THE ULTIMATE STAR WARS INSPIRED TRILOGY FOR HR AND THE WORKPLACE

"A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY…"

If you like Star Wars, you know this opening line. You also know that the central conflict throughout the series is between the light and dark sides of the Force, a literal fight between good and evil. Those aligned with the light side are the heroes, who embrace virtuous behaviors and follow a doctrine worthy of emulating. Conversely, those aligned with the dark side are the main villains, who espouse immoral principles and carry out actions that everyone should avoid.

Despite its creative blend of sci-fi and fantasy, with lightsabers, blasters, starships, droids, and the Force (a mystical, spiritual-like energy that can be channeled, allowing powerful abilities), there are valuable, applicable insights from Star Wars that can be translated into the HR universe and the workplace. You're probably wondering how – we'll show you.

WHITE PAPER

TRAINING, DEVELOPMENT, AND MENTORSHIP

"PASS ON WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED."

-YODA TO LUKE SKYWALKER, RETURN OF THE JEDI (KAZANJIAN & MARQUAND, 1983).

OUT IN THE GALAXY

Heavily illustrated throughout the Star Wars franchise is the importance of training, development, and mentorship, and the Jedi Order is the best example. *The Jedi Order has a precise hierarchical structure, with a strict system of training and development that heavily relies on master-apprentice mentorship and provides a clear path for advancement.* Force-sensitive individuals begin their journey at a young age as initiates, hoping to be selected as apprentices (Jedi, 2019). These apprentices – known as Padawans – are individually chosen by Jedi and shadow their masters until they complete training (Padawan, 2019). Only Padawans that successfully pass every stage and test of their training can become Jedi Knights. Ranked above Knights are Masters, followed by the members of the High Council, and lastly the Grand Master – the oldest, wisest, and highest ranking Jedi elected to lead the order (Jedi, 2019).

A great example of Jedi training, development, and mentorship is demonstrated by the character Obi-Wan Kenobi. He is first seen as a Padawan to Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn in The Phantom Menace and accompanies him during the mission to Naboo while still in training. At the end of this film, he is promoted to Jedi Knight (and eventually becomes a Jedi Master by the start of Revenge of the Sith), and he first takes Anakin Skywalker, and later Anakin's son Luke, as apprentices of his own (McCallum & Lucas, 1999; McCallum & Lucas, 2005; Kurtz & Lucas, 1977).
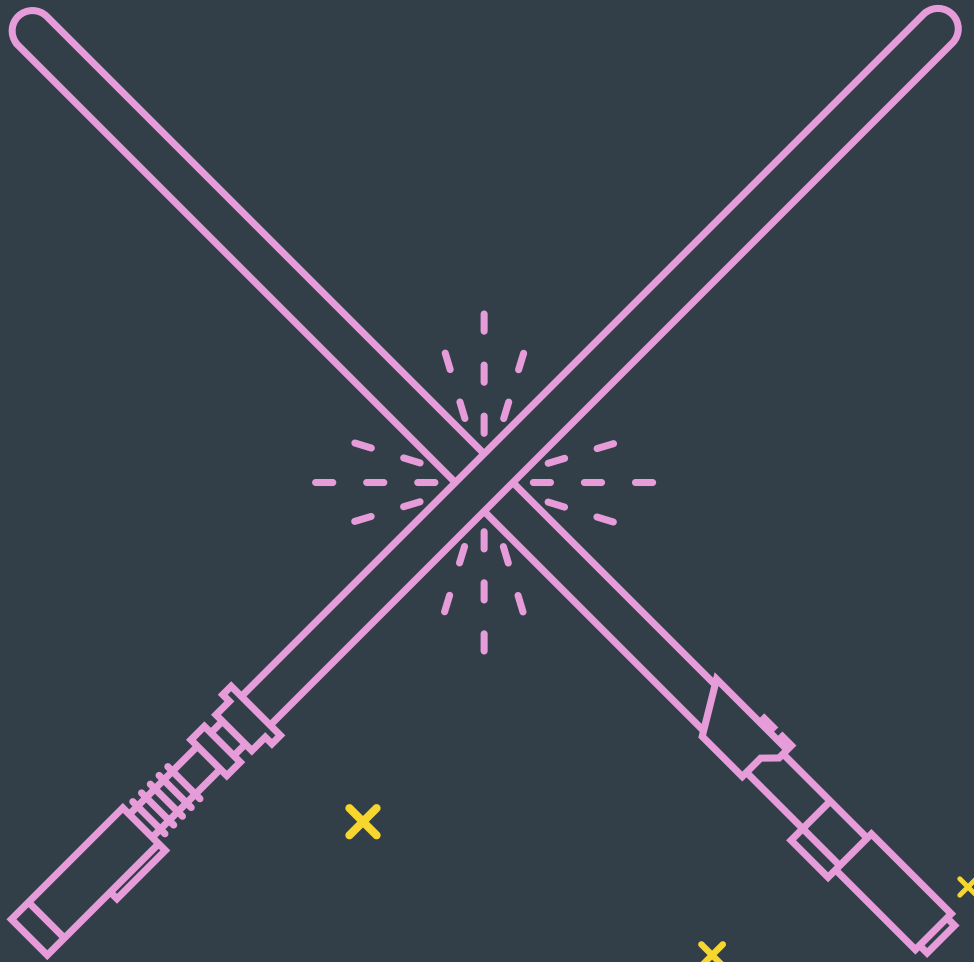
This tailored training, system of development, and style of mentorship directly pertains to the modern workplace. The market research company Ipsos discovered in 2017 that 31% of all adult employees did not receive training in any formal manner, with a rate of 25% for full-time workers (Ipsos, 2018). Even further, a global survey conducted by Deloitte found that a significant majority of those who responded felt that their organization needed to improve learning and development. Although 86% of respondents emphasized the importance of this issue, only 10% believed their organization was prepared to handle it. As work, technology, and required skills are rapidly evolving today and automation threatens to make many jobs redundant, Deloitte concluded that many employers are realizing the necessity of effective training. The same survey revealed that 77% of respondents preferred training current employees over hiring new ones when a demand for new skills arises because it is usually more challenging and time consuming to find applicants with the exact skills desired (Volini et al, 2019, pp. 79-82).

According to a report by the analytics company Gallup, How Millennials Want to Work and Live, millennials are now the largest generation in the American labor force; they made up at least 38% of the workforce in 2016 and likely comprise an even higher and still increasing percentage now (Gallup, 2016, pp. 13, 67). For millennials, opportunities for training, development, and advancement are clearly very important, as this report lists "opportunities to learn and grow" and "opportunities for advancement" as two of the top five attributes sought by millennials when job-hunting, with "opportunities to learn and grow" considered the most important by a majority of those millennials polled (Gallup, 2016, p. 26). Training and development are clearly crucial for attracting and retaining employees today, considering the size of millennials in the workforce, the well-known fact that they frequently change jobs (as of 2016, roughly 60% reported seeking new opportunities), and the prominence they place on these aspects when contemplating leaving or staying with an employer (Gallup, 2016, p. 10).

An article written by Central Michigan University reinforces these Jedi practices and explained that "As training continues to change and adapt to new demands by the workforce, personalized and learner-centric training is becoming more and more prevalent. *Gone are the days* when individuals were presented with wave after wave of materials and information and expected to learn it using a 'one-size-fits-all' method" (Central Michigan University, 2019). Aytekin Tank, founder and CEO of JotForm, further emphasizes these points in an article he wrote, where he explained that while training is indispensable, it can also be costly and ineffective if improperly implemented, which it often is. The approach he recommended and what his company's training includes is an established mentorship system. He views mentoring to be a very effective training tool, as well as much less expensive than other common training practices (Tank, 2019).

THE LESSON

Clearly those Jedi were onto something a long time ago. Training is a valuable investment in your workers and organization. It's best to have a formal process for new employees, but it doesn't have to feel formal. You don't need to get rid of theoretical and classroom-style education; however, like the Jedi, it's better to emphasize practical, personalized, and relevant instruction, and – if you don't already – consider having a mentorship program and a generally defined path and opportunity for career development and advancement.

TEAMWORK AND
COLLABORATION

"HELP ME, OBI-WAN KENOBI. YOU'RE MY ONLY HOPE."

-PRINCESS LEIA, A NEW HOPE (KURTZ & LUCAS, 1977).

OUT IN THE GALAXY

Another lesson conveyed by Star Wars is the importance of collaboration and effective teamwork. *Try to name the main hero from any of the films, and you'll notice there is never just one. Every win against the dark side is achieved by at least one highly collaborative team, united by and focused on achieving the same higher goals.*

Again, numerous examples within the Star Wars universe exist, but one occurrence is in The Return of the Jedi, where the final battle against the Empire would not have been won without extensive, interconnected teamwork. The Empire was in the process of building a second Death Star – a moon-sized space station capable of destroying a whole planet in one blast – after the Rebel Alliance had destroyed the first one in A New Hope. The Rebellion, aiming to prevent this Death Star from being completed, devised a two-part attack: soldiers would attack the Empire's base on Endor, where the Death Star's shield generator was located. Once disabled, the Rebel fleet would attack, and hopefully destroy, the Death Star and Imperial fleet in space (Kazanjian & Marquand, 1983; Kurtz & Lucas, 1977).

It turns out that the Empire anticipated this, laying a trap that could have defeated the Rebellion entirely; however, despite nearly being beaten, the Rebels on Endor won the battle and disabled the shield with the aid of their new Ewok allies. In space, while the rest of the Rebel fleet engaged and distracted most of the Imperial forces, Lando Calrissian flew the Millennium Falcon into the Death Star alongside a small team of other starfighters, blowing up its core and escaping as it was destroyed. Through collective, team-based effort, the Empire was defeated (Kazanjian & Marquand, 1983).

BACK ON EARTH

In militaries, athletics, academics, and professional organizations, teams are widespread and essential. *Work and goals that might be overwhelming, overcomplicated, or impossible for a single person to complete or achieve, like destroying the Death Star and defeating the Empire, are often attainable by teams* (Salas, Reyes, & McDaniel, 2018). This is evidenced by an article examining teamwork in the military, which explained, "Teams are the nucleus around which the majority of the U.S. military force is built to accomplish its mission. This structure allows military teams to accomplish tasks larger in scale and more complex than can readily be accomplished by individual members alone" (Goodwin, Blacksmith, and Coats, 2018, p. 322). The same line of reasoning applies to the use of teams in businesses and organizations. As an article in Harvard Business Review pointed out, "Collaboration is taking over the workplace. As business becomes increasingly global and cross-functional, silos are breaking down, connectivity is increasing, and teamwork is seen as a key to organizational success" (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016).

Though not all teams are perfect, they can be very effective. Teams working well in collaboration can produce greater results than individuals that combine their efforts after working independently (Stagl, Burke, Salas, & Pierce, 2006; Lacerenza, Tannenbaum, Marlow, & Salas, 2018, p. 517). Research has shown that teams are more adaptive than individuals and better at problem solving and fostering creativity and innovation, as multiple perspectives and ideas can be considered and different knowledge can be shared. This research also highlighted that all individuals have their own strengths and weaknesses, and teamwork allows for the capitalization of strengths and the mitigation of weaknesses in ways that cannot be achieved when working alone (Stagl, Burke, Salas, & Pierce, 2006).

Internal research conducted by Google with the goal of uncovering "What makes a Google team effective?" discovered that "Who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions" (Rozovsky, 2015). Project Aristotle, Google's name for this research, identified these five aspects they deemed critical to an effective team: psychological safety (the ability to take risks without apprehension), structure and clarity (defined roles and goals), dependability (team reliability), impact (the sense that the work matters), and meaning (personal significance towards the work) (Google re:Work Guide, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted at Stanford by assistant professor of psychology Gregory Walton and Priyanka Carr in 2014 found that teamwork can boost motivation, focus, engagement, and interest in projects or work, even if the collaboration was imagined and the team non-existent (as cited in Parker, 2014).

THE LESSON

As you can see, teams, teamwork, and collaboration are essential and have significant benefits. Like the Rebel Alliance, you might consider forming teams and establishing a collaborative mindset in your organization if you don't already. And don't forget – just as the Star Wars characters often needed tools to accomplish their objectives, like starships, lightsabers, and comlinks, tools like Microsoft Teams and Slack can greatly enhance teamwork and collaboration in the workplace.

OPEN THINKING AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

"MANY OF THE TRUTHS WE CLING TO DEPEND GREATLY ON OUR OWN POINT OF VIEW."

-OBI-WAN KENOBI TO LUKE SKYWALKER, RETURN OF THE JEDI (KAZANJIAN & MARQUAND, 1983).

OUT IN THE GALAXY

A final HR lesson from Star Wars is the necessity of open thinking and open communication. *These two concepts are directly related: thinking openly and creatively means little without the freedom and security to be able to communicate these beliefs and ideas, and openly communicating is impossible with strict limits on what beliefs or ideas are allowed to be expressed.*

Once again, the Jedi are a perfect example of the importance of open thinking and open communication. In The Phantom Menace, Qui-Gon Jinn meets with the Jedi Council and informs them of controversial news: he believes the Sith still exist – the rest of the Jedi think they had ceased existing a thousand years prior – and he wants to train Anakin to be a Jedi – who is too old to start training. Neither item is popularly received, yet they still hear him out, treat him with respect, and consider what he says. This shows that he feels able to approach them with his thoughts and requests even knowing they'd disapprove (McCallum & Lucas, 1999).
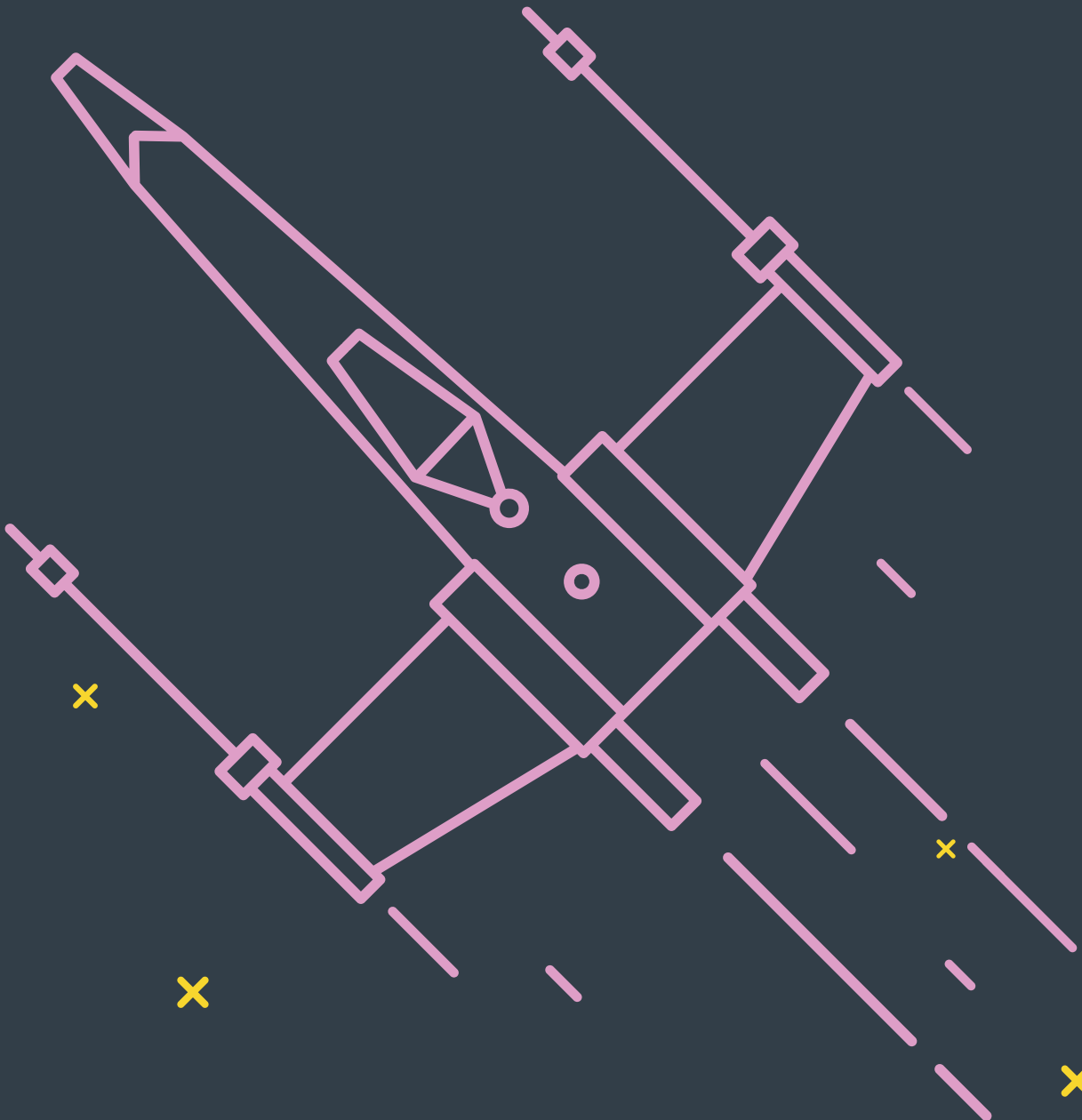
BACK ON EARTH

Open thinking and communication are vitally important in the workplace. They connect to many domains, like training and teamwork, and the research backs this up. Of all the characteristics Google identified as most important to their successful teams, they found that psychological safety was the most important (Rozovsky, 2015). Psychological safety, as defined by Amy Edmondson of Harvard, is "A shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking [...and] a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354).

Psychological safety encompasses open thinking and open communication, and Edmondson highlighted how teams and organizations with psychological safety had improvements in both learning and performance; when employees can voice their thoughts, concerns, and questions, flaws can be found and fixed, improvements can be made, and learning is encouraged (Edmondson, 1999). This connection between psychological safety and open thought and open communication is even explicitly made by Edmondson. In a later paper, she indicated that questions about open communication and the ability to share one's thoughts were used to determine how psychologically safe one's team was (Edmondson, 2003, p. 12).

Additional research also tied open communication to psychological safety within teams and stressed the necessity of both for teams to truly prosper (Salas, Reyes, & McDaniel, 2018). Google's research on teams backed this up, finding that those with more psychological safety received better reviews from management, were more creative, generated more profits, and had less turnover when compared to those with lower psychological safety (Google reWork Guide, 2019).

A key workforce dimension is employee engagement, defined by Gallup as employees "who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace" (Harter & Adkins, 2015). Research has found that workers are more likely to be engaged if their workplace values open communication and their managers are easily approachable (Harter & Adkins, 2015). According to a survey conducted by 15Five on American workers, 81% would prefer to work for an organization that values open communication rather than receive other benefits, and 58% indicated that they felt their opinions didn't matter much, if at all (15Five, 2015).

A Harvard Business Review study also focused on employee engagement and surveyed 568 executives across the world and from a diverse assortment of industries. They classified the respondents into three categories based on how much importance they placed on employee engagement towards their organization's success; 48% of these respondents were classified in the "high-priority" category. 73% of all respondents listed "effective communications" as important to their organization's success, second highest out of all categories, and 86% of those classified in the high-priority group felt the same, also placing it within the top two (Harvard Business Review, 2013, pp. 1-5). Clearly, open thought and open communication are valued by employers as much as employees.

THE LESSON

Surely some boundaries are necessary, but – like the Jedi Order – a work environment where employees feel free, psychologically safe, and confident to ask questions and share their thoughts and concerns should be encouraged. Teams and organizations need open thinking and communication in order to properly collaborate, plan, learn, solve problems, and develop creative, innovative ideas.

THE ULTIMATE TRILOGY

With thorough training and development, effective teamwork and collaboration, and open thinking and communication, the ultimate Star Wars–inspired HR trilogy is complete. While we can't give you a lightsaber, the ability to channel The Force, your own droid, or a starship capable of hyperdriving to distant star systems, we have given you something you can take from Star Wars: lessons you can apply to your workplace and HR best practices now – if you haven't already. As Yoda famously said, "Do… Or do not. There is no try" (Kurtz & Kershner, 1980).

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