

Cultivating a Culture of Learning

Exploring the Impact of Developmental Strategies on Employee
Performance and Retention

October 2024



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Executive Summary

In India's rapidly evolving development sector, especially in the field of education, creating a culture of continuous learning is key to enhancing employee performance and retention. This case study focuses on how developmental strategies were used to improve outcomes at Leadership For Equity, an NGO focused on driving large-scale change through systemic education reform.

Similar to many NGOs and organizations, Leadership For Equity was experiencing a higher turnover rate due to the demanding nature of the work and limited growth opportunities.

Internal and external employee surveys reported team members sharing concerns around the lack of Learning and Development opportunities thus leading to disengagement and a sense of stagnation. The People and Culture team at Leadership For Equity set out to address these concerns by strengthening the culture of learning and professional development. Their objective was to design strategies that would not only elevate individual performance but also decrease attrition, ensuring high engagement and program continuity.

A series of interventions were rolled out and implemented in the past three years as a part of larger 5 year strategy followed by regular feedback loops to foster supportive environments. As a result, positive growth is seen across the criteria of employee performance, engagement and retention -

- **Increased Perceived Benefit from Learning and Development (L&D)**

Opportunities: The proportion of employees who reported benefiting from various L&D opportunities rose significantly from 73% in 2021-22 to 80% in 2023-24. This increase in perceived benefits was accompanied by a notable improvement in average annual performance ratings, which climbed from

53.99% to 62.22%. These findings suggest a positive correlation between employee engagement with L&D initiatives and overall performance outcomes.

- **Enhanced Development Conversations and Reduced Attrition Rates:** The percentage of employees participating in development conversations grew substantially from 52% in 2021-22 to 84% in 2023-24. This higher level of engagement in developmental dialogue corresponds with a significant reduction in attrition rates, which fell from 29.59% in 2022-23 to 22.11% in 2023-24. These results indicate that fostering regular development conversations may be an effective strategy for reducing turnover.
- **Increased Employee Enthusiasm and Longevity:** The proportion of employees who looked forward to coming to work increased from 73% in 2021-22 to 78% in 2023-24. This rise in employee enthusiasm aligns with the recovery in average employee longevity, which had dipped to 17.24 months in 2022-23 but rebounded to 20.48 months in 2023-24. These trends suggest a strong association between employees' enthusiasm for their work and longer organizational tenure.
- **Qualitative Themes Supporting Quantitative Outcomes:** The key themes of a 'learning-centric culture,' 'transparency,' and 'leadership preference for growth and learning' emerged as qualitative evidence reinforcing the quantitative data. These themes substantiate the observed improvements in employee performance, engagement, and retention, underscoring the organization's emphasis on growth-oriented practices and open communication as vital drivers of positive change.

Introduction

Employee retention is a significant challenge for development organizations, particularly for those aiming for sustainable, long-term impact. In the development sector, retaining dedicated and skilled staff is essential due to the specialized knowledge and deep community engagement required for success. This case study examines employee retention strategies within Leadership For Equity, an NGO in the Indian education sector. In 2017, Leadership For Equity started with a team of 8 founding team members. In a mere span of four years, the organisation grew 7 times in strength and in its 7 years of operations has grown into a team of 100+ members. Leadership For Equity's operations have expanded from 2 districts in Maharashtra to multiple districts and municipal corporations across Maharashtra, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh, where its operations are executed. This case study research paper focuses on the following specific objectives:

- 1. Investigate the Influence of a Learning Culture:** The study aims to explore how fostering a culture of continuous learning and development impacts key metrics such as employee performance and retention. By analyzing the effects of learning opportunities on staff motivation, productivity, and career progression, the research will demonstrate the role of professional growth in reducing turnover.
- 2. Examine the Link Between L&D, Leadership, and Turnover:** The research seeks to understand the relationship between learning and development (L&D) opportunities, leadership development initiatives, and regular feedback with attrition rates. This will help determine how these strategies effectively address employee turnover by empowering staff and creating growth pathways.

3. Explore the Role of Feedback and Leadership Programs: Finally, the study will investigate how structured feedback and leadership development programs contribute to employee satisfaction and engagement. By assessing the influence of these practices on staff morale and loyalty, the study aims to identify best practices that drive retention in a resource-constrained sector.

Through this analysis, the case study intends to provide insights into creating supportive work environments that prioritize staff growth and well-being in the development sector.

Methodology

This paper is presented as an Organizational Case Study through a mixed-method approach. It combines statistical findings from 3-year data on internally and externally conducted organizational surveys juxtaposed with insights from selected in-depth interviews of staff members who have been with the organization for a longer duration. This is best suited towards validating the vision for staff learning and development adopted by the organization and contributing anecdotal and statistical insights on indicators of key talent management metrics.

Staff members, the leadership team and external consultants along with the People & Culture team were involved at various stages and played a crucial role throughout the study. They contributed to the design of survey questions, identified key areas for staff development, and engaged in the interview process. Their input ensured that the research addressed relevant organizational concerns and aligned with the goals for employee learning and development, making the findings more relevant and increasing the likelihood of successful implementation.

The study's mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component involved analyzing survey data collected over 3 years to capture trends in employee engagement, satisfaction with development opportunities, and retention rates. The qualitative component included conducting in-depth interviews with selected long-tenured staff members to explore their experiences and perceptions of the organization's learning culture. This combination allowed for the validation of the statistical data with qualitative insights, resulting in a more holistic view of the organization's practices.

Data collection involved administering surveys to all employees on an annual basis, focusing on employee engagement, satisfaction with learning and development programs, and career growth. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select interview participants, ensuring diverse representation across departments and roles. These interviews added depth to the quantitative findings by providing nuanced insights into the effectiveness of development programs and the organizational culture.

The seamless integration of employee feedback, quantitative analysis, and qualitative insights created a balanced perspective on the organization's talent management practices and informed actionable recommendations for improving employee retention and performance.

Evaluation of the case

With the changes in the workforce brought in by the Covid-19 pandemic, leadership at the organization had to fight on two ends - ensure the work stays relevant and the team is rapidly up-skilled and re-skilled as per the needs. With less than 3-4 weeks of learning time, employees had to support stakeholders online, learn to operate remotely and create a safe

space for themselves if away from home. This resulted in employees feeling lonely and the distance reduced their sense of belonging towards the organization. The alarming attrition of 67% coupled with the Employee Engagement Survey 2020-21 results with employees (~50%) highlighting the lack of opportunities to learn and grow forced the organization to prioritize establishing a culture of continuous learning and development.

The developmental strategies designed with a long-term goal of 5 years included a variety of initiatives designed to support employee growth and improve organizational performance.

Leadership at the organization defined a key strategic priority to build an organization with high endurance and adaptability. One of the key organizational goals to be achieved by 2027 read “LFE will be a credible, trusted and aspirational brand for strengthening public education systems, thus attracting high-quality talent, investments & partnerships within the social sector of India.”

Priority areas	Aligned areas of work
LFE’s <u>resilient and agile team members</u> will achieve the set benchmarks and program / project goals	KRA / PMS process Learning & Development (L&D)
LFE will have an <u>effective 2nd and 3rd line of leadership</u> in the organization, operating as <u>intrapreneurs</u>	Recruitment process Employee onboarding process
LFE will be a <u>safe, inclusive and people-oriented</u> workplace, that will inspire other organizations	L&D - support & knowledge HR Policies & Processes

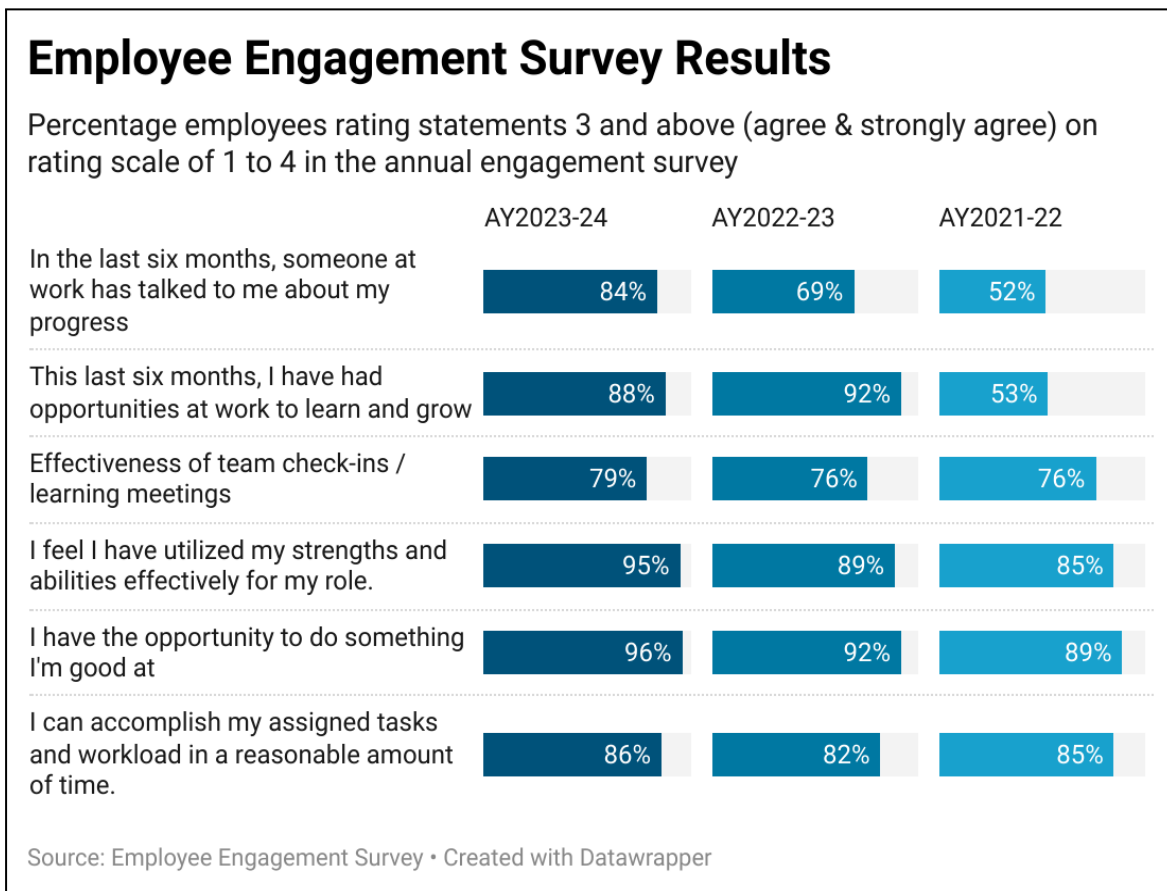
Table 1: LFE’s strategic approach towards building an enduring institution.

These priority areas were further broken down into the following key components:

1. Establishing learning and development structures for employees: Setting-up structures to establish a combination of learning and development for employees was a critical step to account for the changing dynamics of the educational landscape with the Covid-19 pandemic. This was also critical as the talent pool in the sector did not completely meet the needs of the varied demands coming from the beneficiaries. Key structures ranging from individual participation to organizational participation laid out various opportunities for upskilling and reskilling of the existing talent, addressing skill gaps effectively. (Smith, 2022)

2. Holding open forums for regular feedback from employees: Building platforms for employee voice holds great value for employers as well as individuals to feel heard. This space serves as an opportunity for all staff to share positives, concerns, challenges and ideas that can help build the organizational culture, tackle challenges at an early stage and hold accountability with decision-making. Employees asked questions around expansion plans and recruitment strategy of the organisation, organisational strategy on learning and development support since the team member is on-the-job from Day 1 etc. These open spaces evolved with employee strength and hierarchy. The People & Culture team organized individual catch-ups every quarter in the first year moving to holding open time for any employee to join every month. These spaces allowed the People & Culture team to explore understanding, role clarity and received support for all the new joiners. The cadence of once-a-year CXOs to hold open spaces with managers helped in gauging the challenges across landscapes. Crucial topics like expansion opportunities and employee suggestions were heard and discussed, thus leading to increased transparency. The graph below

showcases how personal growth and development for employees have been crucial to meet requirements for the role and organization's success.



Graph 1: Average rating by employees in the annual employee engagement survey across 3 years

3. Creation of a competency framework for employee growth: With growing organizations and changing titles in the organizational hierarchy, individuals' vision for the role becomes subjective. The need to also explicitly set expectations from the varied roles in terms of skills and knowledge needed to be successful/effective increases. Leadership For Equity drafted a comprehensive competency framework across Associate to Associate Director positions to enhance the understanding of roles across teams and employees. The

framework by design also laid out a growth path for any individual at a given level to build skills/knowledge for professional growth.

Themes	Competencies	Definitions	Associate	Senior Associate	Manager	Senior Manager/Associate Director
Stakeholder management	Building relationships and Investing Others	Ability to seek the views and concerns of stakeholders and influencers through formal and informal channels. Build consensus through dialogue, persuasion, reconciliation of diverse views/interests and trusting relationships.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders by being approachable and upholding LFE's philosophy (way of working) that aid the project and the vision of LFE.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders by being approachable and upholding LFE's philosophy (way of working) that aid the project and the vision of LFE. I am able to build trust amongst the stakeholders for self and LFE as an organization. The stakeholders are reaching out to me directly to discuss suggestions and feedback instead of reaching out to my manager.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders and programmatic partners that aid the project, it's expansion and the vision of LFE. I am able to build trust amongst the stakeholders for self and LFE as an organization. The stakeholders are reaching out to me directly to discuss suggestions and feedback instead of reaching out to my manager.	I am able to build long lasting relationships with stakeholders, programmatic partners and the funders that aid the projects I am managing, it's expansion and the vision of LFE. I am able to cultivate evangelists through these relations.
	Mentor and coach	Ability to engage, energise, and enable the stakeholders to excel.	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project.	I am able to mentor and coach the stakeholders I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project.	I am able to mentor and coach the leadership team of the government institutes I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project.	I am able to mentor and coach the leadership team of the government institutes I am working with in planning and executing interventions that are aligned with the current needs of their jurisdiction and LFE's project.

Image 1: A section of competency framework defining competencies under the theme of Stakeholder Management and showcasing the difference in roles from an Associate to an Associate Director.

4. Regularised coaching and feedback for individual growth and development:

Leadership For Equity's dispersed team across three states and close proximity to government brings high need of individual support and regular coaching towards adaptability at work. Structures like individual check-ins which are led by managers focus on individual growth, building a space for brainstorming, personal development and regular observation-led feedback. These have been set as one of the mandatory spaces to be facilitated by all managers across the organization. Furthermore, the Individual Development Plan (IDP) was introduced in AY 2023 to document an individual's learning path and also focus on individual's ownership in their development. This structure is designed to support documentation of an individual's learning journey and serves as an artifact for the individual as well as the organization. (Garvey, 2018)

Competencies to grow on (refer to the Competency Framework tab)	Current status	Activities I did	Challenges I faced	Next steps for upcoming months
Facilitation	2 - Some profici...	Conducted TRM , HM call and HR open hour and PLT ppt.	- Starting problem, sometimes worried about my confidence - bit worried about the silent gaps during the session.	1. Scripting of the session 2. Learn from a few expert team members. 3. Dry run with timers.
Designing Content	2 - Some profici...	TISS recruitment presentation slides made by my own by exploring various new things	- I was initially not very careful about the fonts I was using, but now I'm making an effort to be consistent across all slides. - Creating concise and focused slides, I always consider that if someone asks me to send the presentation, all the information should be included in the slides.	1. Use of graphs and infographics. 2. Identify how to prioritise relevant content - learn from the content team (Anand, Kajal, Samiksha, Harshita) 3. Spend enough time on session planning before presentation creation.

Image 2: Example of a Monthly IDP review format to capture the progress

Domain	Statements	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24	
		LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector
Support	I am offered training or development to further myself professionally.	73	82	75	80	80	78
	I am given the resources and equipment to do my job.	80	86	83	86	85	86
	Management recognizes honest mistakes as part of doing business.	80	78	86	78	82	78
	We celebrate people who try new and better ways of doing things, regardless of the outcome.	67	83	73	82	79	82

Statements	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24	
	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector	LFE	Sector
Management does a good job of developing managers for leadership positions.	71	79	73	79	79	78
People here understand how their role contributes to the organization's goals.	78	85	81	84	72	84
There are opportunities here for my career growth.	79	79	81	78	76	79
Performance of employees here is fairly evaluated.	79	77	85	77	78	76
Management takes action on feedback gathered from employees.	77	78	79	79		

Table 2: Great Place To Work survey indicating shifts seen in employee rating across the last 3 years

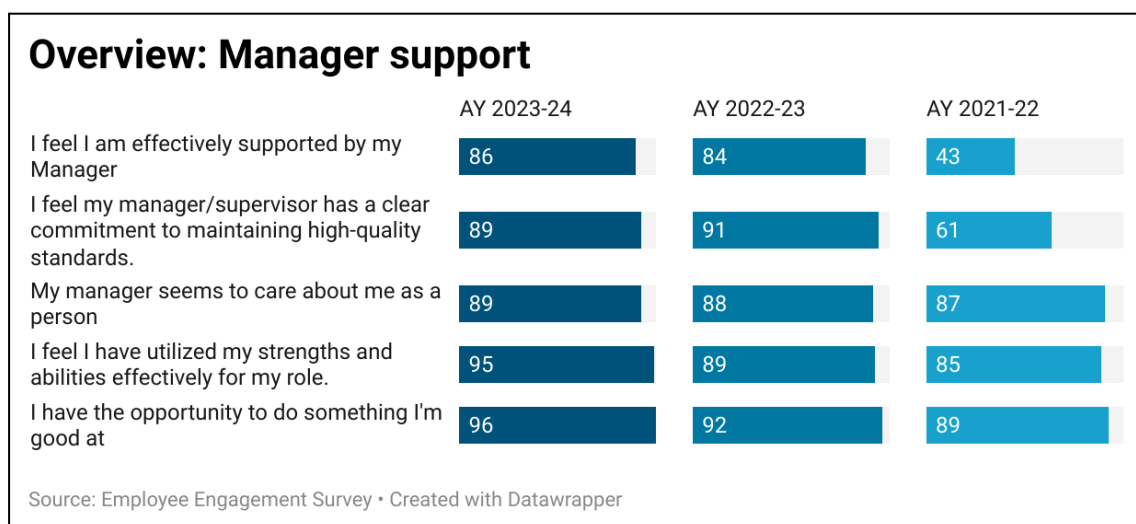
5. Investing in the People & Culture vertical as part of the organization's

development: In the incubation stage, LFE as a young organization focused on sharpening program offerings and strategy. As the organization grew in size, the leadership decided to invest in resources to lead the **People & Culture** vertical. The goal of the organization was to enhance the various internal policies for development, talent management and retention with a strong focus on internal communications. This vertical grew from 1 member across the People & Culture team, Finance and Admin departments to 9 member in-house team located across two state offices.

Dedicated resources focused on developing L&D strategy and leading the execution of these spaces and structures helped ensure the consistency, effectiveness and relevance of these initiatives.

6. Building external coaching & exposure opportunities for employees: Senior leadership team members mentor newer employees, guiding them through project management, stakeholder engagement, and policy advocacy specific to the education sector; however, this is not enough. The organization invited external experts to hold targeted learning sessions for a small group of managerial members. This ensured a focused skill development with respect to Project and People Management for potential team members thus building a third line of leadership within the organisation. The plan also unfolds in the coming years where few members will be given the opportunity for external coaching and share sectoral learning opportunities for employees on performance. This will foster networking opportunities for employees to grow across the sector.

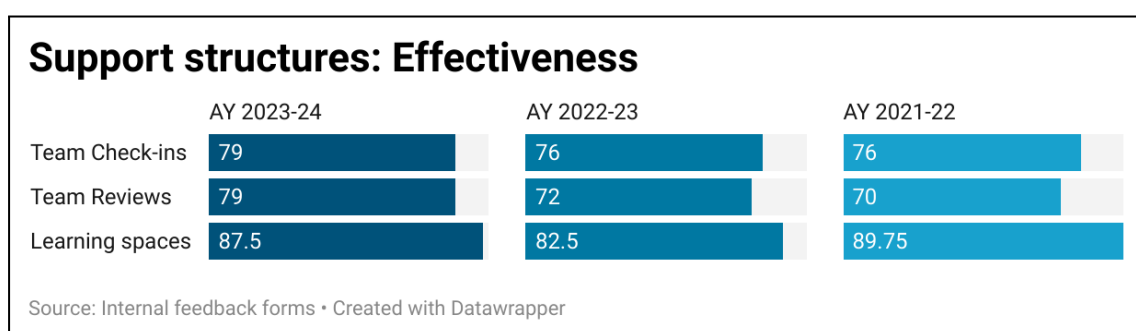
The below graphs highlight the impact of investment in the skill development of managers on employee engagement at the organisation.



Graph 2: Manager support and employee engagement at LFE from AY 2020-21 to AY 2023-24

Conclusion and recommendations

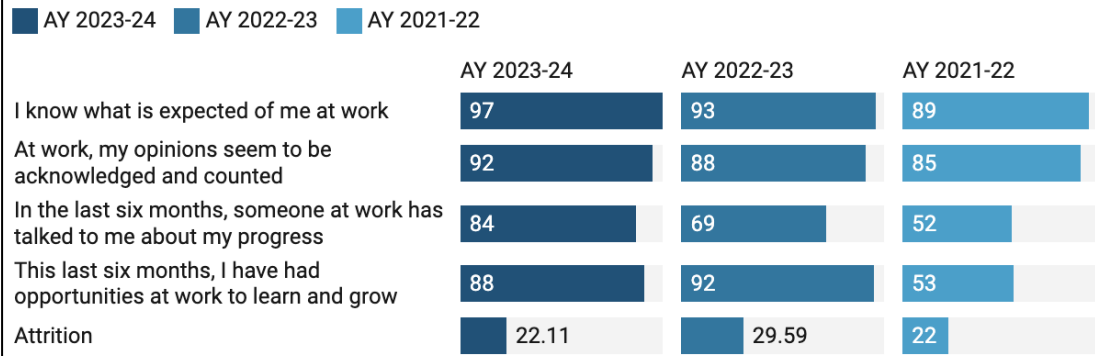
A key element of these strategies was to prioritize listening to employee voices and feedback. Year-on-year consistent feedback structures along with internal and external surveys allowed for that space and scope to understand people's experiences and their evolving needs. Quarterly reviews with the senior leadership team created a space to analyze qualitative data along with quantitative data towards making smaller tweaks and shifts to the programs and the structures. The below graph showcases the effectiveness of various support structures over the past 3 years.



Graph 3: Effectiveness of support structures at LFE from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24

While the quantitative data allowed us a chance to understand the usefulness of the spaces and structures, it was the qualitative inputs and conversations with the team members that threw a better light on the immediate as well as long-term needs with respect to learning and development. The following data showcases the relationship between increased role clarity and employee engagement.

Overview: Employee Engagement



Source: Employee Engagement Survey • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Graph 4: Employee engagement and attrition trend at LFE from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24

These data sets combined with the employee feedback through interviews allowed us to investigate the gaps, its root causes, team members' expectations and the learning needs of different roles. Feedback was not only incorporated at regular intervals but these changes were also communicated consistently to the employees, thus strengthening the employer-employee relationship through establishing transparency along with strengthening the structures and processes. This is reflected positively through the 3-year consecutive Great Place To Work Certification which received comments as below -

“There are a couple of things I've found to be great about working here. There is a great of transparency and preference for learning and growth. Every month, there is a whole day dedicated to learning spaces and open spaces with the leadership team. The culture here is very open and friendly. Every lunch at office is where everyone sits down and eats, talks and laughs together.”

- Employee, Leadership For Equity

“What sets this organization apart and makes it an exceptional workplace is its unwavering commitment to employee growth and well-being. The company goes beyond conventional benefits, offering unique initiatives that foster a positive work environment. For instance, the introduction of personalized professional development plans empowers employees to map out their career trajectories with the support of tailored learning opportunities.”

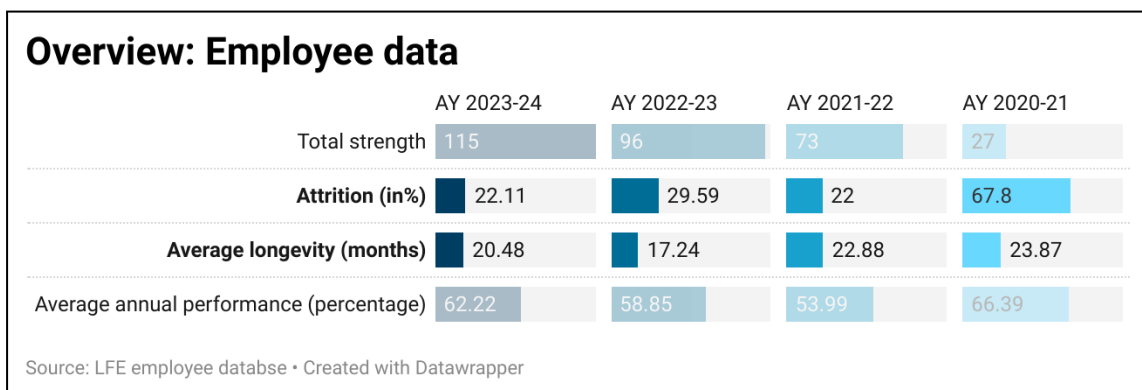
-Employee, Leadership For Equity

Image 3: Great Place To Work Survey, Qualitative Comments, Jan 2024

These findings confirm that investment in creating a learning-oriented culture where the Learning and Development structures and Leadership Programs are well-balanced with consistent, structured and constructive feedback leads to better employee engagement and performance thus increasing employee retention.

As we grapple with the larger sectoral challenges like shortage of the right talent and compensation benchmarking, it becomes crucial to implement strategies that foster employee development, engagement, and retention to stay competitive and resilient.

The data below represents the attrition rate and employee performance across the years AY 2020-21 to AY 2023-24.



Graph 5: Employee strength and attrition trend at LFE from AY 2020-21 to AY 2023-24

Some key recommendations based on this case study and its findings are -

1. **Strengthen Leadership Development Programs:** Encourage a focus on structured leadership development to prepare future leaders and enhance the organization's capability to adapt to changes. This can further reduce turnover by providing clear career growth paths.

2. **Expand L&D Opportunities Beyond the Current Scope:** While the data shows improvements, offering more diverse and personalized learning opportunities could cater to individual development needs, promoting long-term engagement and retention.
3. **Invest in Regular Feedback Mechanisms:** Continue the practice of incorporating employee feedback, and explore ways to make the process even more dynamic. Frequent and informal feedback sessions can identify issues early and adapt learning programs quickly.
4. **Leverage Qualitative Data to Tailor Development Initiatives:** Given the significance of qualitative feedback in understanding employee needs, future development programs should integrate these insights to create more customized and impactful learning experiences.
5. **Increase External Exposure Opportunities:** Expand the program for external coaching, mentorship, and networking opportunities to include more employees. This can help in building a strong network within the sector, contributing to the organization's resilience.
6. **Benchmark Against Sector Trends for Continuous Improvement:** Regularly compare organizational practices and performance metrics with sector trends to ensure that the development strategies remain relevant and impactful.
7. **Future Research Directions:** Suggest conducting longitudinal studies to assess the impact of L&D programs on long-term organizational resilience and talent development, which could validate the sustainability of these strategies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of cultivating a culture of learning within organizations, particularly in the social sector. Our findings reveal that a

learning-oriented culture not only enhances the overall employee experience but also significantly boosts engagement and retention. By framing learning and development (L&D) as a cultural priority rather than just a functional offering, organizations can drive meaningful change and foster a more resilient workforce. The qualitative insights gathered here highlight best practices and actionable recommendations for improving employee retention and cutting hiring costs. Future research should examine the long-term impact of these strategies on organizational resilience and talent development, further solidifying the role of a learning-focused culture in sustaining growth and stability.

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