

How the Heck Does Peer Learning Work?

Written by: Dr. Nanette Miner, Managing Consultant/Succession Strategist, The Training Doctor

Most of us grew up equating learning with being taught. Someone stands at the front of the room, tells us what they know, and we dutifully take notes. That model works fine for transferring information. It's far less effective for developing judgment, perspective, confidence, and leadership capability.

Peer learning works to develop these more esoteric skills because the value isn't in who knows more. It's in how people think together.

When peers come together, especially peers facing similar challenges, they bring different experiences, assumptions, blind spots, and decision-making styles. They may have the same job titles or years on the job, but experience is the greatest teacher, and they do not all have the same experiences.

For example:

Imagine you bring together your project managers (PMs) for a half-day each month. One PM brings up a project that's technically on schedule but slowly bleeding margin. Trade partners are pushing back, the superintendent is frustrated, and the client keeps asking for "small" changes that aren't small at all.

As the group digs in to collectively solve this "problem," something interesting happens.

One peer talks about a similar situation where early conversations with the client changed expectations before costs spiraled. Another admits they waited too long to involve preconstruction – and paid for it later. A third realizes, out loud,



that they've been avoiding a tough conversation with a trade partner because they didn't want to strain the relationship.

No one needed to "teach" scheduling or cost control. What mattered was how each person approached the problem, what they noticed, what they avoided, and what they'd do differently next time.

That's the learning.

Peers help one another by asking better questions than a "teacher" often can. Questions like:

- » Why did you choose that approach?
- » What options did you rule out – and why?
- » What assumptions are you making? (My personal favorite.)
- » What would you do differently next time?

These questions require attention, curiosity, and psychological safety, not degrees, titles, or seniority.

Two additional benefits of peer learning:

1. Peer learning forces articulation. Explaining your thinking to others clarifies it for yourself. Many participants realize what they actually believe – or don't – only when they say it out loud. Reflection is an amazing “development” tool.
2. The group generally continues conversations outside of the “formal” half-days, which means you've achieved continuous learning and engagement. If Raul gave you great advice during the group meeting, why would you wait for the next meeting to ask for advice? You'd call him up and ask, “Can I run something by you?” right?

This doesn't mean subject matter experts have no role. They do. But in effective peer learning groups, experts act as facilitators, not lecturers. They guide the process; they don't dominate the content.

Peer learning is different from what most of us are used to when we think about “learning.” It isn't lowering the bar. It's raising the quality of thinking.

And when it comes to developing leadership competencies, that's what actually moves the needle. 🦋



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is an expert in building ready and capable leadership teams for succession and exit.

Any views and opinions expressed in this article may or may not reflect the views and opinions of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA). By publishing this piece, CMAA is not expressing endorsement of the individual, the article, or their association, organization, or company.