

The Bloomfire Manifesto

A Declaration of Interdependence

A Few Words of Beginning.

This is about learning and teaching, the dual magic that blossoms around us each day of our existence. It is about the long and short of how we become better human beings. The hard and soft interactions that shape our minds and personalities.

Mostly, though, it is about recognizing, embracing and celebrating what perhaps we once knew but have forgotten: That learning is a shared mystery. We learn from other people, and our joint future, potential and promise are inevitably and perpetually intertwined.

1. Learn or Die.

Learning is essential to life, growth and survival. It is primal. We do it every day, but we don't always appreciate how important it is. Time marches relentlessly. The world surges forward. If you aren't learning, you're dying.

In the novella written by Stephen King titled "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" (later made into a movie) the character Andy Dufresne, who is serving a life sentence in prison, says, "In here, you either get busy living or get busy dying." You basically have two choices: progression (get busy living) or regression (get busy dying). This is true of us as individuals. It is also true of organizations.

Knowledge and education and the skills acquired from them are all we have. Learning is the vehicle by which these precious commodities are delivered.

If we as individuals do not constantly learn and improve ourselves, we fall behind the pace of the world. We stagnate. We get busy dying.

If organizations do not constantly learn and improve, they fall behind the pace of the marketplace. They stagnate. They get busy dying.

So which do you choose? Learn or die? We choose learn. We think you should too.

2. We all Learn and Teach Every Day.

All the world's a classroom, and we are merely learners in it.

As inhabitants of this planet, we have a dual-natured responsibility to learn and teach. Every day. Learning and teaching are the basic functions of our existence.

Just as giving is the higher form of receiving, teaching is the higher form of learning. Just as when we give, we get, when we teach, we learn. Teaching and learning are two inseparable partners. You can't have one without the other.

Research shows that we retain much more when we play the role of teacher than when we play the role of learner. Why? It forces us to become active. It forces us to take initiative and accept responsibility. Teaching drives accountability.

Shouldn't learning be active and accountable? Yes.

Can you teach without learning? No.

Can you learn without teaching? We're trying to change that.

3. Great Teachers Rule the Universe.

When did “teacher” begin to carry a negative connotation? Was it when we reserved this responsibility for people who were paid to do it? Was it when some people with that title didn’t actually teach us?

Teaching isn’t a job, an assignment or a title.

A teacher isn’t a person in the front of a classroom holding chalk or standing at a podium.

Circumstance has given these people the responsibility, but not all of them accept it.

Teachers are everywhere because teaching is communicating, inspiring, challenging, motivating and leading.

Great leaders, great grandmothers, great salespeople, great entrepreneurs and great parents are all great teachers. The greater our ability to teach (communicate, inspire, challenge, motivate and lead), the more likely we will find success in this life.

We are teachers by virtue of being human beings. Our humanity gives us this responsibility. It is not an obligation to take lightly. It is not a job for someone else to do. The future of the world depends on all of us magnifying our calling to teach. It is for all of us to be teachers within our circles of influence - our families, our work settings and communities.

4. Learning is About Sharing and Collaboration - Always has Been.

Don't agree? How about we lock you in a cave and see how much you learn while in isolation.

We can learn by ourselves but not from ourselves. It takes others. We do not learn from books, courses, binders, classrooms, Web sites or even experiences. We learn from people who created those books, courses, binders, classrooms, Web sites and experiences.

Since the beginning of human existence we learned from stories told around the fire and drawings scratched on cave walls. Our great ancestors survived because they shared. They taught each other. In collaboration, they learned how to make tools, farm and build. Over time, the best taught the rest how to get better. Progression occurred because of collaboration not isolation.

We learn by watching, listening and modeling. We can learn through example, instruction and mentoring. No matter how we learn, it requires someone else, whether present or not.

There are billions and billions of pages on the World Wide Web. We learn from the people who created them every day. People like you and me created most of content on most of those pages. Ordinary people who perhaps have something extraordinary to share. Or maybe something simple. Something plain and unadorned but important nonetheless. How many pages have you created? There's no time like the present. Jump in and join the conversation.

5. Peer Pressure is Good.

Think back to high school and college. Imagine yourself there in the classroom. Think of the people there. Were there people who were more interesting and perhaps more knowledgeable than the person standing in front? What if those people were responsible for teaching the class? Would the class pay more attention? Would the class be more engaged? Would the class participate more? Why?

The power of peers. We've all heard of peer pressure and the immense power it has over the hearts and minds of people. Why haven't we heard of teacher pressure? Manager pressure? Parent pressure? They're not as powerful.

We are all desperate to fit in, to be a part of something. We want to feel successful and accepted. We will go to great lengths and employ many different tactics to achieve this. This isn't something we consciously do. We were born with the need to belong.

We trust our peers. We follow them. We look to them for advice. We seek to be like them.

We learn from our peers every day. Because of the context and their influence, peer lessons are the most important and sticky we encounter.

6. Great Learning Experiences...

...have little to do with budget, conference rooms, graphics, titles, animation, voice-overs, standards, objectives or projectors.

...have everything to do with passion, creativity, humor, stories, collaboration, communication, simplicity, opportunity and diversity.

Think back. What have been your best learning experiences? What did they look like? Where did they occur? Who was involved? What made them great?

Most likely your answer didn't involve a power lunch or 3D animation. For most people, their greatest learning experiences came from humble means. They were real. They happened informally in ordinary places. They involved people who cared about us. Perhaps they made us laugh, cry, shout or get upset. They shook us.

Possibly these learning experiences came from an uncle who taught us to play the guitar. A mother who taught us to make something out of nothing as she assembled a blanket fort. A mentor who volunteered to show us the ropes on the first day at work or school.

Great learning experiences can be simple or complex. They can be delivered by experts or novices. They can be online, in books or on billboards. They can happen anywhere and any time.

Armed with a video camera and a microphone, you can change the world.

7. Keep it Real.

Learning is personal, not staged, produced or fabricated. Learners can smell a fake a mile away. If you don't believe this, try being a substitute teacher.

Some of the best businesses were created on a napkin. Some of the best sermons were spoken from the heart. Some of the best musical performances were improvised. Some of the best comedians worked the crowd. Some of the best learning experiences happen outside of the classroom.

Why? They are real. They are genuine. Being real is attractive and interesting. These great experiences transcend pomp and circumstance, production and other things that feel synthetic. We don't want synthetic. We want the real thing. An orange tastes better than orange juice, which tastes better than orange drink. The further we get away from the real thing, the less desirable it is.

Trust is a major factor contributing to learner buy-in. A learner needs to trust that the teacher is a good source, has earned their stripes and can help them. These factors are often diluted in organizational learning because the learner isn't always drinking from the purest source.

"Give me the expert, I can handle it." Let me feel the wind on my face, not a flight simulator. I'd rather have lunch with Steve Jobs than a week with someone who has read a lot of books on marketing.

"Corporations do not speak in the same voice as a networked conversation. To their audiences, companies sound hollow, flat, literally inhuman." - The Cluetrain Manifesto, 2000

Although people mean well, it won't help to add a pretty stock photo to a hollow, flat and literally inhuman presentation.

Keep it real. You'll enjoy your life more and people will love you for it.

8. Pull, not Push.

“People learn when they’re ready to learn, not when we’re ready to teach them.” - Clayton Christensen

Is this true? Ponder for a moment. If this is true, what should corporate training look like? What should public schools look like? Imagine we had a blank slate and could start over? What would we create?

Would we build a system with schedules or open doors? Would the lessons be created by one person or many?

Trying to teach someone something when they aren’t ready is a lot like feeding an infant. Usually, most of the food winds up on the head, face, hands, clothes, floor...anywhere but in their mouth. Then once in their mouth, only half of it is actually digested.

Now contrast that to teaching someone who is ready. It’s a lot like trying to feed a lumberjack. They devour everything in sight and ask for more.

Years ago, salesman came door to door selling spices, meat, milk, and many other things that you find at the common grocery store. That was push. It doesn’t work anymore. We close up. We resist. We want pull. “Don’t come to my door, I’ll get it when I need it.”

We can’t control where and when someone will be ready to learn. We can’t control the pace or preference of their learning. We can control what we have available when they are ready.

If we’re trying to grow people, shouldn’t we consider creating an all-you-can-learn buffet rather than meal rations?

9. Empower, not Enroll.

“You’ve been enrolled” - how does that sound?

Does this inspire action or spark defiance? If you heard this would you go check it out or wait until the last minute and begrudgingly complete the requirement?

Battles have been fought and lives have been lost over the human need for free agency. We want to be able to choose our own destiny. This is especially true for learning. In fact, this is the only way we will learn. If a destiny is forced upon us, the only expectation should be a lifeless attempt to satisfy the requirement, not actual learning or growth.

Some managers of learning programs say “We can’t let people be responsible for their own learning.” If you don’t let them take responsibility, you will be dragging dead weight. You have to start on the same side. Empower them. Give them the tools to succeed and let them use them in a way that works for them.

Enlisting and enrolling don’t work for your children, your spouse, your students, or your employees. What works? Recommending and sharing are empowering. They allow for choice. Free your mind.

10. Information Moves Too Fast. Organizations Can't Keep Up.

The average American consumes about 34 gigabytes of information every day. That number is already wrong. Information is moving faster than we can comprehend and will continue to increase exponentially.

Everyone is struggling. We are struggling in our personal and professional lives to stay on top of our families, hobbies, communities and professions.

Organizations can't keep up. Most organizations don't have a system to accommodate this flood of information. The top-down, hierarchical structure of many organizations creates an information bottleneck. If all knowledge has to come from the top of the pyramid, the bottom of the pyramid will starve.

We have spoken to hundreds of learning professionals at organizations around the world and have noticed some common problems that exist across the board.

1. Traditional learning is too slow and expensive. Many organizations have a long list of new courses they need to create this year, but only have the staff to create a few and only have the budget and time to create a couple.
2. The vast majority of what you need to know to do your job, you learn informally through conversations with mentors peers and managers. These conversations are not captured or harnessed.
3. People aren't able to manage their own learning path.
4. Traditional learning systems require hours of management from the people who should be training and teaching.

Information moves too fast. Open the floodgates. Give the tools to the learners and get out of their way.

11. Energy and Potential Drive the Crowd.

Crowdsourcing is no longer a term used by über geeks and technology elitists. It is a word now being uttered by shopkeepers, accountants, community leaders and grandmothers. (Well, maybe not grandmothers yet).

What we've learned is that the crowd is more powerful, smarter and capable than any individual or organization.

In the book "Crowdsourcing," Jeff Howe reveals that the crowd is more than wise. It is talented, creative and stunningly productive.

The power of the crowd has been leveraged to do amazing things from creating the world largest encyclopedia to better determining which movies we might like to watch to solving "unsolvable" crimes and resolving international conflict.

The world of the future exists within the crowd.

The organization is a crowd. A captive audience of doers and believers. Together, they have the power to influence terrific success or the indefinable stagnation of the organization. Which would you prefer?

Tap into the energy and potential of the crowd and ignite learning within your organization.

12. The Org Chart has Nothing to do with Learning.

In a top-down traditional learning model, all of the information and training comes from the top. Leaders, managers and trainers decide when to create and provide training and for what reasons.

There are two problems with this model. First, leaders, managers and trainers are typically the busiest people within the organization. Unfortunately, training often takes a back seat to more urgent items. As a result, training is sparse and unpredictable. The second problem with the top-down model is it creates a Pavlovian learning response. When people learn that they can wait for the learning bell to ring, they become apathetic and spiritless about learning.

Learners need and want responsibility in the learning process. Much of the college curriculum in the School of Education is devoted to shifting the responsibility of learning from the teacher (old model) to the learners (new model). Why? A learner who is engaged and responsible takes much more ownership in the process.

This happens in a classroom when a learner is assigned to give a presentation. During the presentation, the rest of the class is laser focused, engaged, participating and helpful. Why does this happen? Responsibility shifts. Learners know that they will be up in front shortly. They want to be respected. They want participation so they give it to others. It's like group therapy for learners.

13. gd enuf is good enough

We are busy. Busier than ever. Time becomes a more precious commodity day by day. We don't have time for fluff. We don't have time for things that don't get results. In fact, we have to prioritize our time against the endless things that are worth doing.

The increasing speed of the world and the escalating value of time have caused us to want different things today than we did yesterday. This shift has pushed us to favor simple, flexible, cheap, convenient, quick and dirty. We no longer have a need for complex, rigid, expensive, slow and polished.

We love Craigslist and self-serve. Give me MP3s and sticky notes. Draw me a picture, don't make me a document. Today at the rim of the Grand Canyon there is a crowd of people capturing the moment on their cell phone cameras while their good camera sits at home. "But that picture is terrible." "So what?" We want convenient and basic more than hi-fi.

Texting, IM and social media are taking over email which took over writing letters on paper. When was the last time you sent a letter with a formal address at the top and salutation at the bottom? But, isn't that the right way? It's not about being right. It's about being gd enuf.

When it comes to learning, we want the real stuff from the people who get it. We don't care if they stare off camera or wear a weird shade of pink. We hang on every word. We do this because they are the experts and we know they can help us. We respect them. That's gd enuf.

14. Measure Performance, not Learning.

It's not about your shoes. It's not about your dribble. It's not about the numbers on your jersey. It is about putting the ball in the hoop. If you can't put the ball through the hoop, nothing else matters.

Years ago organizations were less complicated. Information moved more slowly. The learning function could stay ahead of learners. Research and technology allowed us to be able to "measure learning." We were able to say things like, "See, we have an average score of 94%." Although the CEO would nod his head, he really didn't care about the test score. What matters to him was how fast people converted that learning to action and achieved performance.

We have always had authentic measures of performance for any job or role within our organizations. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is what impacts the bottom line. This is what really matters.

As organizations get more complex and the information gains momentum, attempting to "measure learning" only becomes more impossible and less impactful.

Smart organizations have recognized this and shifted focus back on performance. This shift will continue for years to come.

15. Brains Should be Backed Up

Imagine an organization that didn't backup the data on employees' computers. What if each employee was responsible for managing their own system and data? If the computer crashed or the employee left, all of the information would be lost.

The data people create is too valuable to lose, so robust IT infrastructures are set up to back up the information.

The knowledge, talents, and skills of most organizations aren't backed up today. We've all heard statements like, "If Bill left, we'd be in trouble." This is because Bill has spent 20 years in R&D squirreling away information, talent and skills and doesn't have a great way to share it. In fact, Bill is so valuable to the organization that he's taxed with the largest projects that keep him super busy.

Bill doesn't have time to share what he knows. He can't spend three or four days putting a training program together. He wouldn't possibly know where to start or how to train someone on the vast knowledge that he has. However, he could sit in front of a webcam for five minutes on Tuesday. He could record his screen for two minutes on Friday. He does have time to quickly start building a pile of extremely valuable mini-courses that together represent the collective investment that the company has made in Bill.

What if we could do this with all of our employees? What if we could pool your organizations' collective brains? We think it would be pretty cool.

16. Everyone has Something Valuable to Contribute.

Yes, this means you. You know something. Something that others want to know or know how to do. This may have something to do with your job, how to play guitar, balance spoons on your nose, or make crème brûlée.

Diversity is what makes the world go round. Different people learn in different ways. One way to do something doesn't invalidate another, different way. Those learning can choose the way that works for them.

Collaborative learning works especially well for topics that require some sort of art or talent to accomplish. For instance, sales. There are thousands of books written on the topic. None of them are right. None of them are wrong. They all help different people in different ways. What is important is that the various techniques are made public and discussed.

Most salespeople in large organizations are starving for information. They get together once a year at a sales meeting and can't stop talking to other people to find out what they are doing. Unfortunately, most of these sales meetings are filled with top-down presentations and dune buggy rides. While these are great, what the sales force really needs is collaboration amongst their colleagues. Sharing best practices. Swapping tips and secrets.

Whether you are #1 or #542, you are holding best practices, tips and secrets that work for you. There are other people out there that would love to learn from you.

17. The Day is a Zero-sum Game

Long gone are the days where you could play space invaders or solitaire on the clock. We are all busy. Everyone in every organization is maximizing the maximized. Everyone is trying to get the most out of their time. If you are able to find time to play space invaders or surf the web, feel free to start biting your nails about the stability of your future.

Adding another job, task or burden on someone's day only robs from other valuable things that are currently part of their day.

An effective training system needs to replace a job they currently have to do, not give them a new job.

Statistics show that the average employee spends 38% of their time looking for information. This is a lot of wasted time. What if the expert, lesson or knowledge was just a couple clicks away?

For the very same reason, content-creation tools allow people to create quickly and easily. Content-creation tools that offer too many options only give people a new job to do. We don't need rounded rectangles with a triple weighted gradient. We don't need clip art. We don't need uninspiring graphics. We need the meat. Information, explanation, demonstrations and modeling from the people who know best. Record it, tag it, share it and move on. This is learning on the back of a napkin.

18. Great Teachers Will Rise to the Top

Would you rather take swimming lessons from Michael Phelps or Jeremy Zonts?

“Definitely, Michael Phelps.....wait, who is Jeremy Zonts?” We all know Michael is an amazing swimmer. He is a record-breaking Olympic Gold Medalist. We don’t know Jeremy because he never won a gold medal. He’s never been to the Olympics. He’s never been on TV. However, he is a very good swimmer and an Olympic- level teacher.

How do you select your next manager or leader or trainer? Is it by seniority? Is it by performance at their job? Many times people with the most experience or most talented at a job are not great managers or trainers.

The best managers or trainers have a natural ability to develop people. They enjoy it. They think about others and how they can impact their performance. They often enjoy helping others succeed more than succeeding themselves. Because of this they are not always your top performers, but you want to find them and prepare them to lead others.

The crowd is wise. The crowd can tell us who the next leaders and great teachers are. It allows these people to show their true colors naturally. No job descriptions or applications necessary, thank you.

This is Not the End, But Where we Begin.

So we come to the end of this Declaration of Interdependence, the sum of our heartfelt convictions about teaching and learning. But it is really just the beginning.

What's that? Radical? Of course. Disturbing and unsettling? We certainly hope so. But exhilarating, too, don't you think?

But only if we do something about all the observations we've shared, all the grievances we aired. What is our point?

Bloomfire.

As you'll see, it's our blank canvas, our launching pad, our catalyst. It's excitement within the ranks. Lined up and ready to march, eager and reaching for new heights. Bloomfire. It's our word for revolution.

Sparks wanted.

Across the land, learning environments are parched, virtual tinderboxes of potential. Well now there's a way to ignite it. To get started, email us at support@bloomfire.com or call 877- 483-2777 (sales).

With Bloomfire, you can be the spark. Be brave. Locks arms with us and let's start something together.