

# How to Fight Learned Helplessness at Work



Growing up, I heard a story about baby elephants and how they are tamed. I learned that when a baby elephant is captured, trainers put a chain around its leg and attach it to a secure pole, preventing it from walking away. It tries to escape at first, but eventually, it stops resisting and surrenders to its destiny. This early life experience leaves the elephant helpless for life. When the elephant grows up, the trainer likely substitutes the chain for a small rope. What for? The elephant will not even try to leave anymore.

But aren't elephants the strongest mammals and the strongest land animals? Aren't they capable of uprooting trees with their trunk? How is this kind of submission possible? Are elephants just ... dumb? Well, actually not. Elephants are one of the world's most intelligent species. Their brain is similar to that of humans in terms of structure and complexity, allowing them to identify languages, understand human body language, show empathy and even mourn death. The elephant had learned it could never escape, so why should he try?

I now understand that this story was not about "how to tame a baby elephant" but about "learned helplessness," a behavior that despite being first spotted in animals, affects people too.

Learned helplessness refers to when people feel they have no control over their situation, often occurring after persistent failure. To see an example of this at work, just look around and wait for all the “we have tried it and it didn’t work,” or “we already asked once, and they said no.” After a series of letdowns and disapproval we, like elephants, may form a sense of helplessness at work. We learn that no matter what we do, we have no control over the outcome.

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This situation is more dangerous than it sounds. For some organizations, this means having a passive workforce that will do what they are told but are convinced that there are no opportunities, solutions, options or possibilities. Any guesses on how much this type of mindset actually affects innovation initiatives and the enterprise’s productivity and profitability? A lot of people are not lazy, but instead feel somewhat helpless. Their self-confidence, initiative and motivation have been buried, leaving no place for being bold or taking risks.

## THE WORKPLACE CAN HELP

At Steelcase, we study how the workplace impacts human interactions and human behavior. In recent years, we’ve found that the physical environment can be used as a strategic asset to engage workers. Specifically, when workers are given the freedom to choose where and how they work throughout the day, they are more likely to be engaged.

It doesn’t always mean a big makeover either. Here are some ideas on how your organization can leverage the work environment to provide workers with more control and fight learned helplessness:

- **Enable workers to personalize their workspace and share accomplishments:** hang family photos, share accomplishments or just an inspiring poster. Allowing workers to personalize their workspace makes them feel a sense of connection and belonging to the organization.
- **Create zones for socializing:** everyone loves a coffee break, encourage workers to socialize and have informal conversations. When workers build deep relationships they are more likely to be loyal to the organization.
- **Design for transparency:** use a [whiteboard](#) or media wall to provide updates on the organization and leverage open environments so workers can easily find one another.
- **Encourage movement throughout the day:** movement brings oxygen to the brain, helping workers feel refreshed and think better. Encourage workers to get up for meetings, take a walk outside or stand during a session.
- **Support privacy for groups and individuals:** Employees need moments of [focused group work](#), but also quiet moments of [individual work](#). Each should be supported with culture norms and the appropriate spaces.

Don’t believe us? Steelcase recently reexamined its own spaces. [Read more](#) about how we leveraged space to fight disengagement.

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## Introducing New Research on Engagement + the Global Workplace

1/3 of workers in 17 of the world’s most important economies is disengaged, according to new research from Steelcase. Working with global research firm Ipos, the Steelcase Global Report is the first to explore the relationship between engagement and the workplace.



**Sandra Garcia**  
**Workplace Consultant**

Though Sandra has a strong vocational background in sales and marketing, her passion for organizational sociology and change management have driven her to perform different roles within Steelcase, all of them oriented around unveiling, understanding and solving customer needs. She believes in lifelong learning and searches to keep discovering and understanding behavior, trends, and technology. Sandra joined Steelcase Mexico in 2009 and moved to the WorkLife Center in Paris, France in 2011. Today she is a Workplace Consultant for the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) team, where she looks after the strategic alliances with the real estate and design community. Sandra has also recently started an Executive Master's in Sociology of the Enterprise and Change Strategy.

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