than a turned-on, empowered human being.”

—Wolfe, Sheth, and Sisodia,
Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose, 2015.



The fact is, our ways of life and work are going to change so much, so rapidly that none of us have the skills yet. So much is in flux: from the ways we harness and consume energy to where and how we school our children. Rather than making our current employees obsolete, we need to support and reskill them so that they can create the technologies, processes, and services of the future.

Reskilling isn't just the right thing to do from a human perspective; it's also—you guessed it!—good for the business.

"The future state isn't even happening yet—there are no people who have these skills yet. We're all going to have to develop them."



—**Andrei Hedstrom**
Cofounder, President, and CEO

Consider this scenario: A global technology company initially planned to lay off thousands of employees over the course of several years. Due to automation, these employees' positions would be gradually phased out.

But the leadership team knew that an employee hired and trained was a valuable resource—and wanted to invest in their people. Instead of laying them off, they chose to reskill them in three key areas: empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking. Because these are foundational skills that can be applied to any new technology, system, and problem, the reskilling helped people to prepare for new roles at the company.

And by reskilling current employees instead of recruiting new ones, the organization saved a great deal of money. The cost of termination, replacement, vacancy, and the new hire's learning curve adds up to an average of \$15,000 and can run much higher for specialized and senior roles ([Work Institute, 2020](#)). With thousands of jobs at stake, that number is life-changing—for the technology company and the employees involved.

Now for the best part—the **human impact**. Keeping those employees prevented their families from falling into our spotty networks of unemployment and social services. It protected them from suffering food, housing, and transportation insecurity: the stuff of Stage 1. And by engaging these employees as partners and co-creators of the future state, the organization secured their long-term engagement and loyalty.

Not least of all, reskilling is the life-centered path. It benefits the industry—and not just by stemming the flood of applicants looking for work. Helping these employees achieve a highly effective state upgrades the larger conversation and the talent pool. (Remember that passport?)

The bottom line: No human is redundant, so long as they're willing to learn and grow.

"Organizations definitely have a responsibility to keep their employees skilled. It serves the organization, and it serves the human."



—**Dané Johnson**
Thrive by SweetRush
Culture Consultant

Be the Change

From school to work to the so-called social nets, we've been questioning the institutions and systems that haven't been working for us. We've had to scramble to find alternatives for everything from schooling to flour and, in the process, we've gotten pretty good at doing things ourselves.

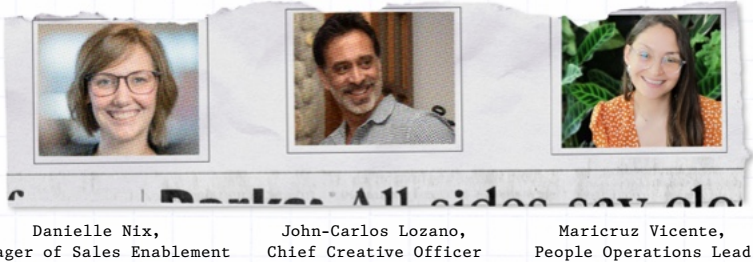
But our people also needed support. We already knew how to work remotely, but working from home while schooling our children—and sharing our Wi-Fi—was something new entirely. Many SweetRushians had to reduce their workloads and adjust their schedules, and our managers were playing the long game to keep their team members.

Maricruz Vicente, our People Operations Lead, and Erin Krebs, Director of Client Solutions, wanted to help parents. So they conducted a survey asking employees about the number of children in their families, their ages, and the impact that having them at home was having on their work, productivity and schedules.

And because 200-plus minds are better than two, they also asked for any solutions. Out of that survey, two ambitious initiatives were born: BeKind and the Kids' Program.



Brainchild of:



Danielle Nix, Manager of Sales Enablement John-Carlos Lozano, Chief Creative Officer Maricruz Vicente, People Operations Lead

Guiding question:

How might we leverage our in-house experts to connect around some of the activities we miss the most?

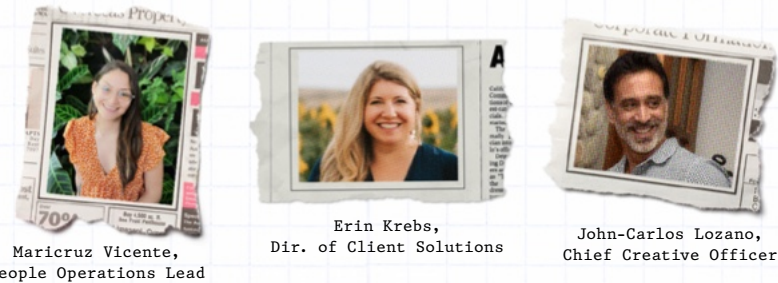
What it became:

Group meetings focused on fitness, yoga, meditation, life coaching, and crafting led by our in-house experts.

How it helped:

We got to connect safety and build community around some of our favorite relaxing activities.

Brainchild of:



Maricruz Vicente, People Operations Lead Erin Krebs, Dir. of Client Solutions John-Carlos Lozano, Chief Creative Officer

Started with:

A Hand-in-Hand Parenting 101 webinar and six-week parenting course

Guiding question:

What else might we do to help parents?

What it became:

A partnership with the education group Paru Paru Educational Center in Costa Rica to offer afternoon sessions in cooking, storytelling, biology, art, and pet care

How it helped:

Sessions kept children occupied and engaged while freeing up parents' time so they could focus on their work.

We talked in Chapter 1 about how businesses are in a unique position to drive social change. They're also great places to prototype and test solutions to family and community needs.

But the shiniest, most impressive solution will sit on the shelf if it doesn't fit people's actual needs. Timing is everything, too: for example, both of our programs are on summer hiatus now due to our families' travel plans, workloads, and other priorities.

*"If you're going to create
a program for people,
make sure it's a program
they'll value."*

*Don't be afraid to make changes, put it on
hold, reevaluate; our needs as people are
constantly changing."*



—Maricruz Vicente,
People Operations Lead

We've learned so much about how to structure and manage a grassroots program—and it's not so different from managing any other workplace program. And though a lunchtime skill share can survive without organizational funding or support, receptive leaders are a must for larger initiatives that require funding and time.

Got funds but no time to DIY a program? Help your people clear away cognitive noise and competing priorities with services that help with their errands or chores. Michigan First Credit Union ([Future Workplace](#), 2021) does just that with company-wide access to an on-call concierge service. With their dry cleaning and gift-buying covered, employees are free to focus on work.

Quests

Company culture starts at the top. If you're a leader, every one of your interactions, conversations, and decisions has an outsize impact on your organization's culture. (No pressure!) If you're currently driving an effective cultural transformation, many of the practices will be familiar to you.

Managers and individual contributors might wonder, *What if my C-suite isn't up for a cultural transformation?* Though we'd encourage you to use your position to advocate for culture change (and have some resources to help you make your case), we also recognize the paradox: culture comes from the top—except when it doesn't.

What can one person do? As we like to say, you can't boil an ocean. But you can be that single water molecule that gets the next one moving.

Here's how.

C-Suite

HR and Management

Individual Contributors

QUESTS >



**PERFORM
A NEEDS
ANALYSIS.**

Sit down with your team leads and identify what their employees need to work better. Ask individual contributors: What’s helping you work? What’s draining you? Remove anything that adds extraneous cognitive load or frustration. Work with managers to forecast future skills needed for each role and who has those skills now. Define a path forward for upskilling, reskilling, and knowledge transfer.

**USE TOOLS
AND SYSTEMS
THAT SUPPORT
FLEXIBLE WORK.**

If you advertise flexible work—but your time-reporting system can’t compute anything but the standard 40 hours, you’re sending your employees mixed messages. Research resourcing and reporting systems and tools that accept flexible time reporting without holding paychecks hostage.

Also ensure that your meeting and collaboration tools are compatible with your VPN, operating systems, and security. The processes, systems, and tools we use need to flex with—not against—us (Norman, 1993. Things That Make Us Smart).

**INCORPORATE
CAMERA
BREAKS.**

Zoom fatigue is real—and being on camera is a huge part of that. We’re not meant to make unrelieved eye contact with others (or ourselves!) for an hour or more at a time ([Stanford News](#), 2021). Save it for when it’s absolutely necessary, e.g., during first meetings and difficult or ambiguous conversations. If you have an established relationship with someone, consider leaving the camera off during routine check-ins. Doing so allows you both to do other things—like take a healthy nature break—while you talk.

**INITIATE
SKILLING
CONVERSATIONS
WITH TEAM
MANAGERS.**

Engage managers in ongoing discussions about the future of their teams and the skills their employees need to update or acquire. Create a plan to ensure that future industry needs can be covered by existing employees.

**SUPPORT
GRASSROOTS
INITIATIVES.**

Welcome employees at any level of the organization to share their needs with you. Engage them in conducting a deeper needs analysis and identifying existing resources to meet those needs. If the initiative falls within your mission, consider using it as a prototype for services you might offer outside your immediate organization.



QUESTS >

HR and Management

**GET BEYOND
BINARY
THINKING.**

Think in terms of how many full-time employees you need—and remember that a full-time employee does not necessarily equal one person. Break free of the 40-hour mandate and budget for resources at 20 to 30 hours per week.

**PLAY THE LONG
GAME.**

Life means that sometimes people need to pull back from work. When employees and candidates share their needs for flexibility, don't get caught up in short-term dollars-to-work hours calculations. Think in terms of long-term employee retention. Given the high cost of turnover, offering flexibility is the right solution for the business—and the human.

**TEAMSOURCE
YOUR
CHALLENGES.**

Have leaves and time off left you with a scheduling or workload issue? Let the people doing the work figure out the problem. Your role is to remove the barriers and challenge them to expand their thinking.

**PRACTICE
HUMANE
SCHEDULING.**

Discourage back-to-back 60-minute meetings. Consider using meeting settings that allow you to schedule 50-minute meetings—and stick to them! Doing so helps them meet the human need for a break without setting them up to be late.

**ENCOURAGE
TEAM MEMBERS
TO MEET 1:1.**

Create opportunities for employees to connect and get acquainted outside of team calls. Dané Johnson, Thrive by SweetRush Culture Consultant, suggests 30-minute “connect” calls with every team member using a prompt that has been preselected and vetted by your team. Preselecting a prompt helps to avoid team members not knowing what to talk about (and thus not actually connecting in a meaningful way!) and ensure that all team members are comfortable with the topic.

**INITIATE
SKILLING
CONVERSATIONS
WITH
EMPLOYEES.**

Engage all employees in ongoing discussions about the future of their roles and your industry—and the skills they'll need to update or acquire. Create a plan for upskilling and reskilling. Keep in mind that stretch assignments and shadowing are high-value, low-cost forms of skilling.

**HOST GROUP
GAMES AND
ACTIVITIES.**

Making friends at work is one of the most important factors in employee retention. Solution Architect Annie Hodson recommends creating opportunities to connect that resonate across different cultures, generations, and preferences. Playing games together gives people a chance to bond with teammates and initiate friendships. They don't have to be cheesy or complicated: our marketing team loves to meet virtually for a few rounds of Among Us! ([SHRM](#), 2014)

QUESTS >

Individual Contributors

DON'T TOLERATE A POOR CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE.

If you've been ghosted after an interview—or your application has never been acknowledged at all—bow out of the application process. An organization that treats applicants poorly is an organization that's not yet ready to do good in the world. If you feel comfortable sharing, politely share your reasons with the recruiter. Share your experience on Glassdoor so that other applicants know it's not them.

GATHER DATA AND RESEARCH.

When you see a problem with your company culture, don't immediately complain to your manager. [These resources](#) can help you show that life- and human-potential-centered organizations are successful. Gather additional opinions and approach your manager with a solution.

SHARE A SPECIAL INTEREST.

Love knitting, birding, or yodeling? Looking for a book group? Locate your fellow geeks on your internal discussion forum of choice and set up regular meetings to chat, practice, and exchange ideas. Once you assemble a critical mass, take turns planning meetings so that no one person is saddled with a second job. Finding a tribe helps you make friends you might never have met otherwise—and can be an endless source of rich conversation. (Author's note: I'm looking at you, SweetRush Writing and Editing Group!)

INITIATE CHANGE.

Want to make a change? Start a program? Think about where you have influence. That might be with your own manager—or with a champion elsewhere in the organization. Don't underestimate the power of being the change. For example, if you want your team to be more collaborative, find a teammate who feels the same. Meet for lunch, decide what that could look like, and model it for others. Processes that work have a way of going viral.


GROW.

Finding practices to increase your self-awareness and empathy will help you understand and collaborate with your colleagues. Learn about your personality and ask your colleagues to do the same. Share your results and discuss your strengths, preferred tasks, and modes of working. How can you support and learn from one another?

KEEP CURRENT.

Follow new developments in your industry. Free webinars and videos can be a great source of information about new software, technology, and practices. Read about the power skills that guarantee the relevance of human employees in an automated future. Engage your supervisor in ongoing discussions about the future of your role and industry—and the skills you'll need to update or acquire. Share what you've been doing to stay current, and mention any new skills or projects that interest you.

Read/Watch/Listen

 [Harvard Business Review: Let Your Top Performers Move Around the Company](#)


♦ [Harvard Business Review: Don't Force People to Come Back to the Office Full Time](#)

♦ ♦ [Harvard Business Review: 5 Myths About Flexible Work](#)

 [Harvard Business Review: It's Time to Free the Middle Manager](#)

♦ [Study: Parenthood and Productivity of Highly Skilled Labor](#)

♦ ♦ [Harvard Business Review: A Way Forward for Working Parents](#)

 [Harvard Business Review: The Best Leaders Aren't Afraid to Ask for Help](#)

♦ [Harvard Business Review: The Power of Hidden Teams](#)


♦ ♦ [Dear HBR: The Advice Show for Workplace Dilemmas](#)

 [A Virtual Team's Success Factors: The SweetRush Story](#)

♦ [eLearning Industry: Leading High-Performing Teams Webinar](#)

♦ ♦ [What Say the Experts: Running a Company Remotely](#)

 [The Stockdale Paradox](#)

 [Harvard Business Review: Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate](#)


♦ [Dropbox Blog: Amy Edmondson on the Power of Psychological Safety in Distributed Work](#)

♦ ♦ [The New York Times: What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](#)

DEEP DIVES

 [Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used](#)

♦ [Nonviolent Communication Resources](#)



Yes, you *can* transform your culture—and unlock your organization's full potential.

Close your eyes.

Think about your culture.

Describe it in three words.

How do those words make you feel?

Are your people thriving?

Is there an opportunity to level up?

Achieving employee engagement, morale,
and motivation is possible.

Let us help you make the cultural innovations
that will enhance the present moment and
lead you to a more prosperous future.



Evidence-Based Cultural Transformation



Facilitated with Authenticity and Heart

Learn more: [Thrive by SweetRush](#) | Get in touch: thrive@sweetrush.com

thrive
BY SWEETRUSH 

CHAPTER 3

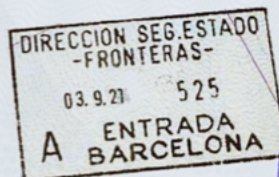
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging



Imagine you're on a trip to another country. After sleeping off the jet lag, what's the first thing you do? Some of us might head straight to the nearest landmark, while others might embark upon a challenging hike. Still others might choose a leisurely stroll around the neighborhood, exploring the local shops, cafes, or even the supermarket.

It's fascinating to observe what daily life looks like for people in that neighborhood, in that city and maybe even strike up a conversation with the locals. After all, connecting with others is one of the perks of travel!

24



25

Back home, though, something happens to that spirit of curiosity and discovery. We become guarded, even fearful, about the differences between ourselves and others in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities. The sharing of experiences and cultures that was so enjoyable on vacation turns fraught.

Granted, the stakes are lower on vacation. If we make a false assumption or don't know a term, we're presumed innocent. At home, we're expected to get it right every time.



We become so fearful of saying something wrong that, instead of engaging our curiosity, we pretend the differences between us and others don't exist.

After all, many of us have been taught that overlooking them is the polite thing to do.

The problem is that, the things we don't mention start to feel like taboos. And our friends and teammates who live life with different skin colors, bodies, abilities, genders, and relationships begin to feel that they'd better hide these fundamental parts of themselves.

When **any** of our people can't bring their full selves to work, we lose out on the benefits of a diverse organization: smarter teams who focus more on facts and innovation ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2016) and help us explore problems and our own products and services through multiple lenses.

When we get diversity and inclusion right, we enjoy an 11% boost in our financial performance ([McKinsey](#), 2020). Companies that don't suffer the cost of turnover, absenteeism, and lost productivity (See right).

Getting it right doesn't mean memorizing long lists of new vocabulary or making stilted conversation to avoid any possible offense. What it **does** entail is applying the practices and mindsets we discussed in Chapter 2 in the service of including and valuing all people. You'll know you're hitting the mark when your people are inspired to step up and initiate their own grassroots projects.

We can't tell you how to reach the summit of DEIB enlightenment—because the landscape is continually shifting and evolving. But we can share some of the practices that have helped us over the course of our climb.

GETTING DEIB RIGHT: WHAT IT'S WORTH

THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Percentage of U.S. workers who report unfair treatment due to:



14%

Their race or ethnicity



34%

A visible or invisible disability



36%

Identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ)



42%

Identifying as female

Sources:

- Absenteeism, Productivity Loss, and Turnover: The Cost of Racial Injustice, The Society for Human Resource Management ([SHRM](#), 2020)
- Disabilities and Inclusion: Key Findings ([Coqual](#), 2020)
- As Economy Improves, Ageism Continues to Hold Older Workers Back ([AARP](#), 2021)

THE COSTS

Race and ethnicity

The cost of absenteeism to U.S. businesses due to unfair treatment based on race or ethnicity in the past year

\$54.1 billion

Cost of productivity loss to U.S. businesses due to unfair treatment based on race or ethnicity in the past year

\$58.7 billion

Cost of turnover to U.S. businesses due to unfair treatment based on race or ethnicity in the last five years

\$171.9 billion

Ageism

Cost of discrimination against U.S. workers over 50 across all industries (in 2018)

\$850 billion

Number of U.S. employees who leave their jobs due to discrimination

2 million

Turnover cost

\$64 billion

- Age Discrimination Costs U.S. Economy \$850 Billion a Year, AARP Report Finds ([AARP](#), 2020)
- The State of the LGBTQ Community ([Center for American Progress](#), 2020)
- Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Held Steady in 2020 ([Pew Research Center](#), 2021)
- The Costly Business of Discrimination ([Center for American Progress](#), 2012)

Mindsets and Practices

Too often, leaders don't raise issues of diversity and difference because we fear the fallout: heated discussions, hurt feelings, and HR nightmares. We don't like to see people argue—much less start the argument ourselves.

Certainly, issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) have been heavily politicized and can feel very fraught. But DEIB involves something far more primary than the bumper stickers on our cars or the boxes on our ballots. It goes back to the smallest unit of culture: the individual.

When we don't feel safe because of our skin color, gender, relationships, or what our bodies look like or can do, we feel that as an existential threat. Being intimidated, mocked, excluded, belittled, or humiliated activates our Stage 1 survival brain—and switches off our frontal cortex.

That means we lose the ability to participate in higher-order functions like problem-solving and ideating. We can't trust our teammates or our supervisor to help support us and, because we never know when a threat will strike, we're on perpetual tenterhooks.

Small wonder that these experiences make us more likely to be #opentowork somewhere else. Life at Stage 1 is exhausting and demeaning—even more so when you're put there because of who you are.

Whoever has your vote, and whatever your beliefs, we hope you agree that there's no place for a Stage 1 experience in a life-centered organization. To be at our best, we need everyone with us.



INCLUSION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

We've said it before:

**We're all responsible for what happens
in the space we share.**

**And like so many other mindfulness practices,
getting inclusion right starts
within ourselves.**

Break Free from Reactive Mode

Humans are wired to make judgments. Once upon a time, snap decisions about whether a stranger was friend or foe, or a berry was nutritious or noxious, saved our lives. Our ancestors weighed the risks against their prior knowledge and experience: *Does this person (or berry) look safe? Has someone or something similar ever harmed anyone?*

They did pretty well, given the fact that we're here today! Even now, our nervous systems are still practically identical to theirs. And though those snap decisions serve us at a busy intersection, they're far less useful in the remote workplace.

Unfortunately, there's no off switch for our judgmental side. That means we might find ourselves reacting to someone. Whether they remind us of a grade-school bully, a workplace frenemy, or just give us a bad vibe, all we know is that **we just don't like that person**.

First impressions are powerful—and incredibly quick. It takes our brains all of 1/10 of a second to size someone up ([Psychological Science](#), 2006). And it's unconscious: by the time we've made up our minds about that person's likeability (or lack thereof), it feels like a fact.

When we like someone, we might feel as though we've known them for ages. When we don't, it can feel as though our very cells are rejecting them.

Of course, not all reactions are quite so dramatic! We might just find someone irritating, or egocentric, or domineering, or "one of **those** people"—whatever that means to us. Naturally, we're polite enough not to say so.

Not in words, at least. But our feeling of resistance makes us avoid the person. It makes us talk around them to teammates we do like. It makes us reach out with assignments and opportunities to anyone but them. And when we are forced to work together, our discomfort shows up as anything from curtness to outright confrontation.

We can't change our gut feelings. But what we can do is recognize them for what they are: feelings. They're important, and they deserve our attention, but they are not facts.

It's worth remembering that discomfort tends to happen when we don't think we have much in common with someone ([Psychology Today](#), 2018). We like those who are like us—and the less we know ([Montoya et al](#), 2008) about them, the more we rely on visible things we have in common.

That's a problem for inclusion, and it's one we **all** need to work past.

That means breaking free of [reactive mode](#). No, that's not a reprint from Chapter 2! We need to catch ourselves right after that split-second impression—in the moment of irritation,

discomfort, distrust, or avoidance. And then we need to get curious about the feeling.

Get Curious

When we feel trapped in that moment, we need to find something to wonder about—even if it's *I wonder why I don't trust this person*, or *I'm curious about why this person gets on my nerves*.

Getting curious gives us a project: finding out the truth. The only way to complete our mission is to approach the person and interact with them.

As we do so, we're likely to discover that our first impression was wrong—or at least oversimplified. Intellectually, we know that it's impossible to understand someone else's motivations, needs, feelings, or competence at a glance. Allowing ourselves to be surprised by others diminishes the power our snap judgments hold over us—and it's often pleasant!

Assume Positive Intent

Here's another [Chapter 2](#) throwback: **as we engage others, we need to assume the best.** We need to trust that whatever makes the person tick, their modes of interaction are not about us, directed at us, or used with malicious intent.

When we tell ourselves, *This person was rude to me*, or *This person has no respect for the team*, it becomes a fact in our minds. We start to feel sure that we're right, and we start to talk and work around the person we're so sure about.

As Linda, our COO, reminds us, we need to trust that everyone is doing their best. We don't know what Stage 1 worries the person has or what else is competing for their attention. (**Author's note:** As I used to tell my students, "You never know what's going on inside—or at home.") In fact, if you knew what they were going through, you might be impressed by how well they're managing.

Don't Compete

We humans are competitive animals. We learn our place in the pecking order by comparing ourselves to one another. That's not all bad: friendly competition can spur us to improve our skills and perform better.

Sometimes, when we hear stories about others suffering exclusion and discrimination, we compare them to our own. That's natural, too—we're wired for empathy, and we understand others through our own experiences.

But harm creeps in when we use our own experiences as a reason to minimize those of others. We might say to ourselves, *So what? I was bullied/harassed/excluded/discriminated against, and I've gotten over it, or That's nothing! I've had it so much worse.*

Many of us have had more than our share of struggles. Fate can be cruel. **Humans** can be cruel. (That's exactly why life-centered organizations are so vital and necessary.) But **another person's experience doesn't negate our own—or vice versa.**

Someone else having a hard time doesn't mean that we haven't. Someone raising their voice to advocate for fairness, kindness, or equality today doesn't detract from what we've been through.

Rather than diminishing each other's experiences, let's commit to approaching them as opportunities to connect. Let's think back to the times we've felt rejected for our personal qualities and use those experiences to form empathy.

Let's replace *I've had it worse* with *I've been there, and I feel for you* and *That's nothing* with *That's nothing anyone should ever go through*. Poor treatment is not a rite of passage or part of dues-paying.

Lean into Discomfort

It's important to notice when—and about what—we start feeling sensitive. Like all creatures, humans are motivated to avoid situations we find upsetting, perplexing, or painful. That's why we put off doing our taxes and avoid people who make us uncomfortable.

The culture of positivity—within both the United States and SweetRush—has many benefits. But as Barbara Ehrenreich observes in [Bright-Sided](#) (2010), it also encourages us to take a pass on things that bring us down. From social media to bumper stickers, we're bombarded with advice telling us: *Stay positive! Cut out negative people! Quit reading the news—it's all bad! If it's not fun, don't do it!*

There are times to follow that advice. But if we followed it all the time, it would lead us to throw out a lot of good with the bad.

It would limit our ability to give and receive support in moments of grief and struggle. It would limit our ability to get constructive feedback from our friends and colleagues. It would limit our knowledge of the world around us—and meaningful causes we might join. It would also severely limit our growth: after all, the desire for change arises from discomfort or dissatisfaction with the way things are.

That's why we're going to encourage you to bite on that sore tooth and engage the people you find challenging. We are not suggesting that you tolerate verbal abuse or mistreatment—no one should! **What we are suggesting is that you approach the people you find challenging not as negative or toxic, but as teachers.**

If your team is as diverse as it should be, you probably know plenty of people with different viewpoints and life experiences. Their different lenses help you innovate and solve problems more creatively and effectively—for that organizational value-add of 11% (McKinsey, 2020).

That sounds great—on paper. But getting things done can feel less comfortable with a diverse team, especially when we're accustomed to groupthink. As Rock, Grant, and Grey put it: "Homogenous teams feel easier, but easier is bad for performance" (Harvard Business Review, 2016). We need our team's different lenses to improve our products and services, and we're going to have to engage in some healthy debate and testing before we get there.

We may feel that the polite thing to do is "gloss over [our team members'] differences in the interest of group harmony" (Harvard Business Review, 2016). And we may be too quick to cosign ideas just to maintain a positive vibe. After all, we've been taught that dissenting and pointing out differences is rude.

But taking the easy way out negates the value of a diverse team—and derails our ability to practice Radical Candor (Scott, 2017). When we're not able to challenge each other directly and respectfully, we fall into either Ruinous Empathy or Manipulative Insincerity, depending on how much we care.

RADICAL CANDOR MATRIX: FINDING THE SWEET SPOT



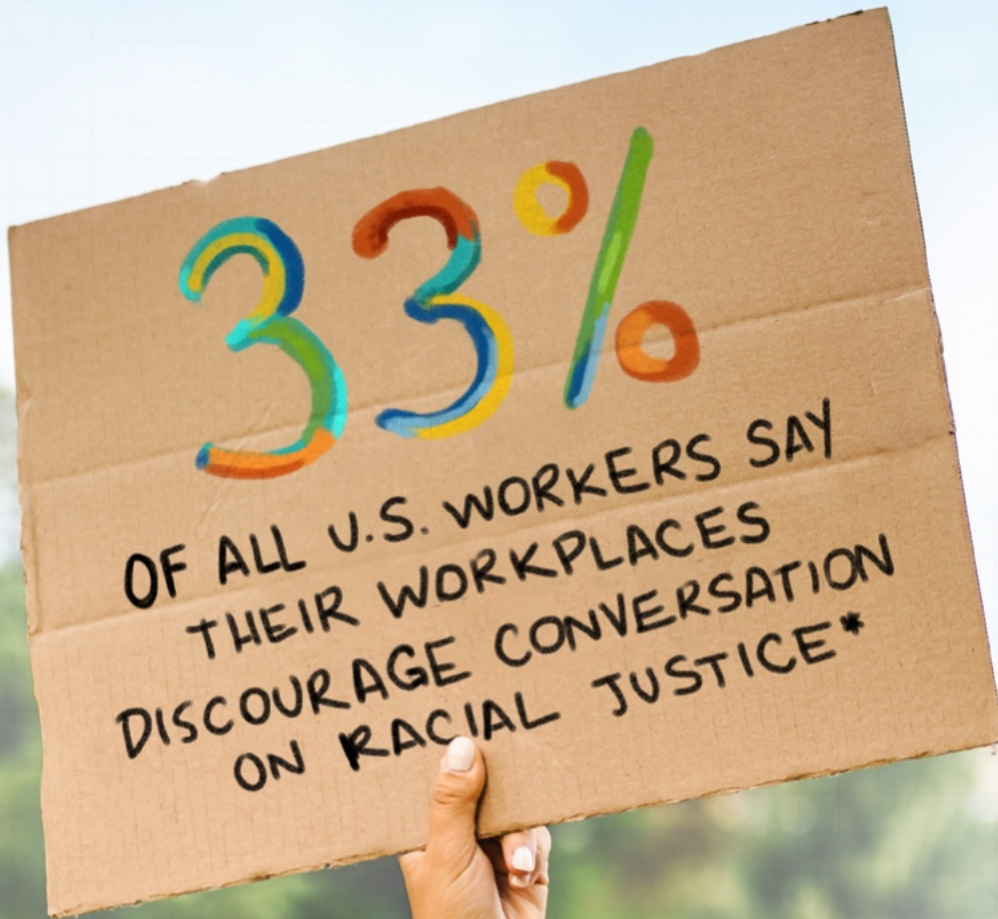
Source: [Radical Candor](#): Kim Scott, 2017

One way to work through the discomfort—rather than ask each team member to speak for their respective group identity (see next page)—is to assign everyone a distinct role on each project.

Rock, Grant, and Grey cite an example in which team members were assigned the roles of Artistic, Event, and Finance Manager on a project. They found that "these teams came up with better ideas than homogeneous teams—but only if they'd been explicitly told to try to take the perspectives of their teammates.

They had to face up to their differences in order to benefit from them" (Harvard Business Review, 2016).

We need to cultivate our own resilience so that we learn to view intellectual debate and challenge as a growth experience—rather than a personal attack. Managers play an important role in modeling respectful discussion and dissent. (See "[Managing for DEIB](#).")



Approach Everyone as an Individual

As we get curious about our fellow humans, it's natural to have a lot of questions. We might wonder what it's like to live life in a different body, skin, or relationship. And as we wonder, we might want to ask questions of the person who's sparked our curiosity.

But we need to be cautious of expecting others to educate us about their bodies, culture, religion, skin color, gender, and so on. It's exhausting for someone to continually explain their state of being. Being expected to help others understand parts of our identity and feel comfortable around us is a form of **emotional labor**, or "the unpaid, often unnoticed labor that goes into keeping those around you comfortable and happy" (Hartley, 2018). It's not fair to ask our teammates to take on that work in addition to their full-time jobs.

Getting comfortable with others' differences is our own responsibility, and our curiosity needs to take us on an independent search for knowledge. We have access to a plethora of information online, at our libraries and through local community centers. The exception: when someone offers to share information or discuss more about their differences, it's fine to take them up on their offer!

Once we have learned more about someone's area of difference, we'll likely feel enlightened and excited to share our knowledge. But we need to be cautious of getting **too** confident. When we position ourselves as experts on people belonging to X group or assume that everyone in the group has uniform opinions and concerns, we veer into overconfidence.

We apply our learning best when we use it as a source of further curiosity—and when we keep in mind that **even the most comprehensive book, documentary, or lecture barely scratches the surface of the lived experience.**

*(SHRM, 2021)

MANAGING A DIVERSE TEAM

We're all responsible for what happens in the space we share—and that goes double for managers. Our employees look to us to model team inclusion and guide them through the inevitable moments of discomfort and dissent.

We promise: Mistakes will be made by all—and it will be okay. Here's how to build resilience and recovery into your practice.

*"It's a dance. Watch your partner
and advance in a way that lets you
follow each other."*

*That's what managing any person is about,
especially when the person is not the same as you."*



—Clare Dygert
Director of Learning Experience Design

MANAGING FOR DEIB

Lead with a Service Mindset

Find out early on how everyone on your team prefers to communicate—and then honor it. Introverted and neurodivergent team members can be uncomfortable with face-to-face, camera-on conversations—and their discomfort may cause you to experience them as reticent or evasive.

Early in her career, one of our employees managed a team that included a neurodivergent employee. She noticed that he backed away and became uncomfortable during face-to-face conversations. Something about them was clearly activating his [Stage 1](#) fear brain—and she wanted him to feel safe.

Shortly afterward, she learned that this employee was the moderator of an online gaming forum. Within the forum, he was engaged and chatty: helping members, joking with them, and seeding discussions. Free from the Stage 1 stress of the office, his creativity, collaborative spirit, and sense of humor could shine.

Our manager took the cue. When she needed to share feedback, assign new projects, or ask questions, she texted the employee. He responded—in every sense of the word—and proved himself a high-performing, loyal member of the team.

Rather than impose her own preferences upon her employee, our manager looked for ways to help him make his best contribution to the team. **Learning how employees want to relate, communicate, and work and honoring their preferences is part of leading with a service mindset.**

Stop the Steamroll

Making space for everyone to share is another part of leading with a service mindset. That won't look the same for everyone, and it won't always happen synchronously—but it's very much worth doing!

Let's start by envisioning those one or two team members who love speaking up in team meetings. They fill the awkward silences and have all the ideas. They're like peregrine falcons, flying above the flock.

Peregrine falcons are great. But if they're the only ones you hear from, you'll only get the peregrine falcon perspective.

Now let's envision the rest of your team. Some may not say much even when you call on them. Some get self-conscious and lose their train of thought. Some need double or triple the time to brainstorm ideas. And many of them are likely to go along with a peregrine falcon's idea just to get the meeting over with.

All of your people have ideas—we promise. Some simply need more time to think or a different way to share. That may be because their brains or bodies work differently, or because of their personalities.

Their sharing style may even change depending on the context. In an all-hands meeting, your peregrine falcons might turn into slower or more cautious species of the [collaboration ecosystem](#)—like cheetahs, sloths, and seahorses. And some of your sloths may speed up for a topic they're passionate about.

People are complicated. But hosting a conversation everyone can participate in doesn't have to be.

See the chart on the next page for a few suggestions.

“Whatever your role,
if you're seeing groupthink
how might you intervene, redirect, and
ask specifically for ideas from a person
who hasn't been heard?”



—Carolyn Barley
Manager of Instructional Design,
Society for Human Resource Management

BUILD A COLLABORATION ECOSYSTEM THAT HELPS THE WHOLE TEAM THRIVE

Some adaptations to try:

Give quieter team members a heads-up about the meeting topic in advance. Ask them to research information or brainstorm ideas—and be ready to share.

Benefits:

- ✎ Offers a structured way to contribute and be heard
- ◆ Respects thinkers who work more slowly and the differently abled
- ◆◆ Offers less-heard team members the opportunity to be experts

Assign all team members a specific role, e.g., devil's advocate, marketing director, accountant, and so on.

Benefits:

- ✎ Offers a structured way to contribute and be heard
- ◆ Provides an area of focus for each team member
- ◆◆ Builds dissent into the brainstorming process

Model “push forward, pull back.” Ask everyone who usually loves to jump into the conversation to pull back and allow others to share. Then ask everyone who doesn't usually jump in to try to do so at least once.

Benefits:

- ✎ Elicits self-awareness from each team member
- ◆ Allows thinkers who work more slowly to choose when to share
- ◆◆ Models curiosity and interest in all team members' opinions

Follow up with the team after each meeting—and invite them to send you any ideas and feedback that may come to them after the meeting. Whenever possible, respond to team members and ask them to share their idea with the group at the next meeting and/or reference the person's idea yourself, giving them credit (of course!).

Benefits:

- ✎ Allows thinkers who work more slowly to choose when to share
- ◆ Models curiosity and interest in all team members' opinions
- ◆◆ Offers less-heard team members the opportunity to be experts

Model Resilience

Nobody likes to plan for the worst. But when we have a team of individuals with different perspectives and life experiences, dissent—even occasional conflict—is inevitable.

That doesn't mean that we devolve into shouting matches or sulking. It does mean that we use conflict as an opportunity to learn about one another and how to work better together. It may mean that someone's presented a perspective we've never considered before. It may be new only to us, or it may be new to the world—after all, we're creating the future state together.

Even the most perfectly empathetic manager or team member won't get everything right on the first try. The first try is the key phrase here: we've got to try again, even after we mess up or hurt someone's feelings. In fact, trying again immediately is the best way to recover.

"If you never make a mistake, you're probably not taking any risks or learning anything new."



—**Heidi Green**
Lead Instructional Designer

MODELING RESILIENCE: OOPS AND OUCH

Setting: **Team meeting**

Teammate 1:

...and that's what I think will make our product more marketable to X community.

Teammate 2: Ouch.

All: 😐 (Pause)

Teammate 2:

That's actually a stereotype about X people, and it's hurtful because (reason).

Teammate 1: Oops,

I apologize. I didn't know that, but I see what you're saying. Thank you for telling me.

Manager: Thank you for sharing that, Teammate 2.

(Optional: Let's make a point of learning more about that.)

No one can be an expert on every ethnic, cultural, or gender identity on the planet—nor about every possible way of being in one's brain and body. We will make mistakes, no matter how curious we are and how much we care. And when those mistakes happen, we can't write each other off forever.

That's the non-resilient approach. And it's not a life-centered approach.

The life-centered approach is to hold one another accountable for learning to do better. We do that by speaking up when someone's words or actions hurt our feelings and briefly sharing why.

That's the resilient approach. It means that we're able to understand that the person who has hurt us is also a person who cares for us and means well. It's the mindset we're (usually!) able to apply when we're upset with our loved ones: we can dislike the words or actions while keeping sight of our love for the person.

Two tiny words can help you maintain that mindset: ouch and oops. They're part of a larger technique called Communication Recovery—a resilience-based technique that helps us "rebuild trust and rapport and move forward" ([The Ouch! Files](#), 2014). Here's how that might look in action.

You might have noticed the pause in the middle. That's critical—and it's where we come in as leaders. **We need to stop the conversation and let the person who's been hurt have the floor.**

After the teammates address each other, we step in as leaders to thank the person who shared the ouch—and, if it feels appropriate, encourage everyone present to learn more about that topic.

Source: [The Ouch! Files](#), 2014



Speaking things aloud removes the taboos around hurt feelings and messing up. Rather than feeling insulted and suffering in silence, Teammate 2 secures a genuine apology from Teammate 1. **And rather than making Teammate 1's mistake a source of shame and secrecy, we model how the entire team can learn from it without dwelling on it.**

As managers, we model responsibility to one another and responsibility for moving on. Handling hurt feelings this way requires a leap of faith from everyone. And when our people are able to make it, it's a sign of resilience and mutual trust.

Hold Space for the Hard Stuff

We're not talking about top-shelf whiskey (sorry!). When challenging issues come up outside of work in a nation, region, or the entire world, the anxiety they provoke follows us to work.

Acknowledging these issues is part of fostering an environment of psychological safety. And while we don't need to delve deeply into the issue in every 1:1 or team meeting, **it's important to acknowledge when we're having a collective moment.** This is a great place to share your own feelings of fear or hope—and invite your team to do the same.

When tensions rise or tempers flare around an issue, that's a sign that it's time to explore it more deeply. (Remember: What isn't talked about becomes a taboo and a source of hard feelings.) To do that well, you might need to engage an educator who can provide some background—and engage your team in a productive, challenging conversation. If that expertise doesn't lie within your organization, look externally.

When we wanted to learn more about the history of Juneteenth and how we might advocate together for people of color, we invited an expert to level-set and spark our imaginations. In June 2021, Certified Diversity and Inclusion Master Trainer, Facilitator, and Consultant [Alicia Newton](#) engaged our entire



team in a discussion of the history of Juneteenth. Together, we considered why this holiday isn't as well known as our other Independence Day and, in small groups, we traded ideas about ways each of us could become advocates for inclusion.

We found once again that our opinions differ. Our experiences also differ. Sometimes, we might feel hurt because someone's experience doesn't yet acknowledge our own. But that won't stop us from holding challenging discussions about how to do better together.

Part of being a life-centered organization means sitting with one another through the challenges—just as we do through consensus and celebration ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2021). By dealing with the tough stuff together, in one virtual “room,” we practice courage and (radical) candor.



RECRUITING A DIVERSE TEAM

As the biggest drivers of social change, organizations have a significant responsibility to employ a workforce that reflects the larger community. We'll say it again: Remote work has been a lifeline for us in our journey toward inclusion.

It's freed us from the constraints of a single geographic area and given us teammates who span 12 countries and every time zone. It's helped us hire extremely talented people whose bodies and brains aren't well served by a traditional office. And it's helped us broaden the definition of that elusive quality we call SweetRush. (Yes, we use it as an adjective!)



According to Ann Cathers, SweetRush Talent Solutions Consultant, the common denominators in the candidates she connects with is that they're all:

"caring people who are super-intelligent, have strong communication skills, want to give back, and want to work for an organization that has ethics and a heart."

"The secret to an inclusive company is in being united—but not uniform."



—Rodrigo Salazar-Kawer
Director of Talent Solutions

Hiring for Culture: Fit or Add?

There's no doubt about it: We have a type.

Our culture is so clearly defined that it's pretty easy to identify people who are a great fit. That's part of why we hire so many referrals from our own people. After all, no one knows the "vibe" like someone who lives it every day.

A vibe rooted in caring, intelligence, and communication isn't a bad thing, but we started to get curious. Might looking for that vibe be a form of bias? Might we be missing out on people who were a good fit but had a different vibe? Might our culture grow even richer if we looked for the [culture adds](#) instead?

Here's what we learned: If we're hiring too many people with similar personalities, we risk developing groupthink. That means we're constraining our ability to produce solutions that work for our diverse roster of clients ([SHRM](#), 2018) and missing out on people with different kinds of minds. They've got lots to offer, but they might communicate and socialize in ways that are new to us.

We also want to be mindful of candidates whose current workplaces aren't providing the abundance necessary for them to work at a [Stage 3](#). These folks might not have the mental or emotional bandwidth to show off their vibe just yet. That can be the case when someone's in the process of voting with their feet—and looking to join a life-centered organization.

We believe that those who shine differently deserve their chance to shine. So we looked at ways we could [invite their light](#).

"I assume that everyone can be Sweet Rushy—the only reason they're not is because they're in a situation that is completely crushing them."



—Clare Dygert
Director of Learning Experience Design

Remove the Noise

We want people who think differently: They tend to see problems differently and challenge the team to think of new solutions. But too often, neurodiverse candidates slip through the cracks. The traditional interview process focuses heavily on interpersonal exchange, a process neurodiverse folks navigate differently ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2017). Candidates who perform well in interviews tend to have more in common with the interviewer, further entrenching the cultural fit.

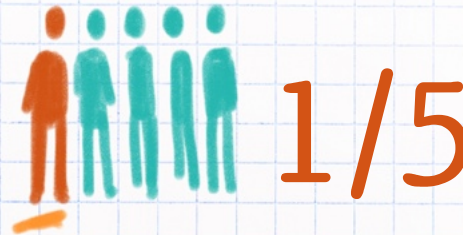
To get to the culture add, we need to consider other ways to assess the many skills that neurodiverse candidates bring to the table. **Though a round of interviews may be a great test of the skills needed in a sales or account management role, it's far less predictive of technical, problem-solving, research, and reasoning skills.**

That's why it's important to identify the essential skills for the role up front. What will the candidate actually need to do well to succeed, and what are extras? Once we've established those essential skills, we need to find a valid way to assess them—and remove the "noise." For some roles, an extended interview will be the noise.

One of the best ways to eliminate noise is to give candidates an authentic task to complete. Specialisterne, a staffing company focused on matching highly qualified neurodiverse talent with organizations, creates "hangouts" where candidates solve problems and build solutions in a group setting and individually. This setting helped candidates showcase their technical skills and focus; many also communicated openly and clearly within their groups ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2017). A traditional interview would almost certainly miss these skills.

Eliminating noise also helps us connect with candidates who have different cognitive processing speeds and physical abilities. We need to make sure our application and interview processes don't create obstacles for folks who use adaptive technologies or need more time to put their thoughts into words.

Just as we wouldn't screen out a great manager who couldn't juggle, we shouldn't screen out a great software engineer or instructional designer who doesn't communicate or present themselves exactly as we do. **Helping more candidates to shine is the life-centered choice—and one that creates abundance for the billions of people who identify as neurodiverse or differently abled.**



of our global population identifies as
differently abled
(WorldBank, 2021)



1/8
of our global population
identifies as
neurodiverse
(WorkDesign Magazine, 2019)



Reinvest Your Profits in People

When we were a tiny organization, getting people with extensive education and experience was a matter of survival. At that time, we hired instructional designers with advanced degrees and an average of 10 years' experience. Our world was tiny, so every employee had to contain multitudes!

Now that we're more established, we have the resources to open our world to developing professionals. Whenever we can, we try to invest our profits in people, especially those who might need an introduction to our organization and industry—and the abundance it offers.

Doing so helps us open our doors to a more diverse group of candidates and ensure a succession plan. It also helps our seasoned folks do what they love best: share their passion and practice with others. (See [“A Tale of Three Grassroots Initiatives: The Instructional Design Internship Program”](#) for details on our newest program.)

When we provide abundance to an employee from an underrepresented group, we pass along the ability to inspire and open doors for others. The impact always radiates out into the world.

Share the Mission

Speaking about diversity makes it real. That's why our recruiters share their goals with our internal and external clients. Ann Cathers and Rodrigo Salazar-Kawer of Talent Solutions start the conversation by sharing their intention to diversify the team. Ann explains, “I'm going to present X candidates, and it might take a bit longer.”

Hiring managers recognize that recruiting diverse candidates may take time, especially when the talent pool isn't representative of the general population. If individuals from an

underrepresented population don't apply, our go-getters go out and search for them. Some of their efforts include posting openings on boards with an audience self-identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), women in technology, and so on.

Anonymizing applications can also help to eliminate “resume bias” based upon applicants’ perceived gender, ethnicity, and even age ([SHRM](#), 2020). SweetRush’s Talent Solutions team is experimenting with candidate-tracking tools that don’t include pictures or names to ensure that candidates are evaluated solely on their skills and experience.

We'd love to trust ourselves, but even when we're sure we're being objective and unbiased, we have blind spots. We all do! But we can work on them without harming real candidates or employees. First, though, we have to learn what they are. That's why Rodrigo recommends the [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#) to everyone on his team. Their results are always a source of surprise—and growth opportunities.

Create Community for Contractors

We've talked about how contract work opens opportunities to people with caretaking responsibilities, differing physical abilities, and other needs. That's a great value-add for both our organizations and the individuals we hire. We can increase the value—and strengthen our long-term relationships with our people—when we provide ongoing support to contractors.

Rodrigo discovered this opportunity early in the life of our Talent Solutions team, which sources learning professionals for our client-partners and for SweetRush. Things were going great: placements were made; projects were completed.

But Rodrigo got curious. He began asking, What can we do better?

One contract instructional designer had an astonishing insight. She had the feeling of being in limbo: not quite a member of our team and not quite a member of our client-partner's team. **It was a lonely place to be.** “If only there was one person who took me to lunch on my first day,” she said wistfully.

Rodrigo's heart went out to her—and he had an “aha” moment. He knew that feeling connected to others played a huge role in employee satisfaction and performance.

He created a plan to make every contractor feel that they were a part of the SweetRush community. It included [onboarding](#), [coaching](#), and [mentoring](#) for every contractor.

After being placed, each contractor checked in regularly with their mentor—a seasoned team member—at regular intervals.

This support turned out to be a huge value-add for our client-partners. They came to us for a contract team member, but they also received the trickle-down benefits of the mentoring and support that person received. By meeting their human needs, the program helped contractors ramp up to productivity more quickly and do better work.

Because our contractors are a diverse group, working from different parts of the world; in different time zones; with different abilities, responsibilities, and ways of thinking, they need to feel a sense of belonging. **When location or mobility concerns isolate people, work can be one of our major social connections and that's become even more true since the pandemic struck.** Writing connection into their contracts is a great way to make our contractors feel valued and visible.

BE THE CHANGE, PART II: GRASSROOTS DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

We touched on our newfound DIY powers—and our collective reckoning with the institutions and systems that haven't been working for us—in Chapter 2. As the world changes around us, the institutional path to social change is simply too slow to meet our needs. That's frustrating, but it also presents life-centered organizations with the opportunity to lead by example.

We're proud to say that the following examples came straight from our people: that is, our employees and our client-partners. These valuable initiatives are a testament to what can happen when our people get curious—and start getting ideas.

“When a culture of openness is part of the business, it helps people to focus on their work—and innovation.”



—Gonzalo “Gonz” Solórzano
Client Experience Manager

A TALE OF THREE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES (INITIATIVE 1)

The Instructional Design^(ID) Internship Program

The Masterminds:



Clare Dygert,
Director of Learning
Experience Design



Ann Cathers,
Talent Solutions
Consultant

Origin Story

Clare got curious about why her team's demographics didn't match those of the larger U.S. population. With 13.4% of American identifying as Black, the team had an opportunity to be more representative ([United States Census Bureau](#), 2019).

The Goal

Recruit more Black instructional designers.

The Solution (Iteration 1)

Clare and Ann shared ID postings on BlackJobs.com and LinkedIn groups for Black L&D professionals.

The Results (Iteration 1)

Fewer applications than expected.

Back to the drawing board!

Clare considered barriers to entry to the ID profession. Those included its relative invisibility to those outside the L&D industry, the lack of clear standards about how to prepare for it, and the team's tendency to hire IDs with advanced degrees. Clare and Ann regrouped to consider how they might provide an on-ramp for candidates of color to what Clare calls "the best profession in the world."



The Goal

Share the value of ID with new graduates and offer paid ID work experience to candidates of color.

The Program

Clare and Ann partnered with the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), a historically Black university, to create the ID Internship Program. UDC will vet candidates from its educational program and share with them the opportunity to learn the craft with SweetRush.

Clare will then provide accepted candidates with an intensive three-part orientation:

How to work at SweetRush: a segment focused on communication protocols, collaboration tools and methods, and project teams

ID Fundamentals: a thorough, graduate-level introduction to the ID model

ID Practicum: The capstone project consists of a 10-minute learning solution. Interns collaborate with the creative director to create the graphic treatment—and receive feedback on the finished product.



After completing their orientation, interns participate in a graduation ritual—and are formally introduced to the ID team. Then, they'll receive a mentor to support them on their first projects and teach them the business side of ID. After four to six months of work as associate instructional designers, they'll either be invited to join the team permanently—or move on to another organization or contract work.

Lessons Learned

After some empathy interviews with UDC students, Clare discovered that part-time, temporary work wouldn't work for them; they needed to be able to support themselves as they learned about ID. Clare updated the program to include a full-time hourly rate—and an afternoon schedule to accommodate side gigs.

The Results

TBA—we'll welcome our first cohort in Fall 2021!

Interested in sharing the value of ID with your students?

Connect with Clare! She's happy to present, review resumes, conduct mock interviews, and generally advise students on the ID profession.



@ clare.dygert@sweetrush.com
in [LinkedIn: /in/claredygert/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/claredygert/)

A TALE OF THREE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES (INITIATIVE 2)

Partners in Pride

The Masterminds:

Gonzalo (Gonz) Solórzano,
Client Experience Manager

Juan Pablo (JuanPa) Flores,
Build Manager



Origin Story

Back in 2019, Gonz and JuanPa got curious about how SweetRush might participate in the Pride Parade—and expanded to include year-round LGBTQ+ initiatives and allyship. The Partners in Pride (PiP) team was born!

The Goal

Continue the Pride celebration year-round by impacting lives, learning together, and adding value through consulting.

The Solution

Gonz and JuanPa partnered with the Marketing department and sent an internal shout-out for pictures of the entire team celebrating Pride. Soon, PiP began meeting on a biweekly basis to share stories and ideas. And though the live Pride Parade was postponed in 2020 and 2021, the team celebrated Pride virtually with a monthlong word-a-day writing exercise—and stories of acceptance, love, and allyship.

Education

The team realized that they weren't as proficient as they'd like to be about nonbinary identities and language. So (you guessed it!) they got curious—and started researching. And they wanted to share what they'd learned with the rest of the team. That was the motive behind the [Beyond the Binary Job Aid](#), which helps allies expand their knowledge of nonbinary identities, and the celebratory (and educational!) timeline of the last 50 years of LGBTQ+ history.





Consulting Power

Andrei, our cofounder, has been an active member of PiP from Day One. When one of our client-partners shared a sensitive need for a learning solution they were rolling out to a global audience, Andrei immediately saw a consulting opportunity for PiP.

Together with our client-partner, we had developed an extensive online learning program, with characters who represent different cultural backgrounds, physical abilities, body types, and LGBTQ+ identities.

The program had been successful with learners in more than 100 countries. But our client-partner realized that they needed to create a new version.

The problem? The original content contains vocabulary, cultural references, images, and characters that don't align with some cultures' norms. In particular, it features nonbinary and lesbian characters who reflect our client-partner's commitment to inclusivity—but create a barrier to adoption for learners in certain cultures.

Together, we considered: How might we adapt the program to respect different cultures without compromising our values—or fundamentally altering the essence of the program?

After all, LGBTQ+ advocacy is a value we share with our client-partner—and an important part of the learning content. Together, we carefully talked through this need. Andrei asked the PiP team to help our team explore ideas around supporting inclusion and the need for global-friendly content.

The PiP team landed on an idea: Represent the presence of LGBTQ+ characters with symbols, or coded images, meaningful to LGBTQ+ learners. These symbols would send the message that LGBTQ+ individuals are seen and valued—but would escape notice by others.

Our client-partner embraced the idea—and tasked three cultural subject-matter experts (SMEs) to research and identify meaningful LGBTQ+ symbols in their respective countries. They came up with several! Our team then worked to subtly incorporate these symbols on everyday objects like wallpaper and coffee mugs in the new global version of the program.

Lessons Learned

Leadership involvement (Andrei!) helped to stretch the PiP team's consultative power. His holistic perspective helped to connect the team with the opportunity to apply their expertise in service of a learning project....the first of many to come!

A TALE OF THREE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES (INITIATIVE 3)

The Accessibility Team

The Masterminds:



Eduardo Escalante
Organizational
Effectiveness Specialist



Ernesto Uribe
Director of
Project Management

Origin Story

This team started from the inside out—as more and more of our client-partners requested accessibility-compliant custom learning solutions.

The Goal

Become proactive, consultative experts on the topic so that we could help our partners clear away obstacles that prevented learners with different visual, auditory, and physical abilities from accessing training. (This one is twofold!)

Here's where things get personal. In June 2020, Eduardo experienced a stroke. Overnight, he became one of the billion people in the world who identify as differently abled ([WorldBank](#), 2021). When he returned to work, Ernesto invited him to lead the Accessibility initiative. Eduardo was honored to delve into a topic that had become incredibly close to him.

“Doing something in a different way is not a deficiency.”

—**Eduardo Escalante**
Organizational Effectiveness Specialist



Meet Eduardo and cheer him on in his journey toward recovery!
 [edu.recovery](#)

The Solution

An initiative composed of three elements:

- ✏ **Process:** Accessibility is now part of the needs analysis and scoping conversations for every new custom learning project. Every team member is responsible for key steps—from intake to QA—and the Accessibility team remains available throughout the project cycle.
- ♦ **Tools:** The Accessibility team developed checklists for every authoring tool we use to develop custom learning solutions—and some best practices for design and development.
- ♦ **People:** A dedicated Accessibility team—with representation from every role that touches a custom learning solution—was formed. Eduardo's team keeps current on accessibility guidelines, general best practices, and new versions of authoring tools and provides ongoing education and job aids for the custom learning teams.

Education

Accessibility is about inclusion, and the team views sharing their knowledge and insight with our partners as a moral responsibility. The team also increases the value of learning solutions by helping partners develop a deeper understanding of their learner audience and learn how to apply universal design to their programs.

Consulting Power

By building accessibility into the intake process, project teams share a deep understanding of learners' visual, auditory, and physical needs. With every member of the team well-versed in best practices, our partners receive consistent recommendations and follow-through from beginning to end.

Best Accessibility Practices for the Whole Team

Accessibility needs to be scoped correctly in the very beginning of the project.

Accessibility should be one of the first steps and certainly not the last one.

The team should be aware of all the requirements of the project and should be onboarded with accessibility.

The team should have a good working knowledge or understanding of accessibility.

The Accessibility group should be involved right from the beginning and during the course of the entire project cycle, as and when necessary.

Accessibility cannot be a short-term project but is an ongoing requirement.

We hope you've been inspired by these stories of our people's initiatives—and the practices and mindsets that help us support one another across distances and differences. And though our work is never done, the cultural practices we shared in Chapter 2 set us up for resilience and sustain us through a lifetime of learning together.



Quests

Getting DEIB right takes a service mindset and plenty of positive intent at every level of the organization. Leaders need to walk the walk by aligning messaging with what employees see, hear, and experience every day and welcoming feedback about how to do better.

Managers and HR play key roles in modeling healthy dissent and resilience for their diverse teams. Working together, you have a tremendous opportunity to build a workforce that looks more like the world and on-ramps to your organization and industry.

Individual contributors, we hope you've heard the carpe diem call of our grassroots groups! You, too, can make a significant, positive impact. Whether you launch a movement or your own learning, these practices will help you spark change and stay curious.

C-Suite

HR and Management

Individual Contributors

QUESTS >

**CHECK YOUR ALIGNMENT.**

Before posting a statement on social justice or current events, consider whether your organization is walking the walk in other ways. How do your values align with your statement? How are those values reflected in your policies, procedures, and culture? Would your board, customer base, vendors, and employees be able to express how you live your values? If not, work toward earning the statement behind closed doors.

BLINDSIDE YOUR BIAS.

Humans are biased beings—but awareness can help us overcome our assumptions. Uncover your own with [Harvard's Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#). With tests measuring 13 different types of bias, the IAT will give you plenty to think about.

ESCAPE THE ECHO CHAMBER.

Limit your social media consumption by time or topic, and don't rely on it as a news source. Populate your news feed with credible sources on every side of the aisle—yes, there are more than two!—and check any facts that sound too good (or bad) to be true.

TRACK YOUR INCLUSION JOURNEY.

We've all heard it before: We can't manage what we don't measure. Note the starting point on your inclusion journey and track your progress over time toward an organization that looks more like the world. Measurement doesn't need to be complex and expensive—[tools like this one](#) from the National Organization on Disability are free.

ASK QUESTIONS.






For DEIB initiatives to be successful, allies need to get curious—and start questioning the status quo. When a colleague is passionate about an issue you don't know much about, Gonz recommends getting clear on the intention behind your questions. If your motive is curiosity and the question feels appropriate for a colleague, go ahead and ask! If it feels intrusive or confrontational, hold off and conduct some independent research.

GET INVOLVED IN GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES.

When your people approach you with an idea, get involved. Attend their meetings and join their conversations. You'll learn more about the cause—and can bring your holistic perspective to guide the team toward opportunities, just as Andrei helped PiP find its consultative power. Support from the top gives an initiative power—and vice versa.

ASK HOW YOUR EMPLOYEES LIKE TO WORK.

A startling 61% of differently abled employees don't feel comfortable sharing their differences at work ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2019), but you can help to accommodate everyone's needs by simply asking how. When a new employee joins your team (or you're new to the team), ask them about:

-  Their preferred modes of communication
-  Their work hours
-  Their preferred way of working
-  Any tools they need to do their jobs
-  How you can be a good partner to them

QUESTS >

HR and Management

DEVELOP YOUR JUDGMENT.

High-stakes DEIB issues require an immediate response—and there isn’t always a precedent. If making a call and taking a position on the spot feels overwhelming, work on developing your situational judgment. Consider investing in professional development to help you address this vital managerial skill. Our collaboration with SHRM, [The People Manager Qualification](#) program, offers comprehensive manager training and a special focus on DEIB and social justice issues.

BLINDSIDE YOUR BIAS.

Humans are biased beings—but awareness can help us overcome our assumptions. Uncover your own with [Harvard’s Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#). With tests measuring 13 different types of bias, the IAT will give you plenty to think about.

BREAK BARRIERS TO ENTRY.

Deciding to recruit a more diverse workforce is just the first step. Next, consider diversity across organizational levels and roles and the types of diversity you’re targeting. Are you looking to expand your talent pool to include the differently abled, formerly incarcerated, and veterans? Do your job descriptions filter people out? For example, some large organizations recruit graduates of prestigious universities whose student body is not representative.

REACH OUT TO VETERANS.

Veterans are often overlooked in recruitment efforts, though approximately 80% have the technical experience and education employers are looking for—and 98% have outstanding interpersonal skills. Tap into this rich pool of talent by partnering with state and local agencies who serve veterans and/or involving a current veteran employee in the recruitment process to help advise you on posting jobs and creating an excellent candidate experience ([SHRM Foundation and USAA](#), 2020).

PARTNER WITH ORGANIZATIONS.

Organizations serving the neurodiverse and differently abled can help connect you to members who are seeking employment, prescreen candidates, and (sometimes) provide skills training and support to help employees succeed ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2017). Deepen your understanding of how to recruit, hire, and retain differently abled people with SHRM’s free 10-hour [Employing Abilities @Work](#) certificate.

ASK QUESTIONS.

For DEIB initiatives to be successful, allies need to get curious—and start questioning the status quo. When a colleague is passionate about an issue you don’t know much about, Gonz recommends getting clear on the intention behind your questions. If your motive is curiosity and the question feels appropriate for a colleague, go ahead and ask! If it feels intrusive or confrontational, hold off and conduct some independent research.

TREAT GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES LIKE ANY OTHER PROJECT.

Appoint leaders with the right skill set—beyond membership in a diverse group. Then, provide them the hours to lead the initiative, e.g., 10% of their time, and make sure they actually receive that time. If the initiative is a priority, it needs to be treated as a billable project, not an unpaid side gig.

INCORPORATE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES INTO HR FUNCTIONS.

Powerful grassroots initiatives underway? Find opportunities to consult with the teams to update and enhance your organization’s onboarding, recruiting, staffing, and learning. Consider the skills and mindsets people managers need to guide their diverse teams—and gather feedback from individual contributors to gather ideas and ensure that they feel included and empowered.

ASK HOW YOUR EMPLOYEES LIKE TO WORK.

A startling 61% of differently abled employees don’t feel comfortable sharing their differences at work ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2019), but you can help to accommodate everyone’s needs by simply asking how. When a new employee joins your team (or you’re new to the team), ask them about:

- Their preferred modes of communication
- Any tools they need to do their jobs
- Their work hours
- How you can be a good partner to them
- Their preferred way of working

QUESTS >

Individual Contributors

"We need allies to ask us questions. We need to open that conversation."



—Gonzalo "Gonz" Solórzano
Client Experience Manager

OPEN THE SPACE FOR GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES.

If you're already part of an organization and notice something missing, ask leadership about the corporation's stance on the issue or cause and any plans they might have to address it. If there are none, be the plan! Identify others who share your passion and start having conversations and brainstorming. When you've identified concrete steps you want to take, do your homework on the business and social cases for your initiative. When you have that prepared, start knocking (virtually!) on leaders' doors. Lead with the ROI for your organization, the risks of not addressing the issue or cause, and follow with a clear statement of what you want to do, how you'll do it, and what resources you need.

ASK QUESTIONS.

For DEIB initiatives to be successful, allies need to get curious—and start questioning the status quo. When a colleague is passionate about an issue you don't know much about, Gonz recommends getting clear on the intention behind your questions. If your motive is curiosity and the question feels appropriate for a colleague, go ahead and ask! If it feels intrusive or confrontational, hold off and conduct some independent research.

BLINDSIDE YOUR BIAS.

Humans are biased beings—but awareness can help us overcome our assumptions. Uncover your own with [Harvard's Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#). With tests measuring 13 different types of bias, the IAT will give you plenty to think about.

RECEIVE QUESTIONS.

It's great when allies get curious! But sometimes their questions can feel naive. Gonz shares that not everyone new to a cause will have the vocabulary or awareness to frame questions well. He recommends meeting curiosity with empathy and openness whenever possible. Getting curious takes courage, after all! Be sure to invoke ouch and oops if language or assumptions cross a line.

LEARN AND FOLLOW.

Unless we actively seek out thought leaders and influencers who are different from us, our feeds tend to look a lot like us. Bring new perspectives into yours by following thought leaders who live in different skin colors, bodies, abilities, genders, and relationships. (See our recommendations to get started!)

ASK HOW YOUR TEAMMATES LIKE TO WORK.

A startling 61% of differently abled employees don't feel comfortable sharing their differences at work ([Harvard Business Review](#), 2019), but you can help to accommodate everyone's needs by simply asking how. When a new employee joins your team (or you're new to the team), ask them about:

- ✓ Their preferred modes of communication
- ✓ Their work hours
- ✓ Their preferred way of working
- ✓ How you can be a good partner to them



Read/Watch/Listen

- ✎ [Harvard Business Review: What Your Future Employees Want Most](#)
- ◆ [Harvard Business Review: 5 Behavioral Biases That Trip Up Remote Managers](#)
- ◆ [Aeon Psyche: How to Have More Meaningful Conversations](#)
- ✎ [Harvard Business Review: Toward a Racially Just Workplace](#)
- ◆ [Splunk: A Global Tech Company Learns to Break Bias](#)
- ◆ [Your Brain at Work: Friends and Foes: The Neuroscience of In-Group and Out-Group with Harvard Professor Dr. Jason Mitchell](#)
- ✎ [Your Brain at Work: Can We Bridge The Gap?: The Neuroscience of Division and Polarization with Jonathan Haidt and Alison Taylor](#)

- ◆ [Your Brain at Work: How Global Organizations Move DE&I Forward -- with Elizabeth Nelson, Jennifer Amara, Michaela Simpson, and Paulette Gerkovich](#)
- ◆ [Adobe: Accessibility Testing PDFs](#)
- ✎ [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#)
- ◆ [Disability in the Workplace: Insights and Advice for Current or Future Colleagues](#)
- ◆ [Entrepreneur: Leaders with Disabilities](#)
- ✎ [The Conversation: Why It Makes Good Business Sense to Hire People with Disabilities](#)
- ◆ [World Economic Forum: Neurodiversity: Why People with Autism, Asperger's, Dyslexia, and ADHD Can Bring Massive Value to the Workplace](#)

DEEP DIVES

- ✎ [A Thousand Brains: A New Theory Of Intelligence](#)
- ◆ [An Introduction to Accessibility and Inclusive Design \(free eLearning course\)](#)
- ◆ [Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People](#)
- ✎ [Erasing Institutional Bias: How to Create Systemic Change for Organizational Inclusion](#)
- ◆ [SHRM: Employing Abilities @Work \(free 10-hour certificate course\)](#)
- ◆ [Staff Augmentation for Learning and Development: The Agile Talent Solution for Modern Business](#)

Learning can be a catalyst for change.

What do your people **see** and **hear** in your learning programs?

Do they see *themselves*?

On-screen representation in learning programs is a vital part of your DEIB efforts.

- It **recognizes** and **validates** human beings.
- It **builds confidence** and **inspires** your people to be their authentic selves.
- And it creates **change**.

At SweetRush, we've had the opportunity to work with and for many communities. That work has honed our commitment to and passion for creating inclusive learning.

Stories are inspired by real experiences.

Authentic **characters** live genuine lives.

Diverse **voice-over talent** bring these stories and characters to life.

For 20 years, our collaborations with client-partners and team members have helped us grow. We love this work and we continue to be open and learn how we can do better.

Let's make an impact together.



Human-Centered Learning



L&D for DEIB Initiatives



Nonprofit Support



SWEETRUSH.

In Service of Life PotentialSM





CHAPTER 4

Learning Design



No question about it—we're in a time of flux. The tectonic shifts we're experiencing in technology, climate, society, and health won't let up anytime soon.

We've talked about how staying skilled helps us build a strong foundation on this incredibly active ground. From remote work and management to being a better peer and partner, learning is a cornerstone of the life-centered organization. It helps us maintain flexibility and resilience as we build our future state—together.

But when our collective resilience is tested by social unrest, political divisions, and the ebbs and flows of the pandemic, we're pulled back into Stage 1. **Our brains are flooded by fear and stress, while our mental energy for learning and growth slows to a trickle.**

That's the paradox we need to contend with: **Ongoing learning is becoming ever more urgent while our bandwidth continues to shrink.** You might have already noticed that you—and your people—aren't as up for new learning experiences as you were in the past.

Maybe you've rolled out a shiny new knowledge-sharing platform—only to hear crickets from the employees with the most knowledge to share.

Or offered weekly lunch-and-learn sessions on the state of the industry—to a few stragglers.

Or created upskilling paths for every job role—that remain unexplored.

Why don't they want to learn?

We'll let you in on a secret: **They do.**

Your people **are** learning. They're learning how to start a sourdough culture, unclog a drain, remove a stain, and play an instrument. They're even following new advances in your industry and learning new skills for the future. **They're just not doing that with you.**

But...why not?

A potential answer might be: You're offering them solutions.

And solutions are great—when they match a problem or need that learners are experiencing. **But if we build something epic, and our people don't come, that's a sign of a mismatch.** Maybe we've addressed a need that isn't a high priority. Maybe our learning app or platform is hard to use. Maybe our people are finding better information somewhere else.

It's tempting to shop around the learning marketplace and pick out some shiny objects to lure them back. But landing on the right solution is more a question of how than what.

What follows will be some serious shop talk—but bear with us! It's all part of the toolkit for resilience and growth.



How > What: Starting with Needs Analysis

Following the right process will help you identify the business results you want to see, the problems learners really experience, and how to create learning that solves both. Whether you work with an internal learning team or an external partner, they should spend a lot of time discussing the **how** with you.

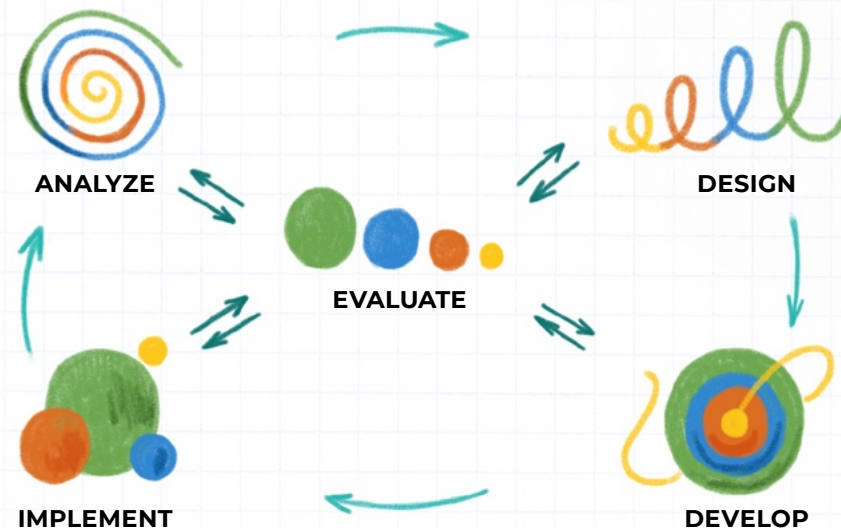
But we need that new learning program yesterday! The future is rushing toward us! We're in flux!

That's all true. Yet the irony is that we'll only reach the future state we want by slowing down and returning to square one. That means starting with a thorough needs analysis—the A in ADDIE. Long before we dream up bells, whistles, or avatars, we need to get curious about our problems.

IS ADDIE EXTINCT?

Is ADDIE, the classic learning design model, a dinosaur? Some L&D practitioners are convinced that it is. They see ADDIE as a rigidly linear process that doesn't allow for multiple iterations or back-and-forth among the different steps.

We believe that ADDIE is alive and well! It provides a framework and common language for every activity we need to consider in our learning solution design—and it can be adapted to every team's preferred way of working. Yes, even agile-inspired, iterative processes.



"For me, ADDIE serves as a useful reminder of all of the things I need to think about and do during my own process of learning solution design."

How I go about conducting each of these activities—whether it's by following a step-by-step waterfall approach or proceeding in a more agile way—will vary, depending on the specific project. What's important is that I make my way through the framework and think about each activity."



—Emma Klosson
Lead Instructional Designer and Learning Evangelist

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

This question isn't as rude as it sounds—we promise!

What we're trying to do is pinpoint the business problem. Are sales down? Customer satisfaction scores low? We need to know what we're trying to solve so that we can determine whether we have a training issue—or something else—on our hands.

Sometimes learners know how to do the right thing but lack the tools, incentives, or work environment that make it easier for them to do it. (**Author's note:** One of my favorite examples is a “performance issue” caused by a burned-out light bulb. Warehouse employees simply couldn't see the new filing system!) Talking to learners helps us discover the best intervention for the problem, whether that's training or something else. (Are you thinking “design thinking”? We've created our own version for learning design called [CoDesignSM](#)!)

BUSINESS PROBLEMS

- ✎ Low customer experience ratings
- ◆ Low productivity
- ◆ Fewer completed transactions
- ✎ High number of safety incidents
- ◆ High volume of customer complaints
- ◆ Increasing number of employees on performance improvement plans

During this exercise, you might identify several business problems. That's normal!

We recommend prioritizing the one or two that have the greatest impact on your business. Once you address those issues successfully, you can tackle the others.

Desired Outcomes

Now that we've pinpointed the problem, we need to determine the **desired outcome** or the **impact we want to have on our business**. It's pretty intuitive: For example, if transaction volumes are low, we want them to be higher. If escalations are too high, we want them to be lower.

One caveat: Your desired outcomes should be **observable and measurable** so that you know when you've achieved them. We'll talk about how to measure them in a moment.

Desired Outcomes

What's wrong with these outcomes?

- ✗ **Make customers happier**
- ✗ **Improve our production**
- ✗ **Work safely**

They're not observable or measurable. It's hard to quantify what “happier” or “safely” looks like—or who will be the judge. If we can't quantify our outcomes, we won't know when we've reached them.

The following outcomes are both **observable and measurable**. Customer experience survey, production data, and so on, will help us track our progress toward these outcomes.



Increase or improve:

Customer experience ratings

Production of widgets

The use of in-the-moment coaching conversations



Decrease:

Customer complaints

Warehouse accidents/incidents

The use of performance improvement plans

Lead with the WIIFM

Identifying the desired outcomes up front helps us show our learners how their performance connects to the business performance—and why it's important to change their behavior and skills. We call this understanding the **WIIFM** or “**What's in it for me?**”

That might sound selfish, but it's incredibly human. **We adult learners need a purpose to guide and motivate us.** Sure, we value knowledge for its own sake, but we have a lot of competition for our time and attention, and we need a reason to focus. A WIIFM connects to the desired business outcome and rallies us to work toward a shared mission.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives speak to **what the learner will know and be able to do after they complete the training.** Just like the desired outcomes, learning objectives should be **observable and/or measurable.**

By focusing the learning objectives on specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors, learners can help accomplish the desired outcomes for the business.

DESIRED OUTCOMES AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Desired outcomes: The impact we want to make on the business, e.g., larger sales volumes, higher customer satisfaction scores, reduced safety incidents, or fewer complaints. We need to determine these up front—before we think about the learning objectives.

Learning objectives: The specific knowledge, skills, or behavior learners gain from the training and apply on the job. These should be directly connected to the desired outcome.

Here's an example of how they reinforce one another:



DESIRED OUTCOMES

(How the new knowledge, skills, and behavior will impact the business)

- ✏ Increase sales pipeline visibility.
- ✏ Increase CRM order entry accuracy by 10%.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

(What the learner will know and be able to do)

- ✏ List the steps for completing a new customer entry in the CRM.
- ✏ Describe the difference between a “sales lead” and a “qualified buyer.”
- ✏ Continuously update and maintain customers' information in the CRM.

Measuring Success

We've talked about how both the desired outcomes and the learning objectives need to be both **observable and measurable.** Now we get to consider how we'll measure them, also known as our evaluation strategy. (No, we haven't jumped to the E in ADDIE just yet! We're still in the Analyze phase.)

There are four lenses or “levels” of learning evaluation to choose from, and each provides different insight ([Kirkpatrick, 2016](#)):

- ✏ **Reaction:** What people thought about the experience, e.g., whether the training was relevant; how confident they feel about applying what they learned
- ✏ **Learning:** Proof that knowledge and skill transfer happened
- ✏ **Behavior:** Evidence of learners' on-the-job behavior and performance changes
- ✏ **Results:** Business impact of training

All you need to figure out (for now) is which lens—or combination of lenses—you'd like to use to view your solution. You can leave the details for later.

Find the Audience

Now you need to determine your learner audience.

That's easy, you might be saying. I'll just have everyone take the training! You want to develop **all** your people, of course!

That approach might work for certain kinds of learning, like onboarding or compliance training. But we'd challenge you to tease out a primary audience whose name isn't Everyone—or at least Everyone at Once.

Here are some questions to help:

- *Who needs this training most, and/or who might have the greatest impact on the business?*
- *Who else might benefit?*
- *Are the secondary audience's needs different from those of the primary audience? In what ways?*
- *Does the training need apply to everyone? Are you seeing this type of behavior across the board?*
- *Are some of your people more skilled at this than others? If so, who are they? What might be impacting their performance?*

Look for ways to meet the needs of the primary audience—then adapt content for other audiences as needed. For example, all employees of a chemical company need baseline knowledge of the company, its products, and its key innovations. However, only the chemical engineers need detailed information about formulas and compounds.

Find the (Performance) Gap

We'll make this quick:

What is your learner audience currently doing?

Great! Now what **should they be doing?**

If your answers to these questions aren't the same, you've found yourself a performance gap—and knowing what that is will help you hone your learning objectives.

If your answers **are** the same for any part of your learner audience, that's a great sign that this learning solution

isn't for them. And that's okay! Life-centered learning rarely takes the form of a one-size-fits-all solution. We'll talk more about the forms your learning can take—and even a shape-shifting solution!

Your Audience, Your Guests: Service Design

You've already considered your learner audience—now let's zoom in even closer and think about how life-centered learning looks and feels.

Let's get into the zone: Think back to the nicest hotel you ever stayed in as a guest.

How did the staff anticipate your needs?

How did they make it easy for you to accomplish what you were there to do?

What “treats” did they include to make your stay enjoyable?

Every element of your stay—from reserving online to the delivery of your room service order—that made it memorable required careful planning, coordination, and research. These elements are part of what we call **service design**.

Service design isn't just for hotels—it's also a mindset that helps us create life-centered learning. **Just as our favorite hotel takes care of guests while earning a profit, our learning can take care of learners while achieving our desired business outcomes.**

In [Chapter 3](#), we talked about leading with a service mindset: honoring every employee's preferred way of relating, communicating, and working. In this chapter, we'll talk about how to apply the service mindset to our learning—and build accessibility and representation into our programs.



Needs Analysis in a Nutshell

We can't say enough about needs analysis! It helps us develop learning solutions that are more agile, responsive, and impactful.

Unfortunately, some folks worry that the process of needs analysis is time-consuming or intimidating.

While we still encourage you to give it a try, we understand that needs analysis can be a solitary pursuit. Sometimes, as Emma shares, that's an asset! But ideally, you'd be hearing from stakeholders and learners together, as a group. That's the gold standard—and where design thinking comes in.

"Needs analysis doesn't have to be a ton of work. Depending on the size of your project, it can take as little effort as two phone calls!"

—Emma Klosson

Lead Instructional Designer and
Learning Evangelist



Want more guidance on needs analysis?

Join our in-house expert Emma Klosson
for a walk-through!

CoDesignSM

Are you staring down a learning challenge that is:



Sticky

Open-ended
with no single
“right answer”



Impactful

Meaningful for a
lot of people or a
particular group



Framable

Possible to formulate
or frame as a “How
might we...?” question



Dramatic

Provoking
trepidation, passion,
and opinion?

If your answer is a resounding “yes,” congratulations! You’ve got a [use case for design thinking](#).

Design thinking is a different approach from the needs analysis process ([Training Industry](#), 2020). For decades, it’s helped product and service designers invite users to the table—and gather their feedback over the course of multiple iterations. And because learning is both a product and a service, **it’s a great method for designing life-centered learning**.

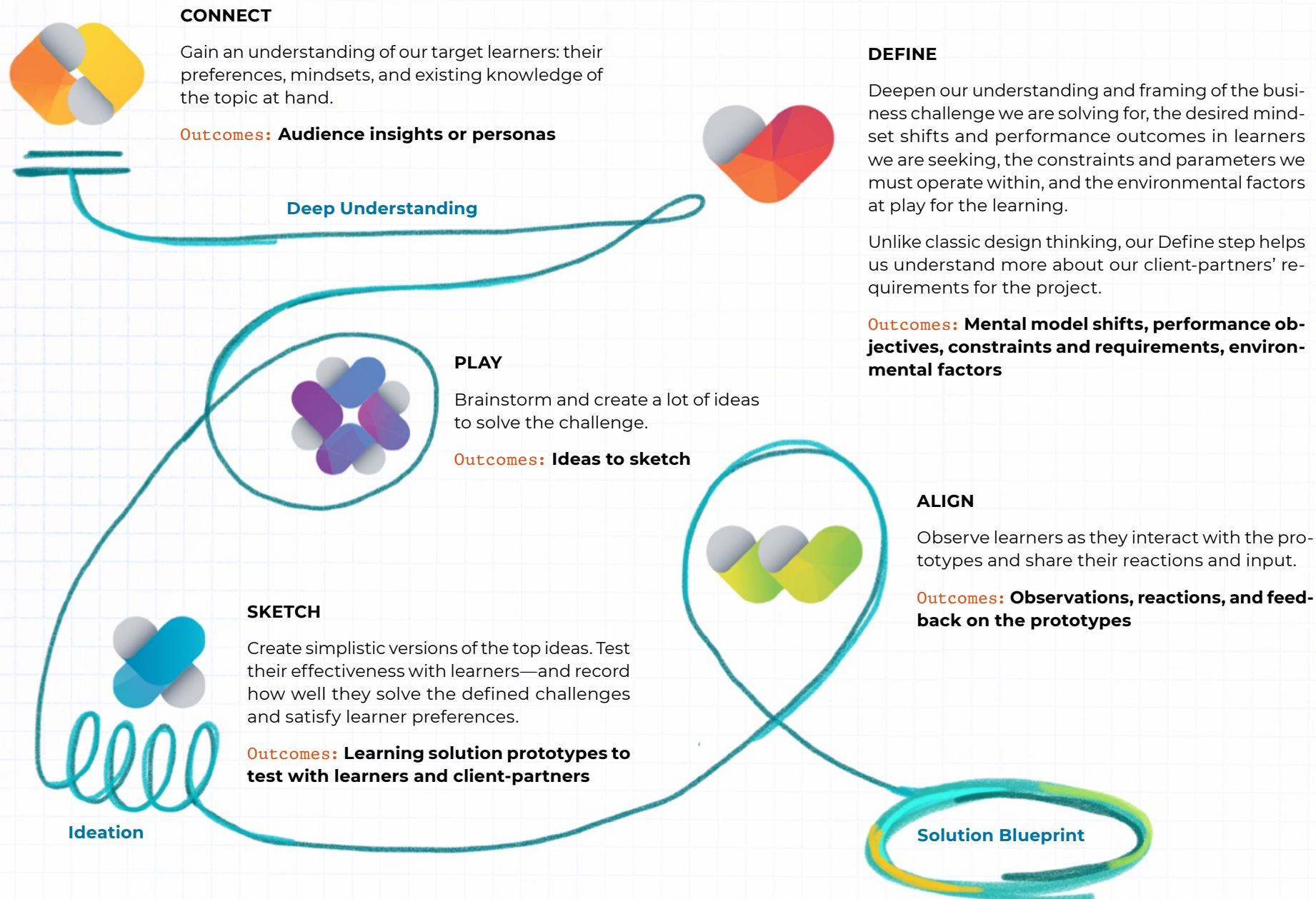
We call our particular brand CoDesign—and the party happens at the intersection of the ADDIE instructional design model and design thinking. CoDesign is an agile, [virtual](#) process that allows us to develop solutions more quickly by getting all of the right people (including learners) in the same room at the same time. Together, we can rapidly think through the training need with our client-partner—instead of designing a solution in a vacuum.

And because needs analysis is so vital, we spend the bulk of our time on the first two steps of the CoDesign process: Connect and Define. Getting the learner and business needs just right in these foundational steps ensures that the rest of our work is successful. It also helps us shave off project time: to the tune of 34 business days. And with a time crunch being one of the most common constraints, that’s a big win!

Our CoDesign guest list includes HR professionals, business stakeholders, subject matter experts, the vendor-partner team, and—our VIPs—target learners. For the best outcome, we invite a representative cross-section of learners and engage them in every step of CoDesign.



Design thinking is like ice cream—incredibly rich and offered in (at least) 31 flavors! We call ours CoDesign: It's customized especially for learning solution design and pairs well with ADDIE. Here's the scoop on our process.



CONNECT

Here's where your efforts to find the audience will pay off! Gather a representative cross-section of your primary and secondary learner audiences, taking into consideration their job roles, years of experience, work performance histories, attitudes, mindsets, and demographics. Ask them what they do when they need information, where they find it, and how they use it. And if possible, try to observe them as they work—or ask them to share their screens and “think aloud” as they perform job tasks.

“Learners know what they need, and if we give them what they need, we're putting humans at the center of our learning programs.”



—Gail Eisenstein
Learning Architect

Even (or especially!) if you're sure you know what your learners need, keep in mind that realities change—rapidly. The shrinking bandwidth we've all experienced over the past year is a perfect example.

No matter how well we keep our ears to the ground, learners are always the best sources of information about their own needs. They're experts on their roles, job tasks, priorities, and preferences for accessing information. They know what will (and won't!) fit into their workday and lives. And they're usually quite happy to share that information with us!

DEFINE

This stage offers us the opportunity to refine our understanding of the business need and desired outcomes. Maybe we've discovered that our learners need support in shifting their mindsets as well as updating their skills. Maybe we've found that their performance issues aren't due to a lack of knowledge or ability after all, (Remember that burned-out light bulb?)

If we do have a case for a learning solution, now is a good time to reflect on the internal and external barriers it could face.

Learners' internal barriers might take the form of skepticism about the value of new skills or their ability to apply them. Internal enablers would be exactly the opposite: for example, a growth mindset and a belief in the value of the learning program.

External barriers and enablers—also known as “pebbles”—are factors in the environment that make it more or less difficult for learners to apply their training. **Even in a life-centered organization, we might find that our systems, tools, or procedures lag behind our learning.** Our people, too, might unknowingly present obstacles if they're not aware of new initiatives or prepared to support them. When rolling out any new program, we need to anticipate these pebbles and clear the way for change.

The Define stage is also where we clarify our budget, time-frame, and any other constraints that might limit our learning solution. Try not to think of these constraints as a downer: They

actually help us shape our ideas and give us a place to start. Anyone who's ever felt overwhelmed by the possibilities of a blank page will appreciate a few guidelines!



PLAY

Welcome to the “Design” phase of ADDIE! Here’s where we synthesize everything we’ve learned from our business and learner audience analysis and use it to create big, hairy, audacious ideas...that just might work.

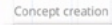
When we're done, we present them to the rest of the team. (We like Mural for online collaboration.) Then we "poke holes" in one another's ideas—with kindness, of course! That means we **find the factors that could "kill" each solution**, from learner preferences to external constraints and barriers. We then revise and revise again until the solution is as hole-proof as possible.

This exercise helps us align our ideas with learner and business needs—and helps us advance better ideas for our sketches. The result? Reduced project time.

SKETCH

Here's where we take our revised and refined solutions to the virtual drawing board! In this stage, we create mock-ups, or prototypes, of our strongest ideas. Our prototypes might include avatars, interaction screens, or a wireframe—a shell showing only the functions and interactions—of a game or course.

The goal is to convey the **look, feel, and flow** of the learning solution clearly enough for learners to share their feedback—before we spend too much time or energy on developing it. Overengineering at the Sketch phase can cause us to get overly attached to a single solution, so keep sketches minimal!



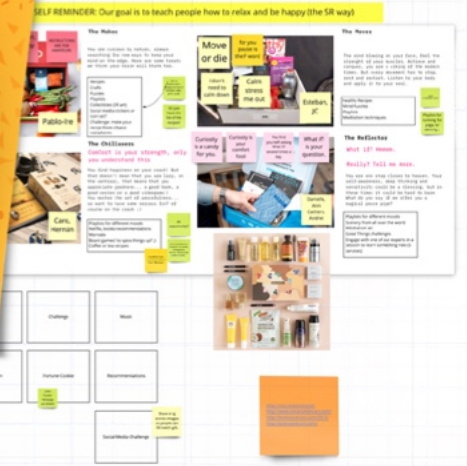
Kill the Program



The CONCEPT



The TEST



ALIGN

In this stage, learners interact with our sketches and wireframes via screen sharing. We observe their reactions, noting what engages them, what trips them up, and where they lose interest. These notes help us make our solutions more effective when we go back to the Sketch phase—and bring our refined sketches right back to our learners.

Even with X iterations of our sketches, we save time overall by leaving the CoDesign table with a better prototype. We can then build that into a blueprint for a solution learners will value and use. That extra confidence is invaluable—and great insurance that a magnificent learning solution won't be derailed by IT firewalls, procedural pebbles, or reluctant learners.



During a CoDesign with the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) for a learning program to prevent sexual abuse in youth gymnastics, kids (the learners!) tested our prototype. And they approved!



Why use CoDesign?

90% of our client-partners say they'd recommend CoDesign to others.

And after seeing the positive outcomes for our client-partners, we've embraced CoDesign for solving our internal challenges.

Here's why:

Solutions with CoDesign are stronger. CoDesign helps us gain a deep understanding of the constraints and requirements, which helps us build solutions that align better with learner and business needs.

Teams with CoDesign are stronger. The immersive, intensive, collaborative experience deeply bonds the team. One solution architect shared, "I've seen past struggles to gain alignment and adapt to changes...and CoDesign significantly mitigates those risks!"

Projects that begin with CoDesign are faster. CoDesign reduces project duration by an average of 34 business days! One ID shared, "It takes considerably less time to develop a Solution Blueprint after CoDesign, and I am much more confident in the work."

Solutions are learner-centric. In CoDesign, we often discover that learners' needs and experiences are quite different from what the stakeholders had imagined. For example, one stakeholder suggested that learners wanted a high-tech solution with VR and apps. In fact, learners pleaded with us for a low-tech, slower-paced solution given the volume of information they were required to absorb. Together we created a solution that respected their bandwidth.

One More How

You're still with us, so you've gotten the message: [Designing life-centered learning is more about the how than the what](#). It's a journey through the business and learner needs and the wild, wonderful world of CoDesign.

Of course, at some point, you'll also need a **what**—a learning solution, ecosystem, experience, or all of the above—to deliver to your learners. We start ideating on that **what** in the Play phase before prototyping and gathering learner feedback.

But when we're new to learning design, design thinking, or both, ideating can be a challenge. That's actually a freeing (and exciting!) position to be in. Not knowing what's been done can help you imagine something entirely new. In fact, some of our best ideas come from people who are new to the party.

We'd like to share a few possibilities for what learning solutions can look like (and we hope you'll [share yours right back!](#)). But before we get granular, we'd like to share one more **how**.

"Each of us has a different understanding of the world, different potential to achieve our goals, and, therefore, different learning needs."

Yet organizations often deliver the same training to everyone, as if we're exactly the same. This means none of us ever gets the exact training we need."



—**John Cleave**
Senior Learning Engineer

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER: ADAPTIVE LEARNING

What would you say to a learning approach that magically shape-shifts to match every learner's needs, abilities, and interests?

That might sound futuristic—maybe even fantastic. But this shape-shifting method, known as [adaptive learning](#) (AL), has been with us for a while. John Cleave, Senior Learning Engineer at SweetRush, describes AL as learning that “dynamically adjusts to an individual learner's understandings, skills, and interests” and delivers “only the instruction needed and nothing that isn't needed.”

Interested in Adaptive Learning?

[Check out John's eBook and discover how to personalize learning experiences.](#)

AL can be as simple as a parent teaching a child to ride a bicycle—and as complex as an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled learning experience platform serving up new content to learners as they proceed through an eLearning course. The key similarity between these two very different situations is the way the learning experience is tailored to each learner.

For example, a parent knows exactly how risk-tolerant their child is and how developed their motor skills are. Experience level matters, too: A child beginning today will have a different experience than a sibling who's been practicing for a month. As the parent tailors their instruction, they take into account all of these factors—as well as the weather, the child's mood, and their frustration tolerance. That coaching, from handlebars to pedals, is a great example of AL.

In short: AL isn't just for high-tech learning solutions.

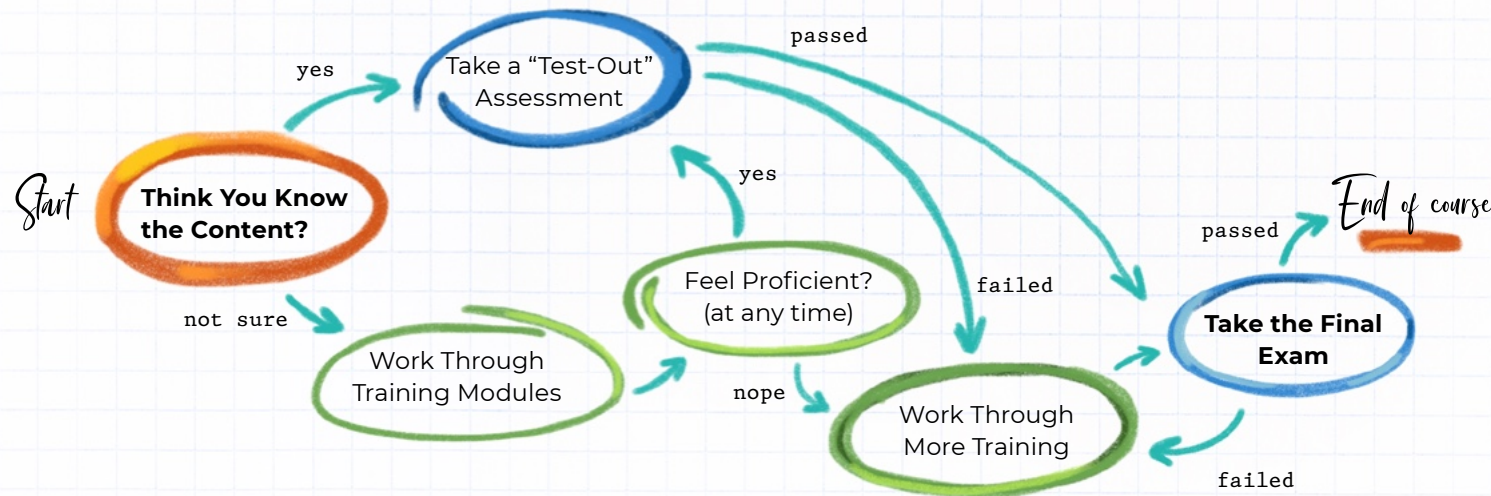
Build Your Own AL

Whatever shape our AL takes, it needs to treat our learners like guests—not captives. And putting them in charge of their stay means that we meet their needs and respect their time.

How might we do that within, say, an eLearning course?

ADAPTIVE LEARNING (AL) IN ACTION

Here's how the flow of an eLearning course might demonstrate respect for learners' time and prior knowledge. Clear performance objectives help us offer the opportunity to test out at any time.



As always, we'd start with a thorough needs analysis to make sure there's a business need for our course. Then, we'd need to get extremely clear about the performance gap, what learners need to be able to do, and how we'll assess their skills and competencies.

If learners have prior knowledge or expertise, the life-centered way is to let them test out. (They're our guests, remember?) On the other hand, if learners experience difficulty with our learning content, we need to offer additional support. Our learning solutions need to welcome different brains, abilities, and experiences—just as our organizations do.

Of course, tailoring resources to some learners while confidently allowing others to test out requires an airtight assessment! It takes skill to write great performance objectives and assess learners meaningfully. (See "Ask a Psychometrician.") Getting these right enhances our credibility with our learners and increases the value of our training.

SHAPE-SHIFTING GIFTING: TRY OUR AL EXPERIENCE!

Last winter, we gave our hearts to our entire community with our Holiday Gift. We used a brief, whimsical quiz to sort giftees into four personality types—then presented them a beautifully wrapped gift, with contents customized for their type. (Yes, they can peek at our gifts to the other types if they're feeling curious!)

What's inside these adaptive gift boxes?
You'll have to [see for yourself!](#)

ASK A PSYCHOMETRICIAN

VALIDITY

Does your assessment measure what it's supposed to measure?

RELIABILITY

Do learners get the same scores if they take the test more than once?

If not, you just might have a case for a psychometrician!

What's a psychometrician? "Someone who's an expert in assessment and measurement. We write tests—but we do so much more! We can look at existing tests to make sure they're reliable and valid—or that each item measures what we say it's measuring."

Assessment pet peeve: "Multiple-choice questions getting belittled! I want the world to know you can write a very good, higher-order multiple-choice question. We can hit every level of [Bloom's taxonomy](#) except 'Create.'"

"When client-partners engage me, they often have learner data."

If, for example, learners say the test is too difficult, the data can tell me which questions are too hard (if any) and which are too easy—or if learners simply aren't studying."



—Barbara Rowan, PhD
Psychometrician

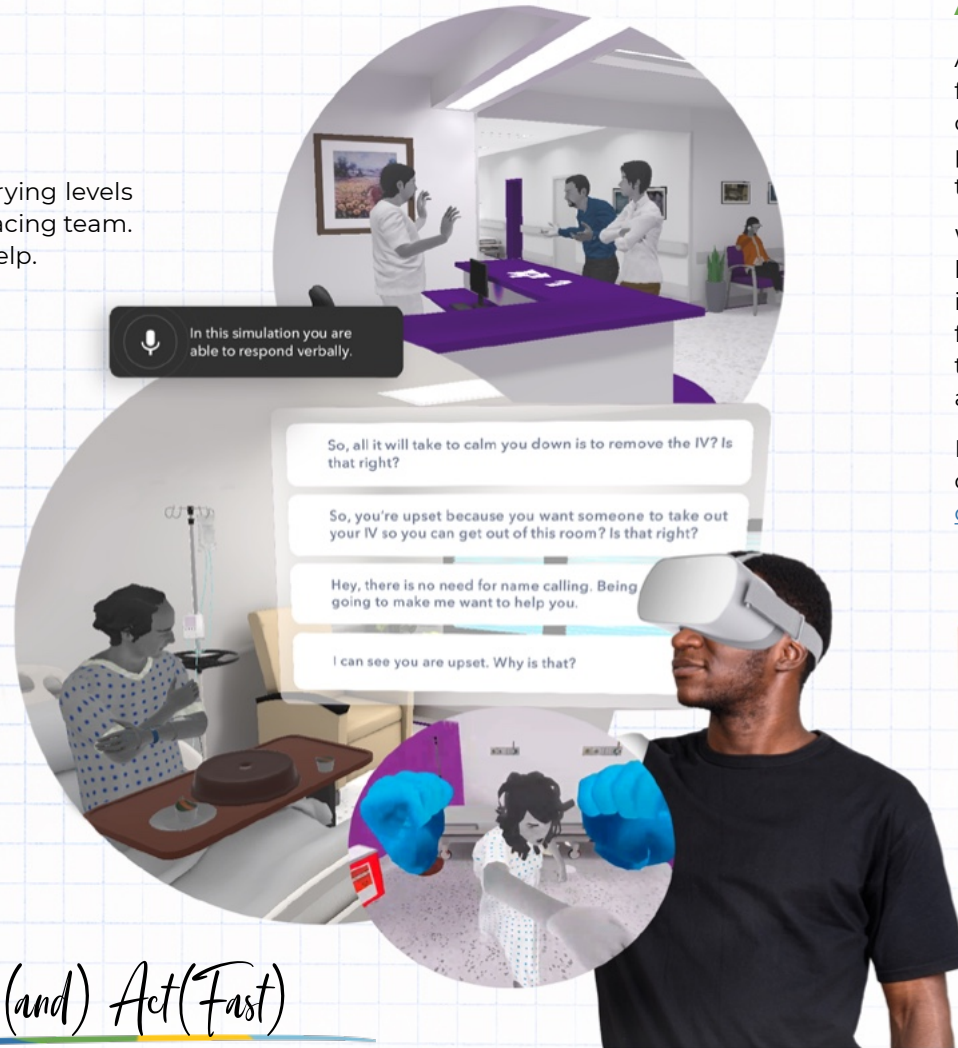
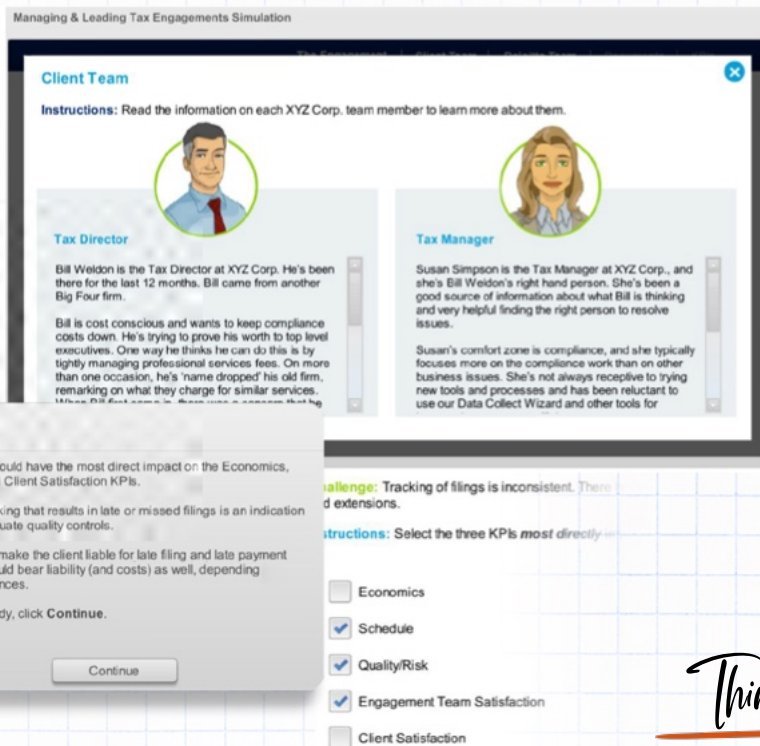
Assessing higher-order cognitive skills such as problem-solving might seem like a challenge for an eLearning course—but it can be done well! A simulation, or story based on a real-world scenario, is one powerful option. Learners navigate the challenging (and sometimes rocky) course of a client escalation or workplace hazard—and receive feedback and assistance based upon their answers.

Some skills—for example, de-escalation—require an ability to respond physically as well as intellectually. When engaging other humans tactically isn't practical (or desirable), the virtual reality (VR) environment is a great setting for a simulation. Data such as voice analysis and movement tracking provide an opportunity to refine recommendations for every learner.

A TALE OF TWO SIMULATIONS

Respond to Client Challenges

This simulation asks its learners, financial consultants with widely varying levels of experience, to respond to the highs and lows of engaging a client-facing team. Virtual coaching is offered when learners make a mistake or ask for help.



Think(and) Act(Fast)

This virtual reality (VR)-based simulation asks its learners, health-care workers and security staff, to respond to aggressive patients. Patients escalate or de-escalate their aggression based upon learners' physical and verbal responses. Movement tracking and voice analysis data are broken down to show learners where they can improve their reactions—all without risk to actual humans!

AL in the Ecosystem

As you can see from the diversity of solutions above—from training wheels to de-escalation training—AL can shape-shift to fit all levels of technological complexity. Like needs analysis and CoDesign, it's a how: that is, a method of learning design.

We've talked about AL in the space of a few single learning solutions. But it's not right for every solution in your learning ecosystem: Sometimes a one-size-fits-all approach does work best. Your internal or external learning partners can help you decide whether and when you've got a case for AL.

If you'd like to get a head start on your next **how**, check out the potential AL use cases on [Page 31 of our Adaptive Learning eBook](#).

Want to learn more about Adaptive Learning?

Delve in with our in-house experts John Cleave, Clare Dygert, and Adrian Soto!



Life-Centered Learning Looks (and Feels) Different

Thinking back to our hotel analogy, our goal should always be to treat our learners like our guests. When the door opens both ways, learners are empowered to identify their own moments of need and seek out resources that will help.

This kind of learning is called “pull” learning—meaning that learners access it of their own volition. It’s the opposite of “push” or mandatory learning.

Pull learning is the life-centered choice. By offering it, we recognize that learners have a limited amount of attention and energy to spend with us—and encourage them to spend it wisely. That means spending it on understanding and practicing new material, not in struggling to find time for learning, prioritize extraneous details, or figure out a new app.

Just as an upscale hotel asks its guests for feedback, we should always be asking our learners how we can make their stay with us better. Even the most beautifully prototyped, learner-approved solution can become obsolete. That’s why it’s so important to return to the Connect and Align stages of the CoDesign process to check back in with our learners and hear their voices. Making a habit of the **hows** helps us create a **what** that reflects our care and empathy for learners.

“Far too many things in the world are designed, constructed, and foisted upon us with no understanding—or even care—for how we will use them.”

—Don Norman,
Usability Engineer, Design Educator, and
Cofounder of the Nielsen Norman Group

LIFE-CENTERED LEARNING TRUTHS

We’ve said it several times: Learning is both a product and a service. By providing skilling and growth opportunities, we maintain our people in a highly effective state which, in turn, elevates the larger conversation in our industry and the global talent pool.

In Chapter 2, we talked about sharing a commitment to provide our people with a mutually recognized skill “passport.” And they’re likely to have fewer stamps: 94% of people stay longer with organizations that invest in their careers ([LinkedIn](#), 2018, as cited by Forbes, 2019).

Skilling efforts also elevate society by keeping our people employed and in-house as we prepare them for new roles—just as our friends at the technology company did for the thousands of workers they reskilled.

Not least of all, investing in our people’s growth serves us by reducing costly turnover—an average of \$15,000 per person ([Work Institute](#), 2020).

Learning is also part of our messaging. It speaks volumes about who is present and valued at all levels of our organizations and what we believe our employees look like and can do.

With so much riding on learning, it’s important to get it right. Here are four truths—and four real-life learning examples—that help us share our care for people in our most vital product, service, and message.

94%

of employees stay longer with an organization that invests in their career ([LinkedIn](#), 2019, as cited by Forbes, 2019).

More than
2/3

of global workers want to learn skills for new roles that offer more job security and opportunity ([SHRM](#), 2021).

Truth #1:

Life-centered learning is accessible.

Your people have different bodies and brains and your learning needs to provide them all with a rich, welcoming experience. That's why accessibility needs to have a place in every learner audience analysis. We partnered with a major technology company to build a robust, gamified learning program that addressed learners' visual, hearing, and mobility needs.

Desired Outcome: Improve customer satisfaction scores—especially in the area of communications.

Learning Objectives: Build empathy for customers; boost commitment to the customer experience and skill retention; drive organizational culture change.

Primary Audience: Engineers (individual contributors)

Solution: The Engineer of Tomorrow program, an engaging collection of 57 nanolearning courses, 8 instructor-led team meetings and workshops, and a brand-new custom learning platform complete with badges, games, and social learning elements.

All nanolearning courses are designed to [WCAG 2.0 Level AA accessibility standards](#). Some accessible course features include:

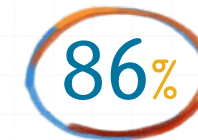
- ✏ Size, contrast, and legibility of all fonts and images
- ◆ Screen reader technology
- ◆ Closed captioning and transcripts
- ✏ Keyboard navigation

Fun Features:

- ✏ Hands-on activities
- ◆ Storytelling and humor
- ◆ Gamification

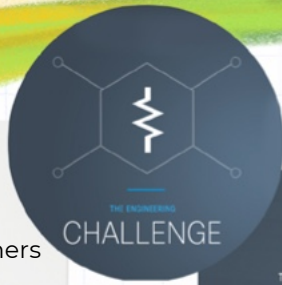
Results:

increase in customer satisfaction—specifically in the area of communication



learner net promoter score

Gamification: In addition to the course-level gamification, learners also earn badges by completing challenges. Challenges might involve an additional nanolearning course, an on-the-job stretch task, or collaborating with another learner.



What is the engineer of tomorrow?



+ DOES THIS MAKE MY LIFE EASIER?

+ WHAT IS THE ENGINEER OF TOMORROW?



The Engineering Challenge

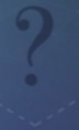
YOU HAVE COLLECTED ALL OF THE ITEMS AND YOU HAVE UNLOCKED THE CHALLENGE. CLICK THE CHALLENGE TO SEE WHAT YOU SHOULD ASSEMBLE WITH THE ITEMS YOU HAVE COLLECTED.



4x

1x

1x



Hands-on Activities: After each nanolearning piece, learners receive clues for a surprise “engineering challenge” they can build out of office supplies—with modifications from Ambassadors (senior engineers) so that differently abled learners can participate. This Star Wars X-Wing Fighter was a favorite!



Storytelling and humor: Narrator Priya becomes a private eye to solve a customer communication mystery! Learning experiences like these incorporate storytelling, humor, problem-solving, and elements of gamification.



Truth #2:

Life-centered learning is representative/inclusive.

Our diverse learners need to see and hear themselves in our learning solutions. And it's vital that they see themselves in all departments, at all levels of the organization. Depicting leaders and knowledge workers with all skin colors, genders, bodies, and abilities helps your people envision a long-term career path with you.

If you've somehow got a monolithic learner audience, you won't for much longer! With a BIPOC population of 53% under 40 in the U.S. alone, there's a good chance that your new hires will boost your team's diversity. Now is the time to ensure that your learning welcomes them home.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) wanted to do just that for its learner audience of 300,000 members in 165 countries.

We partnered with SHRM to create the People Manager Qualification (PMQ) program, an action-packed (and highly bingeable!) 10 hours of eLearning that focuses on the ups and downs of five friends, all rising managers.

With such a vastly diverse learner audience, creating relatable, relevant characters was critical. **To make that happen, the characters needed to be eclectic and engaging—just like the learners themselves.**

Desired Outcome: Give new people managers approaches and behaviors they can directly apply on the job, and reduce the costs of turnover due to poor management.

Learning Objectives: Build people managers' skills in four key areas:

- ✍ Effective Communication
- ◆ Performance Management
- ◆ Team Leadership
- ✍ Situational Judgment

Audience: New or current people managers

Results:

of learners share that they can directly apply approaches and behaviors from PMQ in their work as people managers



recommend PMQ to others

The team started by giving each character a backstory, including life experiences, work history, personality traits, goals and desires, strengths and weaknesses.

Characters were crafted with differing body types and abilities, gender identities and relationships, and skin colors and ethnic backgrounds.

Heather's the youngest member of the SHRM PMQ friend group and probably one of the most energetic.

Gender: Nonbinary
Pronouns: They/them
Age at start of show: 26
Occupation: Front of house individual contributor at a boutique hotel
Relationship Status: Single
Education: Bachelor of Arts

The team added tattoos, piercings, and creative hair color that expressed each character's individuality.

And, not least of all, every character needed to have different skills and abilities that allowed the team to teach SHRM's robust management content through their perspectives.



Truth #3:

Life-centered learning is enjoyable.

Learners are our guests, but a great stay isn't all business! We can make the experience of gathering needed knowledge and skills colorful and engaging for our learners.

Our client-partner, a global leader in snacks and beverages, wanted a fun learning experience to welcome new hires and encourage them to share their uniqueness. They chose a whimsical onboarding experience that combines storytelling, humor, fun 2D characters and animation, and standout interactivity in a single eLearning course.

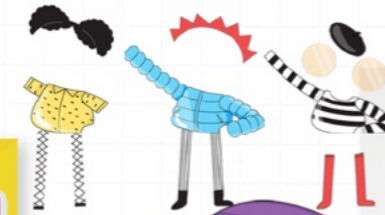
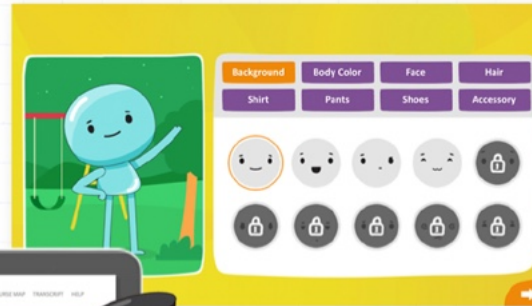
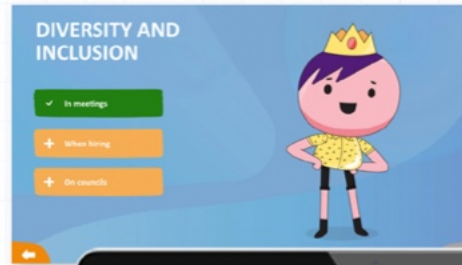
Desired Outcome: Shift learners' mindsets away from working for a specific brand and toward one of working for a unified global company.

Learning Objectives:

- ✏ Make individuals feel welcome.
- ♦ Embrace and celebrate their uniqueness.
- ♦ Create a sense of "oneness" and shared purpose.
- ✏ Encourage individuals to find and use their voice.

Audience: New hires

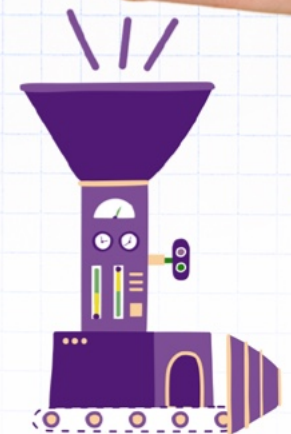
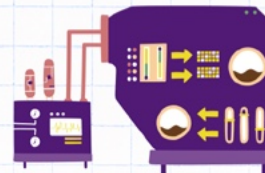
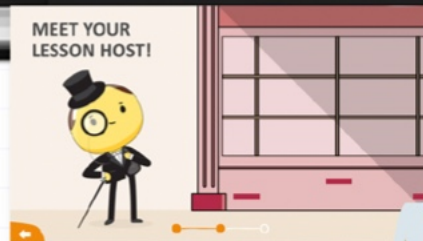
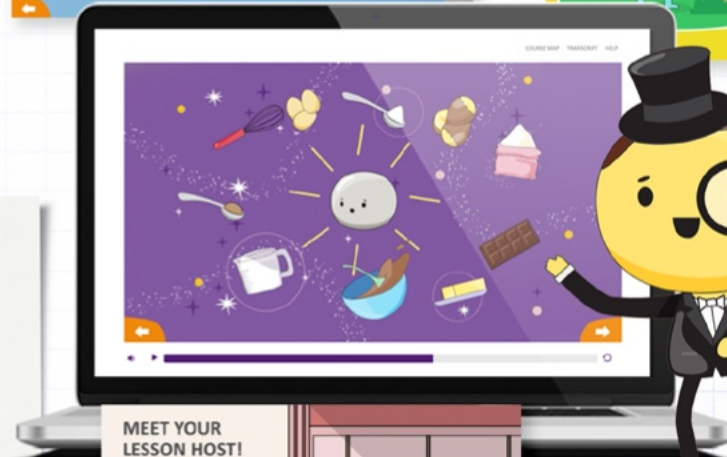
The theme is **“From Unique to Extraordinary,”** and the learner is the hero!



Learners create their own companion—a “unique ingredient” resembling a lollipop!—to accompany them on their onboarding journey. Learners unlock additional flair and fashion statements along the way.



Characters and avatars meet a group of diverse “hosts” at the Flavor Factory to share the company mission, culture, and heritage, and values of diversity and inclusion.



Truth #4:

Life-centered learning happens in the flow of work.

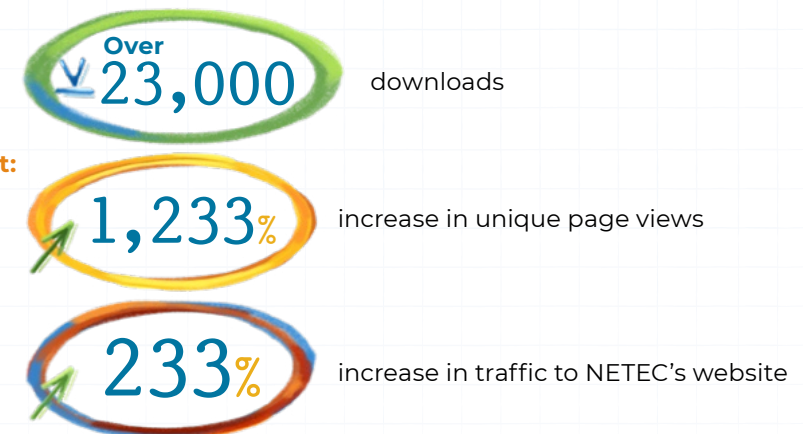
Our learners are often right in the middle of a task when they realize they need help. They literally have their hands full and need a nudge that responds to their questions within their flow of work. These nudges are called **performance supports**—solutions learners can access at their moment of need and then turn that information into action within seconds ([Training Solutions](#), 2012).

Our client-partner, the National Emerging Special Pathogens Training and Education Center (NETEC), had an especially urgent performance support need. Its global audience of frontline health-care workers needed up-to-the-minute information on the new COVID-19 virus. With findings emerging daily, even hourly, that was no small undertaking. And these life-saving resources needed to be easy to find, download, and understand—by any learner, anywhere in the world.

Desired Outcome: Distill global sources of information about COVID-19 into a digestible, actionable format—and boost NETEC's visibility as a trusted, apolitical source of current COVID-19 information.

Learning Objectives: Provide the most current and accurate information on COVID-19 transmission, immunity, and treatments to help learners save their patients' lives—and their own.

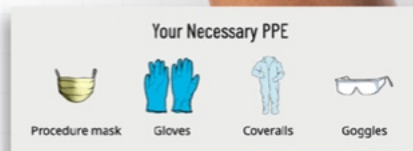
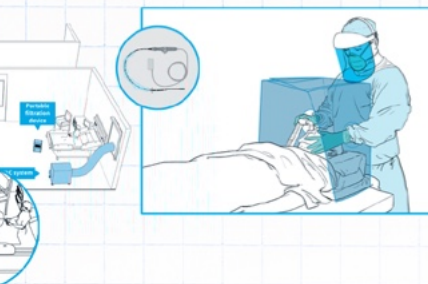
Audience: The 67 million-plus health-care workers (World Health Organization, 2016) around the world who serve in every type of care setting.

Measurement:

NETEC's COVID-19 Education and Training Resources Hub offers a simple user interface (UI) that is indexed, intuitive, and highly visual. The goal? Get overworked, exhausted learners to the lifesaving information they need—with minimal clicks.



NETEC's collection of point-of-need infographics delivers comprehensive coverage of COVID-19 through just-in-time performance support resources. Illustrations put learners at the center of the action and depict urgent procedures with clarity, accuracy, and dignity.



WHAT LEARNERS SAY	WHAT THEY MEAN	POTENTIAL LEARNING SOLUTIONS
<i>"I'm a road warrior."</i>	I can't watch or click—but I can listen!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">AudiobooksPodcastsStorytelling
<i>"I'm always on my phone."</i>	If you want my attention, give me a text—or an app!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">ChatbotGamesSocial LearningVideos
<i>"I'm not much of a reader."</i>	Reading is difficult for my eyes or brain. Show and tell me how!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">AudiobooksPodcastsStorytellingVideos
<i>"I learn by doing."</i>	Give me a few prompts, and I'll get the task done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Job AidsMicrolearningVideosVirtual Reality
<i>"I learn by watching someone else."</i>	Show me the steps from beginning to end.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">StorytellingVideos
<i>"I don't know what I don't know—until I need it!" and/or</i> <i>"I don't remember what I learned after the training's over."</i>	I need an easy way to get answers when I have questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">ChatbotJob AidsMicrolearningVideos

Make Learning Sticky with Story

Try these [four tips](#) to bring your learning experiences to life.



Life Looks Different After Learning

We've talked a lot about how we arrive at our learning solution—and what our designs might look like when we get there. But when the learning experience is over, we need to help our people with retention of the content and reentry into their jobs and lives.

Learning can stir up strong emotions, especially when it focuses on topics of personal growth, bias, and self-awareness. **That's part of its power.** But when we lead people into these powerful learning experiences, we have a responsibility to maintain the connection and conversation. Whether we do so in 1:1s, team meetings, all-hands meetings, or grassroots special-interest groups (or better yet, all of these!), **we need to make the space for continued conversation and reflection.**

When we challenge our people to consider new ideas, behaviors, and mindsets, we need to clear the way so that they can apply them. Removing the pebbles helps us keep our people inspired and moved through the course of our shared journey.

Quests

Friends, we've come to our final set of Quests.

We hope you'll forgive us the nostalgic turn, but we'd like to take a moment to look back at this common thread in this life-centered web.

Our Quests in Chapters 1 and 2 had us getting curious about the world and how to live in it well together.

In Chapter 3, we focused our curiosity and care on the range of experiences humans can have in different bodies and brains.

And here in Chapter 4, we learned how to turn our shared curiosity into the how and what of organizational learning. This final set of Quests has some thoughts about how to make space for continued curiosity in our lives and organizations.

And because we can't resist closing on a meta note, we'll leave you with this: The Quests, in themselves, have been adaptive learning (AL) experiences. They're tailored to your role; they come in different formats; and they're entirely voluntary. Only you know if and when you need them. Only you know when you feel curious.

C-Suite

HR and Management

Individual Contributors

QUESTS >**ALLOCATE
WISELY.**

Each learning program is a discrete investment, not an annual line item. Allocate funds for training based on the priority of the business and learner needs, audience size, and resource needs instead of a fixed dollar amount. Every audience has different needs, so these amounts may differ from year to year or department to department. That's okay! Equality means that everyone has their needs met—not that they get the same thing.

**ASK ABOUT THE
HOWS.**

Before you sign off on a learning investment, ask your stakeholders to describe the needs analysis and design process that helped them arrive at the solution. (Ideally, you'd be at the table for at least part of that process!) Request a copy of the needs analysis report (Chapter 4 of the [Needs Analysis Playbook](#) has a great model!) to enrich your discussion. You'll likely have some insights to share!

**ALIGN LEARNING
WITH YOUR
MISSION.**

Humans work and learn most productively when they have a purpose. Understanding how a learning program connects not only to their job role and department, but the shared organizational mission, helps your people take an active role in learning. Not sure how a course connects? Review the needs analysis report—and talk to your team—before you roll it out.

**STAY CLOSE
WITH
CHANGEMAKERS.**

Maintain ties with your change management and culture teams, and leverage their expertise to boost adoption and engagement with your learning content. Ask for their help in identifying and overcoming barriers to applying new skills, behaviors, and mindsets.

**PUT LEARNING
ON THE AGENDA.**

Reserve time in your 1:1s and team meetings to trade new information about the industry—and the world. Our learning culture arises from our everyday habits and conversations—model these for your people.

**FOLLOW
INNOVATIONS IN
DESIGN.**

Learner experience (LX) is a branch of user experience (UX), and UX experts can teach us a lot about great product and service design. (Learning is both, after all!) [The Interaction Design Foundation](#) (IDF), [IDEO](#), and the [Nielsen Norman Group](#) offer excellent information in their blogs and articles—and IDEO and IDF offer the opportunity to deepen your practice of UX and design thinking through online courses and certificate programs. See [Read/Watch/Listen](#) for more resources to help you get started.



QUESTS >

HR and Management

SEEK FEEDBACK ON TRAINING NEEDS.

Ask your team regularly what they're curious about. Do they worry about automation or want to learn a new technology? Seek feedback on their needs and areas of interest—and follow up with resources. They don't have to cost anything to be effective (See [Read/Watch/Listen](#) for some free resources.)

LEVERAGE FREE LEARNING.

Team members who want to round out their skills—or develop new ones—don't need to go back to school. Have them shadow team members with the target skill set and offer stretch assignments when possible. You don't need to do all the coaching yourself—ask experienced team members to provide feedback and support.

PUT LEARNING ON THE AGENDA.

Reserve time in your 1:1s and team meetings to trade new information about the industry—and the world. Our learning culture arises from our everyday habits and conversations—model this exchange for your people.

FOLLOW UP ON LEARNING.

Learning is a process, not a standalone event. Check in with your team as they reenter their routine after a learning experience. Ask how they're processing the learning and what obstacles they see to applying the new skills, behaviors, or mindsets. Look for ways to clear any pebbles (and boulders) and coach your people through internal barriers.

CREATE A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE.

When you sense that your people need to process and practice their learning, invite them to reserve calendar time for further conversation, reflection, and reading. Whether that takes the form of a book club or Slack channel, organization-wide forum, or individual study, or both, it's important to make space for learning over the long term.

ALIGN LEARNING WITH YOUR MISSION.

Humans work and learn most productively when they have a purpose. Understanding how a learning program connects not only to their job role and department, but the shared organizational mission, helps your people take an active role in learning. Not sure how a course connects? Review the needs analysis report—and talk to your team—before you roll it out.

KEEP YOUR EAR TO THE GROUND.

Listen for any new information that will affect (or derail) a learning program in progress. It's better to pivot now than after it's rolled out—and your foresight will prevent wasted time, budget, and energy.

FOR L&D PARTNERS: BREAK OUT OF THE SILO.

Stay in close contact with your stakeholders and learners, and gather their “wish lists” at regular intervals. (Done right, this can count as a needs analysis!) Doing so helps you connect the dots between business and learner needs—and strengthens your partnership with all. These allies are also great sources of feedback—invite them to design-thinking sessions to weigh in on learning programs in development.

FOLLOW INNOVATIONS IN DESIGN.

Learner experience (LX) is a branch of user experience (UX), and UX experts can teach us a lot about great product and service design. (Learning is both, after all!) [The Interaction Design Foundation](#) (IDF), [IDEO](#), and the [Nielsen Norman Group](#) offer excellent information in their blogs and articles—and IDEO and IDF offer the opportunity to deepen your practice of UX and design thinking through online courses and certificate programs. See [Read/Watch/Listen](#) for more resources to help you get started.

QUESTS >

Individual Contributors

STAY CURRENT.

Get curious about the conversation in your industry. What can you learn from the larger conversation—and your competitors? Follow influencers and outliers on social media; attend free webinars and online conferences on topics and technologies that interest you; and follow headlines on innovations. A few minutes per day can help you get familiar with leading makers and thinkers.

PRACTICE RESILIENCE AND FLEXIBILITY.

Take good physical and emotional care of yourself: Doing so supports your resilience as a person and professional and helps you remain open to continued growth. It also gives you the resilience to practice Radical Candor and exchange feedback.

PAY IT FORWARD.

Seen any good documentaries lately? Heard a great TED Talk? Mention it in your next team meeting or 1:1. A learning culture arises from our everyday habits and conversations—model this exchange for others. If you attended a course or webinar that was particularly well-delivered, talk about what made it effective. Talking about metacognition, or thinking about thinking, makes us more aware of how we learn.

ASK ABOUT PURPOSE.

Humans work and learn most productively when they have a purpose. Understanding how a learning program connects not only to your job role and department, but your shared organizational mission, helps you get more out of learning. Not sure how a course connects? Ask your supervisor what the training will help you do and what they'd like you to get from it.

USE YOUR VOICE.

Look for ways to apply Radical Candor to the learning opportunities at your organization. Join a design-thinking initiative or cross-functional ideation team where you can find allies and champions for your ideas. If you're uncomfortable with a learning experience or task, speak up. We need to say "Ouch" to hear the "Oops."

FOLLOW UP ON LEARNING.

Learning is a process, not a standalone event. Check in with your colleagues after you learn new skills, behaviors, or mindset and look for ways to process and practice them. Whether you start a lunchtime book club or private Slack channel—or just trade updates from your own research—it's important to make space for learning over the long term.

FOR L&D PARTNERS: BREAK OUT OF THE SILO.

Check in periodically with your stakeholders and learners, and gather informal "wish lists" when you can. Doing so helps you connect the dots between business and learner needs—and strengthens your partnership with all. These allies are also great sources of feedback—invite them to design-thinking sessions to weigh in on learning programs in development.

FOLLOW INNOVATIONS IN DESIGN.

Learner experience (LX) is a branch of user experience (UX), and UX experts can teach us a lot about great product and service design. (Learning is both, after all!) [The Interaction Design Foundation](#) (IDF), [IDEO](#), and the [Nielsen Norman Group](#) offer excellent information in their blogs and articles—and IDEO and IDF offer the opportunity to deepen your practice of UX and design thinking through online courses and certificate programs. See [Read/Watch/Listen](#) for more resources to help you get started.




Read/Watch/Listen

 [Strivr: 2020 learning predictions from Josh Bersin](#)

♦ [Forbes: The Future Of Learning: Top Five Trends For 2020](#)

♦♦ [From Surviving to Thriving: Our Best Virtual Transformation and L&D Articles of 2020](#)

 [Instructional Design Trends 2020: Four Shifts That Are Here to Stay](#)

♦ [Harvard Business Review: If You're Not Helping Employees Learn, You're Not Doing Your Job](#)

♦♦ [Harvard Business Review: Where Companies Go Wrong with Learning and Development](#)

 [Aeon Psyche: How to Think Clearly](#)


♦ [Needs Analysis Q&A](#)

♦♦ [Needs Analysis Webinar](#)

 [Webinar: Meeting Learners' Needs With Adaptive Learning](#)

♦ [eLearning Industry: Needs Analysis Assessment: How To Find Skills Gaps](#)

♦♦ [eLearning Industry: Identify Business Needs: 6 Stakeholder Analysis Questions](#)

 [eLearning Industry: Learning Needs Assessment Tips For L&D Managers: 3 Steps To Getting Buy-In for Your Vision](#)

♦ [eLearning Industry: How Training Needs Analysis Helps L&D Overcome Common Challenges](#)

♦♦ [Be a Learning Hero: Use Design Thinking](#)

 [10 Steps to Winning at Nanolearning](#)

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 [SHRM Toolkit: Developing Employees](#)

♦ [The Needs Analysis Playbook](#)

♦♦ [Hats Off to Adaptive Learning](#)

 [Virtual Reality for Our New Reality](#)

♦ [Virtual Training SweetRush-Style](#)

♦♦ [Emotional Design: Why We Love \(or Hate\) Everyday Things](#)

 [Things That Make Us Smart: Defending Human Attributes in the Age of the Machine](#)

♦ [Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability](#)



Ready for a human-centered approach to learning solution design?

Exciting, disruptive, and engaging, our **CoDesignSM workshop** is an experience at the **intersection of design thinking and ADDIE**. It's a powerful evolution in the way we approach needs analysis and design learning solutions.

Project complex? Solution less clear? Impact great?

CoDesign makes these projects faster, teams more cohesive, and solutions stronger and more learner-centric.



90% of our clients **recommend CoDesignSM** to others.



Where Do We Go from Here?

Most of us would agree: Our people aren't fine. Nobody's fine right now. As the negative headlines and uncertainty intensify and our fear brains light up, we need new sources of resilience.

Now more than ever, we need our organizations to be that source. We need ways of collaborating, communicating, and being that energize us. We need access to learning and skilling that help us evolve with our work. And when life gets tough, we need the support and flexibility that give us the space to care for ourselves and our loved ones.

We need work to stop being an extraction—the proverbial tooth-pulling—and start being an exchange of abundance.

We know that money talks—and it's still the primary voice some leaders hear. **The good news is that life-centered organizations don't just feel better; they do better.** The numbers speak for themselves: we do better business when we invest our profits in the service of life potential.

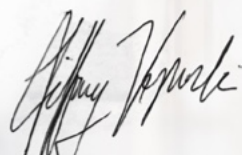
We hope you're as convinced as we are that the life-centered choice for people is, well, choice: the flexibility to determine **when, where, and how** they work. In turn, we tap into a global pool of talented people who are ready to give their best—because they're living their best lives.

We're not all in a position to rebuild our organizations from the ground up. But **we are all in a position to build strong relationships based on care, candor, and respect, and to influence those around us.** Our goal in these four chapters has been to offer a way for every human to share their own light—and be happier at work.

We're leaving you with a lot—but this isn't goodbye! Whether you're looking to lay the foundations of a life-centered business, demolish a domination culture, or stretch your team's skill set, our experts are here to plan and process with you. We never miss an opportunity to geek out over life, learning, and culture—and we'd love to match you with the right people to guide you through your plans, process, Quests, and questions.

We haven't been shy about sharing our Big Hairy Audacious goal of positively impacting the lives of a billion people—and perhaps this book will get us a little closer. We hope you'll share it with anyone curious about the life-centered cause.

Stay kind, stay curious, stay in touch—and thanks for joining us on this journey!



Tiffany Vojnovski

SweetRush Learning Evangelist



Empower Your People. Improve Performance. Make a Positive Impact.

WITH A COLLABORATIVE, INNOVATIVE PARTNER YOU CAN TRUST



CUSTOM LEARNING

Bespoke solutions are designed to motivate, build skills, and change behavior. Give us the opportunity to show you why we're judged the best.



CODESIGNSM

High-impact, complex challenge? Talk to us about CoDesign, our design thinking process. (It's disruptive.)



GOOD THINGS

Nonprofits, we stand in awe of what you do. Let us show you how learning and communication can amplify your impact.



SPARK

VR, AR, and immersive learning are a new world of opportunity. Curious? Confused? Let us be your guide and show you how these technologies can work for you.



thrive BY SWEETRUSH

Investing in our culture has been the secret to our success. Discover how we can help you create high-performing leaders and teams.



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Need temporary talent? We understand your needs and can quickly match you with the right L&D professional—because we do this work, too.

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In Our Clients' Words

"When we look to bring on new learning partners, one of the criteria that we look at is the **corporate culture of the organization** and whether or not we believe it would be a true partnership. **SweetRush comes out on top in this area.** Working with them always feels highly collaborative, and the team builds off of one another's ideas to get the best possible result for the Client. **When we work together, it is like we are all one team vs. two separate entities.**"

—Global Talent Development Leader, Consumer Goods

"I worked with the Center of Excellence for Transgender Health at UCSF to create an online program to help clinicians to be comfortable with and welcoming of transgender patients. Through every step of the process, **SweetRush showed respect and commitment far beyond what I anticipated from a vendor.** They're people who are **passionate about applying their craft for good**, are responsive to nuanced feedback, and are exceptionally professional."

—Director, Higher Education and Healthcare

"**Excellent and responsive team, great innovators, inclusive leadership.** All of this has made me and my team feel at home as if SweetRush were an extension of our internal team members."

—Product Management Lead, Secondary Education Start-up

"SweetRush's creativity, knowledge of instructional design, and capable team of experts are what make them an **industry leader.**"

—Education Manager, Nonprofit Organization

Author's Note

Not to get **too** meta, but my journey into a life-centered organization might look a bit like yours.

Like so many adventures, it began with curiosity. After almost a year at SweetRush, I understood **what** we did and **how** we did it—but I wanted to know **why** our methods worked and **where** they came from.

Luckily, I had a **team of experts** who were ready to show and tell. They led me back in time to our origins, when our cofounders created the blueprints for a life-centered business. The idea: Offer people autonomy and abundance, and they'll have the bandwidth to care deeply about their craft and be good people. (Radical, we know!)

They shared the best practices that help a tribe of generous, caring people with all kinds of brains, bodies, and life experiences work together and learn from each other.


And they shared how working on projects that matter with people they care about has made them kinder, nimbler, and more innovative. **Everyone** had a story about how their teams supported their need to sign off and show up as a partner, caregiver, or friend.

The takeaway: Good creates good, and doing good is great for business.

Maybe you believe that work can be an exchange of abundance between people and organizations—but you need some help imagining how that exchange might look.

Maybe you're not yet sure what it means to work in service of life potential and you don't know what to expect.

I've been there! That's exactly how I felt as I started this epic quest into the heart of SweetRush. And while I didn't face off with a hydra or walk through the underworld, I did come back changed for the better.



Tiffany Vojnovski
SweetRush Learning Evangelist

Bio

Tiffany Vojnovski has worked in learning since 2006, in roles spanning from secondary education and school leadership to instructional and message design for adult learners.

As a Learning Evangelist for SweetRush, she is passionate about sharing the stories of how clients and teams work together to create learning solutions that make the world a better place. Her other passions include learning languages, volunteering with humans and avians, and writing a proprietary blend of fact and fiction about Eastern Europe.



Photo credit: Alex Vojnovski

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Annie Hodson
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