

People & Organizational Performance Practice

# Apprenticeship gets a makeover

It may sound like an outdated term, but apprenticeship remains a powerful tool in today's businesses for building skills, increasing collaboration, and retaining talent.



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**In this episode** of *The McKinsey Podcast*, McKinsey director of learning Lisa Christensen and McKinsey partner Tony Gambell speak with McKinsey executive editor Roberta Fusaro about what apprenticeship looks like in today's organizations and how an intentional two-way learning environment can help individuals and teams tackle problems more effectively and meet their performance goals. In this episode, we also hear from McKinsey senior partner Robert Palter, featured in our *My Rookie Moment* series, about the valuable lesson he learned from his boss when confronted with a difficult client.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

*The McKinsey Podcast* is cohosted by Roberta Fusaro and Lucia Rahilly.

## Defining modern-day apprenticeship

**Roberta Fusaro:** When I think of apprenticeship, I think of my uncle in Italy who apprenticed with a tailor and then opened his own shop. How do both of you define apprenticeship?

**Lisa Christensen:** When I think of apprenticeship, I think about a teacher–learner relationship that happens in the flow of work. There is somebody who has skills who is teaching someone else those skills, helping that person move toward greater independence.

We know apprenticeship is working when somebody is able to start doing things more and more independently. Apprenticeship is an opportunity to transfer expertise from someone who knows how to do something to someone who is just learning.

**Tony Gambell:** A lot of the concepts of apprenticeship are unchanged and are around skill transfer from an expert to a novice. The biggest realization that we're finding these days is that in the world of knowledge working, or in a place where

expertise is cognitive as opposed to physical, we have to think about apprenticeship differently. We have to act differently and speak differently and use a different skill set to be able to transfer knowledge and skills more efficiently.

**Roberta Fusaro:** How does apprenticeship differ from other teaching and learning models that folks in businesses today are more familiar with, like mentorship, sponsorship, or coaching?

**Lisa Christensen:** Mentorship is important, because from mentors you get advice and direction. They can help you think about what you should be doing. From sponsors, you get real opportunities. They can create new opportunities for you to lead or work in different ways that you have not before.

From an apprenticeship relationship, you get skills. We do think there are differences between those three kinds of relationships. All are important, but apprenticeship comes with a set of techniques that you can use as an expert to grow skills in the people around you, techniques that are different than just giving them advice or even trying to create opportunities for them. There are some really specific things that help grow skills in other people.

**Tony Gambell:** Something I've come to really believe is that apprenticeship is not a selective commitment. As leaders, we have a responsibility to grow the skills of the people in our organizations. Whereas you might choose a mentor or choose a mentee—and likewise with sponsorship—apprenticeship is a commitment, an obligation, that we should all embrace.

**Lisa Christensen:** Tony, I've heard you say something before that's really interesting, which I wrote down and I think about in my regular work: when someone's on my watch, my job is to help make them better. My job is to look around me and say, "What skills do I possess, and how can I help transfer those to other people?" I love the idea that this is an obligation for leaders and something that we should all be doing.

## The four techniques you need to know

**Roberta Fusaro:** What skills are required for an apprenticeship relationship to succeed?

**Lisa Christensen:** The research tells us there are four techniques that make up the skill set of apprenticeship: modeling, scaffolding, coaching, and fading. At a high level, here's what those things mean. Modeling is my ability to show you what I know and help you understand the rationale behind it.

Scaffolding is the support that I create around you. That can look like anything. That could be a document that I give you. That could be a YouTube video I send you to look at. That could be me talking to you or coaching you in a situation. I provide support to help you do the work.

Coaching is the feedback, the pointers, the tips, the things that I do to help you as you are doing the work. So you do it, and I give you lots of rich feedback so that you can get better at it.

Fading is knowing when to pull back. As you start to get better and better, I am able to remove some of the training wheels that I'm providing for you, and you're able to act with increasing independence.

**Tony Gambell:** One of the biggest insights for me around apprenticeship is the notion of scaffolding. Scaffolding is a method or a language that makes your invisible insights visible.

There was a time when I had to visit four factories in a week, and there was no way I could physically do it. Some of my colleagues had to go look at the other factories while I was looking at one or two of them.

I created a template for how I look at factories: here are the questions that I ask, here are the things I look for, and here is the output that I typically present after doing a one-day factory walk-through. I found it was quite effective to not only get to a good output for my clients, but it also upskilled the people that I was working with on how I think about factory walk-throughs. And in doing so, I was scaffolding.

## No hierarchy means more diversity

**Roberta Fusaro:** Does apprenticeship have to be top down? Or can it go the other way?

**Lisa Christensen:** It should go both ways. One of the core tenets of apprenticeship is that it is nonhierarchical. It doesn't have to be a senior person apprenticing a junior person.

That certainly happens, but it doesn't have to be that way. The person who has the skills should embrace the responsibility, the obligation, and the opportunity of helping other people get the same skills they have.

**Tony Gambell:** As the problems we're solving in the world become more and more complex, it's really valuable to have diversity in problem solving and different perspectives. So oftentimes, even just the interaction of people of different tenures, backgrounds, or expertise really does help you get to a better answer. And oftentimes, the most amazing insight will come from a pair of fresh eyes, someone who is brand new to the organization and who has a different way of looking at things.

**Roberta Fusaro:** This calls to mind the notion of multigenerational workforces. Is there a generational component to apprenticeship that leaders need to think about if they're trying to build more apprenticeship into their organization?

**Lisa Christensen:** One thing does come to mind, which is that we live in an era where information is much more accessible than it has ever been before. I am not as dependent on the people around me to teach me. I can learn in lots of different ways.

In the work I do in the field of learning, for a long time there's been this concern about how to get the younger generations to stop searching for answers and come to us instead. I think that's the wrong way to look at it. If people are googling or watching YouTube videos for great information, wherever they're finding it, how do we start to think about also bringing experts and expertise and apprenticeship

into that ecosystem so that people aren't out searching on their own, but that it's part of a full experience that they're getting? They're getting information from wherever they find it, but they are also learning from experts and people who do something really well.

## Barriers to effective apprenticeship

**Roberta Fusaro:** What are some of the obstacles to engaging in apprenticeship models in organizations today?

**Tony Gambell:** One of the most important unlocks is the mindset of intentionality.

This became really clear to me last year when we were piloting concepts of cognitive apprenticeship with about 180 of our colleagues globally. After three months, we found that 80 percent of participants experienced better apprenticeship relationships.

**Lisa Christensen:** When I think about intentionality, it's acting with purpose. The things I do, the choices I make, the ways that I interact with you—I'm making those choices quite purposefully. For example, maybe you get a deliverable, and it's not what you want it to be, you change it and make it right.

Nobody can learn anything from that, but if you sit with somebody and you say, "Here are the ten comments that I made on this deliverable. Let's talk through them. Let's go into this thing that I need you to do differently. Let's talk about why this matters."

The deliverable is going to get produced one way or another. If you start to model the thinking, it can become a tool for learning—or it could be a missed opportunity. So for me, part of what we're describing is intentionality: making purposeful choices about using the work to further other people's skills.

**Roberta Fusaro:** When you talk about better apprenticeship, what are some of the discrete outcomes and metrics you use? Is it about the

nature of the relationships or the nature of the outcomes or the deliverables?

**Tony Gambell:** At the end of the day, it comes down to growth and learning. I'll highlight one insight that I think is the real unlock, and that is the idea in cognitive apprenticeship that the insights are invisible. They're in your head. An expert has a mental model on how they see the world, and a novice or a learner is trying to learn that mental model.

To me, the metric of success is the extent to which the learner has adopted that new mental model. Not that they've reflected feedback. Not that they've changed something in an output of work. But that they've changed their mental model so that when they see a situation later, independent of the expert, they will be better skilled and better able to address that same situation.

**Lisa Christensen:** I like that idea of invisible insights. I think that's critical to the work, because so much of the work that we do in our environments is not work that you can observe. Even what we're doing right now. You might be able to observe us recording this podcast, but the actual work is happening in my mind.

So if I'm going to help other people grow their skills, I need to get a lot better at being able to give voice to that cognition. I have to be able to talk about my thinking. I have to be able to model it for other people. And it is through that modeling that I start to build their skills.

Work is so heavily cognitive: sitting in a meeting and managing stakeholders, thinking about how you build deliverables or what somebody will need to see in a presentation or hear in a conversation. That work is all deeply cognitive. You can't see it. So the idea of embracing apprenticeship techniques that help you model those invisible insights is a really important differentiator in this work, and in the skills to becoming a great "apprentisor"—someone who apprentices others.

**‘The value of the expert is amazing, but that value is multiplied if they’re able to share their mental model with a whole community of people in their companies.’**

–Tony Gambell

**Tony Gambell:** We’ve learned more and more that the deeper you are an expert in something, the harder it will be for you to explain your mental model. That’s made me think about expertise in a different way, and the value of an expert in an organization relative to the work that they’re doing.

That’s going to be one of the biggest organizational challenges we have in the future: finding ways to encourage and incentivize and help experts train communities of experts within companies so that their knowledge becomes institutional knowledge. The value of the expert is amazing, but that value is multiplied if they’re able to share their mental model with a whole community of people in their companies.

### **Apprenticeship in a hybrid world**

**Roberta Fusaro:** We’re not always co-located, and as much as the information is in my brain, sometimes it’s easier if you and I are sitting side by side. How do we think about apprenticeship differently in today’s post-COVID-19, often-hybrid work environment?

**Tony Gambell:** A good question, Roberta, and one that we have been talking about a lot internally. Our research does tell us that apprenticeship has relied on informal collision moments in the past. Those are the unplanned moments when two coworkers collide, so to speak, or find time to connect, whether it’s following a meeting or over a cup of coffee.

Something like greater than 80 percent of apprenticeship was happening in these unplanned moments. But when you’re in a remote world, those physical collision moments just don’t happen. Which again brings me back to the point about intentionality—you can create those moments if you’re a bit more thoughtful about how you manage your calendar and find time to connect with people.

It’s also important for us to continue to look for ways to work collaboratively with people, even when in remote situations. The simple fact is that if you’re doing work together, you will learn from one another.

**Lisa Christensen:** One of the things that we are excited about is the idea that we might actually be able to start to get greater scale in an organization if people’s skills are stronger and they’re less dependent on those collision moments.

If that's what you think apprenticeship is, if you think it's the car ride to the airport or the walk back to your office after a meeting, then your view is limited in what you can do. You have to create some space in a remote environment that you wouldn't otherwise have to create, but it's really a lot more about skill and your ability to grow the skills of others than it is about a moment that happens.

## The long-term payoff

**Roberta Fusaro:** Can you give us an example of how a manager and a team member can incorporate apprenticeship into their process?

**Tony Gambell:** Let's take an example where a worker has sent a presentation or a document to a manager in preparation for a meeting the following day. As the manager, I'll look at it and I may see that there are a lot of changes that need to be made.

In my haste, I may look at it and say, "I know exactly what needs to be done. I'm just going to make all the changes myself. I know what I'm looking for and I have the expertise and it will just take much less time."

That's a common practice, or perceived as a common practice, that taking the path of least resistance will get you to a good answer for the next day. However, what I will miss out on is the opportunity to apprentice the person on my team.

Alternatively, what I could do is pick up the phone and talk through the document with the person on my team, walking through all the changes that I was going to make myself individually, but do them with the coworker, explaining why along the way.

It's also important to explain the why, which might be as simple as, "I prefer this word choice," or "I prefer telling a story that's more direct as opposed to indirect." Or it might even be the formatting of the page.

In the end, if I'm going to do the work anyway, why not do the work in a way that develops a person on my team so that they will grow their skills independently? So the next time they send a document or prepare for the same sort of meeting, they've advanced their skills and they're much more capable of doing what we're looking for them to do.

If we're deliberate and we take the time up front, it will save time. It will.

**Lisa Christensen:** It will. And that's one of the biggest concerns that we hear in our work right now: "I don't have time to do this." It will pay off in the long run, both for you and for them.

**Tony Gambell:** Here's one more example. In a remote world, I'm starting to see that a lot of us are doing our work independently and sequentially, as opposed to working together collaboratively.

So what I've started doing is, even in a remote-working world, if you're going to have a one-on-one meeting with someone, invite someone from your team who can join the meeting, observe, listen, and apprentice with you. Even in those small instances, built up over time, your team will grow.

**Lisa Christensen:** It's really about providing people exposure to lots of different situations in which they can practice—so that it's not just theoretical, but it's all of these instances where you're actually doing work together.

## Hire for will, train for skill

**Roberta Fusaro:** I want to dive in on the actual apprenticeship relationship. Does enthusiasm matter more than experience when it comes to building a successful apprenticing relationship?

**Lisa Christensen:** I think it's both, right? And I think it's license and liberty to feel like you can grow other people's skills and that you should be doing that.

Certainly, we want people who have deep, rich skills in an organization to be apprenticing others. But if you're really excited about teaching what you know to other people, we collectively believe you should take the liberty to do that.

There's something implicit in this question about what if we teach somebody wrong. I understand that concern. But if apprenticeship is a rich environment inside an organization, I'm not learning from just Tony. I'm not learning from just you. I'm learning from everybody around me. And I'm not trying to create somebody who's exactly like me. I'm trying to create really great designers or I'm trying to create really great leaders.

**Tony Gambell:** There's an age-old debate about whether you hire for skill or hire for will. And I think you're right—you're looking for both. But at the end of the day, I am more and more convinced that you can hire for will and train for skill.

If someone has the enthusiasm to learn, and you as an organization have an enthusiasm to teach, then you have a commitment to each other that this is the type of formula that's really going to be successful.

## Beware the mini-me mindset

**Roberta Fusaro:** Lisa, you mentioned this notion that you don't want to apprentice only people who are exactly like yourself. How do you avoid the mini-me bias?

**Lisa Christensen:** That's a really important thing to think about. There is somebody on my team who I really enjoy working with. I really enjoy apprenticing him because he is exactly like me. He thinks the same way I think, and so those conversations just feel very easy and they gel.

However, part of my obligation as a leader is then to look around and say, "OK, I certainly should spend time with him, and work and help build his skills.

But I can't only spend time with him. I have to find opportunities for everybody on the team. I have to try to build the skill set of everybody on the team."

They don't all need to be exactly like me. Trying to intentionally avoid that mini-me bias and having awareness that that's a possibility is a really important first step.

**Tony Gambell:** Another bonus benefit that comes from avoiding the mini-me mindset is that sometimes the experts need a different point of view to continue learning themselves. Experts have blind spots too.

I'm a manufacturing expert, so I've been in over 200 factories. I credit myself for being able to read a factory pretty quickly. But a couple years ago, I brought along with me a colleague who really had no background in manufacturing but was super deep in corporate finance.

After we walked through the factory, we compared notes, and I shared the different levers that you could pull to improve the factory's productivity and improve the throughput, improve the quality. And the colleague I was working with stopped and said, "I see you could do all those things, but I don't think this factory's making any money, nor do I think it's structurally able to make any money."

And he did the back-of-the-envelope math to show me. And he was right. The factory was structurally unprofitable. I didn't have that lens to look at this. I was coming to it with my pattern recognition and my well-refined expert lens of "How do you fix a factory?" Having a diverse viewpoint creates another situation of learning for the expert as well.

In the end, not only did I, as a leader and expert, learn a new way to look at a problem, we actually solved the problem in a better way. We need to be open to the idea that as leaders, if we are open to different perspectives we will get to better answers.

**Lisa Christensen:** I like that so much, and it reinforces something that we keep saying but is really important: this has to become an ecosystem where everybody is learning and everybody is teaching, and we're doing that all the time for one another.

### It's OK to fade

**Roberta Fusaro:** Both sides of the apprenticeship relationship are going to have different work experiences, inputs, successes, and failures. How do we think about maintaining these relationships over time?

**Lisa Christensen:** One of the important techniques we're teaching folks is the ability to fade: the ability to dial down their support as somebody's skills increase. As you see somebody's independence increasing—they're doing the work on their own, they're much more effective on their own—it's OK to fade back.

An apprenticeship relationship might be for a season. It might be for a specific skill. It might be

for a specific moment. Or it might last for a really long time. But the relationship is quite fluid, and as the expert, knowing how to dial up or down your support is an important part of the skill of apprenticing others.

**Tony Gambell:** If you're talking about expertise apprenticeship, the arc of learning is much longer. It could be years or even decades. When you're talking about expertise apprenticeship, then you have to be much more deliberate about who you're choosing to learn from.

**Lisa Christensen:** That gives me one other thought that circles back to something we talked about at the beginning. Which is that there is a distinction between apprenticeship and mentorship. And some of those people might overlap for you.

It's important to be explicit about the types of relationships you have with different people. You might stay connected to somebody for a really long time as a great mentor, and sometimes you'll apprentice with them a little bit and sometimes you might apprentice less. Both of those things can be true in the same moment.

**‘Something we keep saying but is really important is that this has to become an ecosystem where everybody is learning and everybody is teaching, and we’re doing that all the time for one another.’**

—Lisa Christensen



## Everybody learns, everybody teaches

**Roberta Fusaro:** Lisa and Tony, how can organizations use apprenticeship to begin to reshape their cultures around this idea of continuous learning?

**Lisa Christensen:** There are a couple of important things. Creating an organizational expectation that everybody learns and everybody teaches is the first thing. And then the second thing is making sure that everybody has the skills to apprentice one another.

**Tony Gambell:** Let me pile on with two practices or habits that I think have made this come to life for me. First is about creating space for apprenticeship. That's looking for windows of time throughout the day that you could stop and have moments of apprenticeship with people on your team. Or if you're the learner, that you deliberately pause and ask someone why they acted the way they did, or if they can explain what they said and what was behind it.

The second thing is there's a difference between giving feedback and giving development-oriented feedback. The difference just comes down to the words we use.

I can say, "Change these words," or "Write this sentence instead." But if I just pause for a moment and say, "Because this will get us to a better outcome," or "Because the person you're writing to is going to be sensitive about what you just wrote here, so we need to write it differently," that explanation alone explains why I'm giving the feedback and is developmental in nature. And the person I'm talking to will be better for it going forward.

**Roberta Fusaro:** This has been a great conversation. I know I've learned a lot. Lisa, Tony, thank you for joining us today.

**Tony Gambell:** My pleasure, Roberta. It's been great. Thanks so much.

**Lisa Christensen:** Yes, thank you for having us.

**Lucia Rahilly:** And now, let's hear from senior partner Robert Palter, who, early in his career at McKinsey, learned a big lesson from his manager about how to handle a client who wouldn't take no for an answer.

**Robert Palter:** The first time I had to have a difficult conversation with a client, I was leading this engagement where I was helping a client assess a potential acquisition. We'd been working confidentially with the CEO alone because it was a high-profile transaction. And after about five weeks, the team had come to view that this acquisition probably was not the smartest or most attractive investment for this client to do.

We took our analysis and wrote a very detailed memo with all the backup work. I sent it to the CEO and scheduled a meeting to brief him on our findings. In advance of the scheduled meeting, the CEO called my office, found my assistant, and said, "Wherever Rob Palter is, you find him and you tell him to come down to my office immediately. I need to speak to him." As a young project leader, I was very nervous.

So I quickly hopped in a cab and ran down to the client's office, and I walked into his office, and he said, "I received your memo. And I've received your analysis where you concluded that this was not an attractive transaction for us to do. I want you to know that I vehemently disagree with you and that you will change this memo. You will write a memo to me saying that McKinsey wholeheartedly supports this transaction and thinks that it's an excellent thing for this organization to do. And if you do not write that memo, I won't pay your fees." I was petrified.

So I walked out of the CEO's office and I called the senior partner who was working with me and I told him what had transpired. The senior partner looked at me and said, "Rob, do you believe in your analysis?" And I said, "Yes, absolutely. I believe in the analysis." He said, "Rob, do you believe that it's the wrong thing for this client to do?" And I said, "Yes, I do believe it's the wrong thing for this client to do." He said, "Great. Let's get together tonight. Let's

spend an extra hour or two going through all the work to make sure that I agree and you agree and the entire team agrees. Let's bring in somebody from outside our team to look at our work and see if they agree with our conclusions. If the conclusion is that we stand behind our work, then we stand behind our work."

We went through every page as a team, every analysis, every model, read the memo, checked the conclusions. I said to the senior partner, "Well, what do we do about the threat about not paying our fees?" And he looked at me and he said, "We have a professional obligation to be objective and independent. And if we objectively and independently conclude that this is not the right

thing for the client—which we do—then we need to stand behind our work and tell the client that. And if we remain with our fees unpaid, so be it."

I called up the CEO the next day, and I said, "We've done a thorough review. We're not changing our position. And if you choose not to pay us and you choose not to work with us again, so be it." The CEO said, "That's fine. We're not working together again. And I'm not paying you." And I said, "OK." The CEO subsequently went on to do the transaction, and it did not work out well, and it ended that CEO's career. We no longer work with that client, and unfortunately it didn't work out for anyone, but at least we were objective and independent.

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**Lisa Christensen** is director of learning in McKinsey's Learning Design Center of Excellence and is based in McKinsey's Bay Area office, **Tony Gambell** is a partner in the Chicago office, and **Robert Palter** is a senior partner in the Toronto office. **Roberta Fusaro** is an executive editor in the Waltham, Massachusetts, office. **Lucia Rahilly** is global editorial director and deputy publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing and is based in the New York office.

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