



Encourage a learning environment at your studio



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Encourage a learning environment at your studio

It seems like with each passing day, a new technology expands and hits the headlines with promises of success.

As great as technology may be, it's only as effective as the people using it. Hours spent working inefficiently can add up to the difference between a project hitting its deadline or a project going over budget.

When Peter Drucker coined the term “knowledge worker” in the 1950s, he certainly wasn't thinking about artists using software like 3ds Max or Maya. And yet whether or not you use the term, your team is made up of knowledge workers. More than ever before, knowledge workers are quickly becoming the strongest asset of nearly every creative industry.



When Peter Drucker coined the term “knowledge worker” in the 1950s, he certainly wasn’t thinking about artists using software like 3ds Max or Maya. And yet whether or not you use the term, your team is made up of knowledge workers. More than ever before, knowledge workers are quickly becoming the strongest asset of nearly every creative industry.

Simply put, your team’s most valuable asset isn’t the latest and greatest technology they use. It’s the knowledge your team brings to the table. And like any tool in your studio’s arsenal, you need to make sure your team’s knowledge stays up-to-date and relevant.

In 2009, McBassi & Company released a study which found a correlation between rising stock prices and investing in employee training. By feeding your team’s knowledge, you’ll be able to cultivate long-term success while at helping your entire studio better prepare for whatever challenges may come.

KNOW YOUR TEAM’S REAL NEEDS

The most expensive cost of your team’s learning is their time, both during the actual learning but also as they’re pulled away from income-generating projects in favor of learning.

Like storyboards for a movie or a well-planned game design document, the first step to encouraging a learning environment at your studio is to put together a plan for what your team needs are.

You can combat this by dedicating a little bit of your own time up front to put a little structure behind your team’s learning time.

A great place to start is to answer the following statements:

As artists, my team needs to _____.

As co-workers, my team needs to _____.

Of course you can customize the statements above for your team and add to them as you need, but the benefit behind an exercise like this is to force you to think more about the needs of your team in multiple perspectives. After all, they're more than a group of people who need to stay on top of the latest trends.

More importantly, they're people who may not be able to, or want to, take a trip to GDC to learn those trends. Whether they don't like to travel or they have family

obligations, when you put the considerations of your team as people at the forefront of your decision-making everyone will appreciate it.

Sometimes it's helpful to run a simple exercise like this and then sleep on it. When you come back with fresh eyes, are the things you've identified still the needs of your team? Once you've established the needs of your team, you make a good decision on how your team can learn most effectively.

ENCOURAGE TEAM LEARNING

While there's always going to be times when your team members need to learn on their own, there's a lot of benefits from learning as a team. Since everyone has a different background, everyone also approaches learning with a different perspective.

Even if it's as simple as making sure everyone is speaking with the same terminology, by going through learning exercises together your team will be able to communicate much better.



“...your team should be sharing new tips and tricks with each other on a daily basis...”

As the team leader, your role during these sessions is to both participate and facilitate affirmations for your team. Everyone has a different level of experience, but no one knows everything so as much as possible try to foster a positive learning experience.

A great approach to this could be to offer a free lunch for any team members who want to stay in periodically to learn something new as a team. Or if you can't get the cost of a team lunch approved, try a monthly learning club where everyone on your team is encouraged to learn the same thing throughout the month. It could be a book, tutorial, website or anything. Then, at the end the entire team can discuss what they've learned.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Not all learning is done in front of a computer screen or at a conference. In fact, one of the best and most cost-effective ways of learning is through teaching. Although having your artists teach at a local user group or conference is a great learning experience for them, not

all artists are comfortable with public speaking. They should, however, be comfortable sharing ideas with the rest of your team.

It's always going to be faster to have the specialists on your team do what they do best, but having them work in silos isn't necessarily going to be what's best for the team as a whole. You can help this in your team by looking for opportunities to allow your team members to teach others.

Ideally, your team should be sharing new tips and tricks with each other on a daily basis, but if that's not happening it may be up to you to encourage that behavior. One great method for starting to encourage this sort of collaborative behavior is to block off a few minutes each morning with the whole team.

Depending on the size of your team, you can either have your whole team share at once or if you have a larger team you can have a different team member share something they've learned since the last time they shared.



You'll need to identify what sort of learning will fit those needs.

Did your Senior Character Artist find a cool, new technique for sculpting scratches into leather? The more you encourage your team to set aside a few minutes a day to share the new things they've learned on a daily basis, the more the rest of the team will feel comfortable sharing what they've learned either with the rest of the team as a whole or on a more one-on-one basis.

Another great method of learning through teaching is with local user groups. If there's one near by, encourage your artists to attend or even teach a session.

JUSTIFY THE TRAINING

If you've filled out the statements above, created similar statements of your own or even if you already know what your team needs, you'll need to identify what sort of learning will fill those needs.

While there are some great methods of learning without the need for an added cost, very often there may be the need for some fresh ideas, techniques or solutions from an external source. Whether those costs go towards supporting a local user group, a Pluralsight subscription or something like a trip to SIGGRAPH, in the eyes of your studio they are still all additional costs.



Whether you're leading a team of two or twenty, you can help artists become better at what they do.

In the real world, this means you'll need to be able to justify extra costs before you're able to incorporate any sort of learning for your team. You may know it's beneficial for your TDs to learn new rigging techniques for the next project, but does the person approving your budget know that?

When you're sitting down to write a justification instead of jumping into it right away, take a couple minutes first to put yourself in the mind of the person reading the justification.

If you jump right into writing a justification for something, often the justification ends up being more

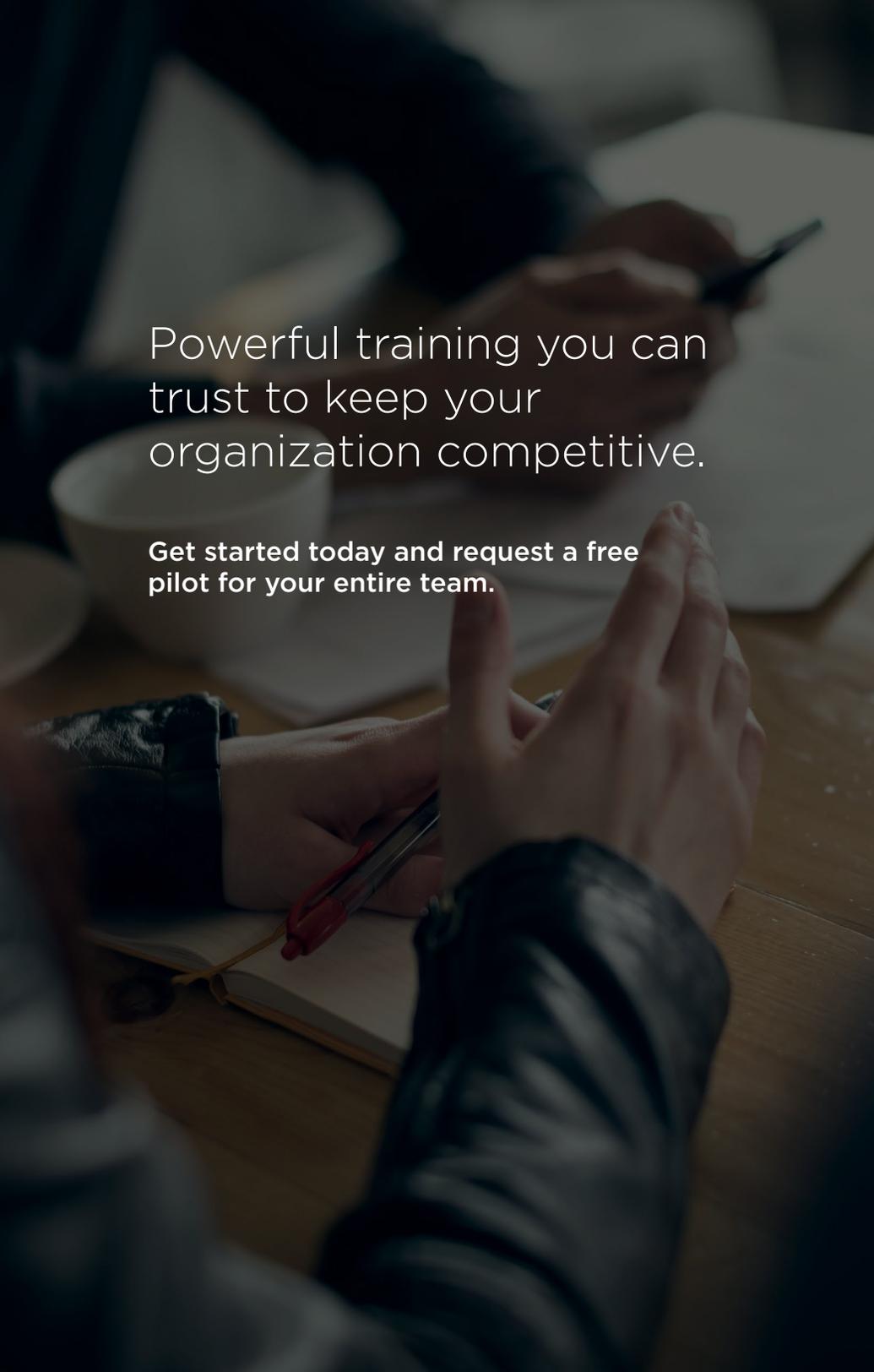
about what your team needs and not why your team needs it. In the end, justifications that tell the what and not the why aren't nearly as effective.

Jot down a few questions from the perspective of the person you're writing the justification for and then take the time to answer them. Why does your team need to learn X instead of Y? Why will this training benefit the whole studio (or, what's the ROI for the studio)? What are some alternatives and why did you end up deciding on X instead of Y?

IN CONCLUSION

In such a fast-paced industry where every year brings new technologies capable of amazing things, being anything but life-long learners isn't really an option for CG artists. And yet, for many artists it can be all too easy to get wrapped up in projects and let self-learning fall by the wayside.

Whether you're leading a team of two or twenty, you can help your artists become better at what they do and, by extension, your studio will become more successful by seeking out opportunities for your artists to learn.



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