

Description: This week, we've got an energizing conversation with Kate Walker, Vice President of Learning and Development at MRA, as she shares her expertise on how to train an emerging leader - including mentor programs, leadership styles, team building, assessments, professional development opportunities, retaining talent, and more!

Listen to Discover:

- When you promote a new leader, you want to make sure you're over-communicating with them.
- Pair up or connect with a mentor and a coach if you can!
- Training and professional development is a great way to retain your employees!

Transcript:

Transcripts are computer generated -- not 100% accurate word-for-word.

INTRO | 00:00:00:02 - 00:00:23:03

Hello hello, everybody, and welcome to 30 minute THRIVE, your go-to podcast for anything and everything HR, powered by MRA - The Management Association. Looking to stay on top of the ever-changing world of HR? MRA has got you covered. We'll be the first to tell you what's hot and what's not. I'm your host, Sophie Boler, and we are so glad you're here. Now it's time to THRIVE.

Sophie Boler | 00:00:23:13 - 00:00:52:07

In this podcast series, we've been talking a lot about the talent shortage, the demographic changes, and generational differences just in all. And we've heard that with one rather large generation, now, in many leadership positions, leaving the workforce at a fast rate, there simply aren't enough in the next generation to fill those roles. So we're looking at an even younger generation to fill that leadership gap.

Sophie Boler | 00:00:52:20 - 00:01:10:10

So today we're here with Kate Walker to talk more about how we can really help to train the next level of leaders. And she's our vice president of Learning & Development here at MRA, so she comes with a lot of knowledge and expertise here today. So I'm excited to talk to you, Kate, and welcome to the show.

Kate Walker | 00:01:10:10 - 00:01:10:23

Thank you.

Sophie Boler | 00:01:11:01 - 00:01:28:10

Absolutely. We can get started right away. And really, the first question I have for you is that we have companies needing to fill the leadership roles, and sometimes that may mean promoting managers to leadership roles. So what is the best way to help with the rapid development of new leaders?

Kate Walker | 00:01:29:02 - 00:01:51:13

That's a great question, Sophie, and we're seeing it a lot from our member companies that they have this influx of new talent that's been promoted quickly and they need support. I think, number one, when you promote a new leader, you want to make sure you're overcommunicating with them. The worst thing that could happen is for them to be stressed out or have a situation arise that they don't know the solution and they end up getting frustrated—they leave.

Kate Walker | 00:01:51:13 - 00:02:10:18

We don't want that, right?

Sophie Boler

Right. Absolutely.

Kate Walker

We want to just make sure that they're very supported. But, you know, by communicating, I don't mean you check on them once a week. You might want to make your calendar open to them so that they can access it if they have questions and just make sure that you're really ready to support them in being effective in that role.

Sophie Boler | 00:02:10:18 - 00:02:17:22

Absolutely. I don't think anyone's ever complained that they've been talked to too much. It's always like I haven't heard enough.

Kate Walker | 00:02:17:22 - 00:02:24:01

Right. And if you don't have the capacity yourself, you want to make sure that you have somebody here for them.

Sophie Boler | 00:02:24:01 - 00:02:32:09

Absolutely. And what are some of the core business and leadership skills that you think emerging leaders need to have nowadays?

Kate Walker | 00:02:32:18 - 00:02:54:15

Yeah, this comes up quite often, Sophie. And I would say it doesn't really matter what industry you're in—if you have problem-solving skills and the ability to show up on time, have a friendly attitude and disposition, you can go really far in this world. And it sounds simple, but problem solving can also be how do you make sure that the coffee's ready when we open up in the morning?

Kate Walker | 00:02:54:15 - 00:03:16:12

Right. And you'll see that people that just have that intuition and ability to think through those problems, known or unknown, those are just such great skills to have. And if that's something that doesn't come natural to you, look for different ways to develop those skills. You know, if you're a sudoku fan and, you know, do some puzzles that get your mind kind of thinking about problem solving can be a real asset for you in the work world.

Sophie Boler | 00:03:16:20 - 00:03:39:03

Absolutely. I think one of the skills or characteristics that I really admire, like an emerging leader, is just being driven too and just like saying "yes" to everything because at that point in time, maybe they don't know what exactly they want to do. So it's like just saying "yes" to every opportunity and maybe it'll lead them down the right path eventually.

Kate Walker | 00:03:39:06 - 00:04:03:02

That positive attitude is so valuable, and when you see someone kind of dig their heels in and you know, you might hear, "That's not in my job description" or "That's not my responsibility," you just kind of go, Whoa, that, that doesn't set them up for future leadership. And you've probably seen that already in your career, right, Sophie, people that do that? They kind of stand out and you know who they are and oftentimes are the ones that get passed over for promotion opportunities.

Sophie Boler | 00:04:04:13 - 00:04:26:13

Right. And you mentioned just other ways on expanding the skills. And I know for me personally, we have a lot of resources here at MRA to expand those skills like our training and development classes. But also just like LinkedIn Learning, this is so easy just to do a 30-minute video to expand your skills and leadership.

Kate Walker | 00:04:26:15 - 00:04:27:14

That's a great idea.

Sophie Boler | 00:04:28:14 - 00:04:35:11

But moving on, how can an emerging leader really better understand their own leadership style?

Kate Walker | 00:04:36:14 - 00:04:40:12

That's a great question, I think ... Are you familiar with assessments, Sophie?

Sophie Boler | 00:04:40:12 - 00:04:42:18

I am. I've taken a few.

Kate Walker | 00:04:43:06 - 00:05:05:17

And we offer them here at MRA. And there are plenty other vendors that offer them as well. But some of the most common assessments you'll see are DiSC, which is really a behavioral assessment. There's Myers-Briggs, which is somewhat similar. They're all kind of based on the same science. And then there's also StrengthsFinder. I just think these are great tools to really understand your personal leadership style.

Kate Walker | 00:05:05:17 - 00:05:23:15

Like you can see, Am I a D or am I an I or an S? But it also helps you relate to your own leaders and peers because you can kind of figure out where do they fall? And in some organizations you have the opportunity to take those assessments as a team.

Sophie Boler

Yes.

Kate Walker

And kind of learn how to communicate within that structure.

Kate Walker | 00:05:23:15 - 00:05:28:17

And it's just super valuable to understand and it's kind of fun too. I'm kind of an assessment nerd.

Sophie Boler | 00:05:28:19 - 00:06:02:14

Yes, me too. I was a communications major in college, so assessments and communication styles were like our thing. But I just recently took MRA's project management class and we had to take a communication assessment there. And it was just like it was fun to see my strengths and weaknesses and how I can improve or how I could talk to someone else who's a different leadership style and I know I talked to even Sara about like her leadership style and how we differentiate ourselves and stuff like that.

Kate Walker | 00:06:02:19 - 00:06:07:07

Did you have any surprises when you took the assessment or was it pretty spot-on for you?

Sophie Boler | 00:06:07:07 - 00:06:22:22

It was pretty spot-on. I feel like I could have kind of went between two different leadership styles, but it was just kind of like funny to see how someone could be completely opposite of you. And it's like, how do we match and how do we blend together then?

Kate Walker | 00:06:23:01 - 00:06:32:03

Yeah, it's so helpful because to understand yourself is great, but then to know what someone else's inclinations are and how they need to be communicated with can be very helpful.

Sophie Boler | 00:06:32:08 - 00:06:32:13

For sure.

Kate Walker | 00:06:32:13 - 00:06:34:05

And help you on your leadership journey.

Sophie Boler | 00:06:34:05 - 00:06:45:13

Yeah, that's some great advice, but we know that not every great worker makes a great manager, which is okay. But how would you help to develop those management skills?

Kate Walker | 00:06:46:05 - 00:07:10:20

Yes, thinking of that classic salesperson, Michael Scott, as you will—great salesperson from “The Office.” Questionable management skills maybe, right? Fun to watch. So we've all probably experienced someone like that in our career. They got promoted because they were really good at that job, so they were a really good individual contributor, but they might not have had the background to be a manager.

Kate Walker | 00:07:10:20 - 00:07:29:20

So to get somebody prepared to be a manager, there's a lot of different resources. We have a lot of different classes that are available and training available here at MRA too. But really they need to know what they need to do to be successful. They need to look at other managers that have been successful in their roles. They need to be paired with a potential mentor or coach.

Kate Walker | 00:07:29:20 - 00:07:42:10

Coaching can be a really great way to help somebody learn how to improve their skills and also become more self-aware if they have hiccups or roadblocks to what they're doing. Are you familiar with coaching?

Sophie Boler | 00:07:42:10 - 00:07:44:22

I am. I am a little bit, yeah.

Kate Walker | 00:07:44:22 - 00:07:48:06

Yeah. Have you had the opportunity to have a coach yet in your career?

Sophie Boler | 00:07:48:06 - 00:08:12:11

I've had some mentors, which I would say probably could be recognized as a coach, and I think it's been really helpful just as an emerging leader and as a younger professional, it's nice to have someone there who kind of can know your strengths and kind of push you to keep going forward and where I don't know just what paths to take and stuff like that.

Kate Walker | 00:08:12:17 - 00:08:34:19

Yeah, a coach can really provide those services for an individual and you can develop an action plan and work together. So for that manager that might not have that baseline, you know, if they're struggling with employee communication, that coach can talk to them about it, they can role-play in a safe environment and they can really improve those skills so that when they're in their real work experience, they can feel comfortable.

Kate Walker | 00:08:34:19 - 00:08:40:04

So there's a lot of great ways to help support that new manager and just hope that they take advantage of it.

Sophie Boler | 00:08:40:08 - 00:08:55:17

Absolutely. In going along with what you just said, another consideration is the fact that a manager is really the key to a successful team. So how can you not only develop the manager skills but also team building from a manager standpoint?

Kate Walker | 00:08:56:09 - 00:09:18:11

Yeah, I think team building is one of those skill sets that you have to be very intentional about. And if you just think, "Oh, we're going to do something quarterly and it's going to be a potluck lunch, we're going to be good and have relationships here"—it's not really like that anymore. And particularly with hybrid and remote work environments, you have to be even more intentional about creating a team environment.

Kate Walker | 00:09:20:03 - 00:09:37:19

One thing I can say for our Learning & Development team, every team meeting we have, we incorporate some team-building activities and we do meet as a team virtually. And you would think, oh this team that teaches and does all these different things, how do they team build in a virtual environment? We use our chat quite a bit.

Kate Walker | 00:09:38:21 - 00:09:50:17

There are a lot of different activities that we can facilitate. It's really fun and you get to know your team better and you feel closer to them and just those relationships flourish. Have you experienced any good team building?

Sophie Boler | 00:09:50:20 - 00:10:10:18

I have. It's funny that you mention that because right before we were recording this, I was talking with Sara, our producer, and I was like, "We should do something after work today. Like we could go get dinner or a happy hour or something." Just to ... I mean, it was her 8-year anniversary and I was like, let's just go do something to celebrate, something as a team.

Sophie Boler | 00:10:10:18 - 00:10:16:14

And we're actually going out to lunch today as a team too.

Kate Walker

Oh, that's good.

Sophie Boler

Just fun, fun team building.

Kate Walker | 00:10:16:15 - 00:10:36:20

Yeah. I feel like that stuff is so important and I've heard some really great practices around hybrid and virtual. Some companies I am familiar with that are completely virtual. They actually signed on to Zoom together as a team during the day and like work together. So if somebody has questions, they can just pop on and ask and they feel more connected that way.

Kate Walker | 00:10:36:20 - 00:10:52:01

So that's something I've seen. Another activity hybrid organizations and remote organizations have been doing is have a team member kind of share like a passion or a hobby virtually, which is kind of neat. They can do that and get to know their team members better.

Sophie Boler | 00:10:52:01 - 00:11:08:04

Yeah, absolutely. We at MRA have our Intern Leadership Program and that's kind of mostly virtual, but kind of a hybrid format, too. But we had to do a lot of team-building activities virtually, which may seem harder, but there's so many options you can do.

Kate Walker | 00:11:08:04 - 00:11:08:21

And oh yeah.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:09:02 - 00:11:19:09

We did a Jeopardy one time online and it was just fun to, I don't know, just see everybody and we could all play at the same time. So there's definitely a lot of options.

Kate Walker | 00:11:19:12 - 00:11:35:07

Yeah. One thing for our Learning & Development team for our holiday party last year we had a virtual holiday party and everybody had to go and find a crazy Christmas ornament within their house.

Sophie Boler

Oh, that's funny.

Kate Walker

And then show it. We had a contest, so that was really fun.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:35:07 - 00:11:36:15
That's fun. There's so many things.

Kate Walker | 00:11:36:15 - 00:11:45:17
Yeah, there's so many. And I think like the virtual environment kind of opens you up too, because you kind of get to see people in their own space, which is interesting, as we all know.

Sophie Boler | 00:11:46:03 - 00:12:00:16
Well, we hear that professional development also contributes to employee retention. So let's talk a bit more about that. What can you share to encourage organizations to consider learning plans and professional development to encourage retention?

Kate Walker | 00:12:01:17 - 00:12:22:10
I get very passionate about this topic, Sophie, because I think, you know, a lot of employers have known that training and professional development is a great way to retain people and develop them. They kind of had their noses down and focused on a lot of different things. And I think just the talent environment the last several years have made it front and center.

Kate Walker | 00:12:23:07 - 00:12:34:22
We've definitely seen an uptick in training requests and it's just it's such a good practice to work with your employees. It's so much easier to keep and retain somebody that's already within your organization than to bring someone new.

Sophie Boler | 00:12:35:03 - 00:12:35:20
Absolutely.

Katie Walker | 00:12:35:20 - 00:12:59:03
Into the world, so just very passionate about it. And I think there's so many great ways to train them, whether you do in-house training, whether you use LinkedIn Learning, whether you use MRA to train your employees, whether you have mentor programs, community leadership programs. A lot of our communities have leadership programs that, you know, get your organization's name out there, but get your employees familiar with the community.

Kate Walker | 00:12:59:03 - 00:13:22:22
So that's another facet. You can get them ingrained within your organization, but also help them establish groups with where they live.

Sophie Boler
Absolutely.

Kate Walker

Great ways to retain people and, you know, just take advantage of it. You know, the cost can be a little jarring sometimes when you're looking at budgets and it's budget cycle, but really that retention and you know, it pays itself forward over time because you have people that are very committed to your organization.

Sophie Boler | 00:13:23:08 - 00:13:47:02

And I think today especially, we've seen employers get very creative on how they are retaining their employees. I know we talked with Kathy Seidel, our manager of Recruiting Services, and she just explained how companies are offering a lot of incentives to get these people to stay, like pet insurance and stuff like that.

Kate Walker | 00:13:47:21 - 00:14:05:18

I think and sometimes employers think, are they looking to go back to school or is it a different baccalaureate program or a master's program? It's not always that. It's professional development. They might want to go take an Excel class and become better at Excel, and that can have immediate impact to the work environment as well.

Sophie Boler | 00:14:06:02 - 00:14:15:15

Totally. Well, taking a little step back here, who would you say are the best candidates to consider for professional development? And this can really be anyone.

Kate Walker | 00:14:16:05 - 00:14:40:17

I think that's a great question, Sophie. And I think people tend to focus on leaders, you know, getting them more skills. But that new employee who's eager to learn more and might put their hand up, I think them putting their hand up is just great, a reason that you'd want to invest in them. But sometimes you're surprised that you're more seasoned employees could benefit from professional development or want to take it.

Kate Walker | 00:14:40:17 - 00:14:57:06

We had a situation on our team where someone had been with us a very long time, had asked about a certification, and I was just so excited about that because I thought she's been in her role for a long time. This is really stretching herself. And the fact that she asked, I just thought that was super exciting.

Kate Walker | 00:14:57:06 - 00:15:08:03

So, it's great—you want to see your new leaders and your new employees take advantage of professional development, but sometimes you'll have some surprises along the way and you don't want to ignore those requests either or opportunities.

Sophie Boler | 00:15:08:04 - 00:15:20:10

Yeah, and it's nice to just encourage your employees, like take any opportunity you can when it comes to professional development. And you know it's not going to hurt you, it's only going to better you, you know?

Kate Walker | 00:15:20:18 - 00:15:33:15

That's the right attitude to have when it comes to it, you know, I think if you have that attitude about lifelong learning and professional development, that will only help you and you'll be seen as somebody that should be invested in within your organization.

Sophie Boler | 00:15:34:08 - 00:15:49:18

Well, you talked about this a little bit earlier, but there's been a lot of talk about mentoring and coaching emerging leaders. And I know I mentioned that I had a couple of mentors here, but how does coaching differ from mentoring and how does that differ from training?

Kate Walker | 00:15:50:08 - 00:16:13:13

Yeah, mentoring I think can fall into different buckets. It can be informal. So you might have somebody who mentors you, gives you advice, and it's not like a formal relationship, but organizations can assign a mentor. So if you're new and part of your onboarding, you might have somebody assigned your mentor just to be a safe person, ask questions and just to learn a little bit more about the culture.

Kate Walker | 00:16:13:16 - 00:16:36:10

So those are two ways mentoring kind of is facilitated. Coaching is a little bit different because it's typically a three-pronged approach. There's typically a sponsor for the coaching process, be it the manager or direct supervisor; a coachee, you know, somebody who's going to benefit from the coaching; and then also the coach themselves. So that's kind of how that's structured.

Kate Walker | 00:16:36:10 - 00:17:06:10

And the sponsor usually has some reason for wanting the coaching. Could it be performance, help that person be a little more effective with what they're doing, but also could be developmental or it could be a response to a situation that happens, so you want to make sure that they're equipped to handle situations in the future. So most times you would follow that structure and they would establish kind of guidelines and goals and objectives for the coaching arrangement, and it can go anywhere from 6 months to a year.

Kate Walker | 00:17:06:21 - 00:17:29:01

You know, they meet those milestones across that timeline and stay in contact and the coachee and the coach will have confidential conversations, which really can help them feel comfortable with the direction of what they're talking about. And then, you know, usually they would the coach would go back to the manager or supervisor to see, are you seeing changes here?

Kate Walker | 00:17:29:01 - 00:17:47:06

You know, have you noticed anything? Sort of kind of reiterate the feedback that's going on to help them be supported and be effective in their role. It's a really neat process. If you ever have the opportunity to be coached, I would always say go for it. That will only help you develop and further your skill set. Sometimes it can be a little scary.

Kate Walker | 00:17:47:06 - 00:18:05:22

"Oh, my manager wants me to have a coach." I think it's great. I've had a couple opportunities to have coaches throughout my career and I've found that they would ask questions that my boss would not have asked me at that time. They would challenge me in ways that I wouldn't challenge myself, and I just got a lot of great insight from that third party.

Kate Walker | 00:18:05:22 - 00:18:09:07

I think third-party perspective can be really valuable.

Kate Walker | 00:18:10:18 - 00:18:15:10

So don't be afraid, Sophie, if someone ever offers you coaching. I highly encourage you to take it.

Sophie Boler | 00:18:15:23 - 00:18:24:12

I will. Do you recommend that an emerging leader would have a coach and a mentor at the same time? Or what are your thoughts on that?

Kate Walker | 00:18:24:21 - 00:18:40:06

If they could, that would be great. It'd be even more feedback. It could be time consuming would be my only hesitation there. But yeah, definitely. And depending on the relationship of the mentor, if it's a little more informal, they definitely would have time for that.

Sophie Boler | 00:18:40:17 - 00:18:51:12

For sure. So what are your thoughts on reverse mentoring? I know we talked about just regular mentoring, but we often see that with emerging leaders, there's reverse mentoring. So what can you say about that?

Kate Walker | 00:18:51:21 - 00:19:16:16

I'm so glad you asked this question because I don't think many people understand the concept. For me, I've actually had a couple throughout my career. I went to a convention and they were talking about this and like that is really interesting. And really what it is, is taking two individuals with different backgrounds and experiences and typically one is maybe a little more senior in their development.

Kate Walker | 00:19:16:16 - 00:19:39:01

And then one is maybe newly out of college or new to the workforce. That's how it worked for me. I had a younger gentleman that I worked with that was right out of college, very insightful, had a lot of technology background, a lot of sales background, and just had a really fresh perspective. And I found it really interesting to spend time with him and kind of see the world through his eyes.

Kate Walker | 00:19:39:01 - 00:20:02:00

So we would get together about two or three times a year and just kind of check in and see what he was seeing in his career and what I was seeing in mine. And I always felt like I walked away with more than he probably even did. It's really great if you can figure that out and you're kind of putting yourself out there as well as someone who's looking for a reverse mentor just to benefit from that perspective—it's exciting.

Sophie Boler | 00:20:02:00 - 00:20:24:03

I definitely think that's a great concept and it's usually you hear that you learn from the senior leaders and you don't often hear that like the senior leaders hear from somebody that's way younger, maybe there's not much experience with that person, but feel like you can always take something away from learning from each other.

Kate Walker | 00:20:24:03 - 00:20:30:22

Something tells me you're going to be a mentor for a lot of people in your career, Sophie. So if you're not doing it already, I'd be surprised.

Sophie Boler | 00:20:31:09 - 00:20:43:23

Well thank you, Kate! I would love to be a mentor, but it seems like we're wrapping up the time here. So do you have any departing tips for emerging leaders or for our listeners today?

Kate Walker | 00:20:44:13 - 00:21:04:03

Yeah. One big thing I have for you is to always advocate for yourself as an emerging leader. If you're not getting what you need from your supervisor, if you're not getting that level of communication, tell somebody. Make sure that you overcommunicate too what your needs are. You know, I mentioned earlier that managers and leaders should overcommunicate with you, but you should too. Don't be afraid to speak up.

Kate Walker | 00:21:04:04 - 00:21:19:12

Let your manager know your preferred speaking style. Do you prefer to be called? Do you prefer text? I think having some baseline ground rules really help you too. And just, yeah, when in doubt, ask questions, be curious and always be learning.

Sophie Boler | 00:21:19:15 - 00:21:49:05

Absolutely. That's some great advice. I think it was a great conversation today. So thanks for joining us and sharing your knowledge and expertise. I think a lot of people learned a lot today, but we have linked Kate's LinkedIn profile on the show notes. So if you'd like to connect with her or ask her any follow-up questions about this topic or really any topic or how to get involved in MRA's learning and development opportunities, be sure to contact Kate.

Sophie Boler | 00:21:49:05 - 00:21:57:02

Otherwise, we will see you next week when we're talking about "The Great Sansdemic" with Jim Morgan. So I look forward to that. But thank you again, Kate.

Kate Walker | 00:21:57:06 - 00:21:58:01

Thanks, Sophie. It was fun. I appreciate it.

OUTRO | 00:21:58:01 - 00:22:30:03

For sure. Thank you. And that wraps up our content for this episode. Be sure to reference the show notes, where you can sign up to connect for more podcast updates. Check out other MRA episodes on your favorite podcast platform. And as always, make sure to follow MRA's 30 minute THRIVE so you don't miss out. Thanks for tuning in and we'll see you next Wednesday to carry on the HR conversation.