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Back to School Isn't Just for Students: Why Employers Should Invest in Their Next Generation of Leaders Now

Organizational psychologist Dr. Celina Peerman encourages organizations to use the back-to-school season to rethink how they prepare new, emerging, and experienced leaders for what comes next.

IOWA — August 2026 — As students across Iowa head back to classrooms this month, organizational psychologist and leadership strategist Dr. Celina Peerman says there is another group that should be thinking about learning this fall: the people leading our workplaces.

“Back-to-school season is a great reminder that learning doesn’t stop when we finish a degree, earn a certification, or get promoted,” said Peerman. “The strongest leaders I know are continuous learners. They remain curious, keep developing their skills, and recognize that what got them to their current role may not be enough for what comes next.”

That need is particularly important for employees stepping into their first people-leadership roles.

Organizations frequently promote employees because they are strong individual contributors, technically skilled, dependable, or knowledgeable about the operation. But leading people requires an additional set of skills. from communication and feedback to coaching, accountability, decision-making, relationship building, and navigating change.

“A promotion gives someone a new title. It doesn’t automatically give them the skills or confidence to lead people,” Dr. Peerman said. “New people leaders need support as they make that transition. We shouldn’t expect them to figure it all out through trial and error and while that is one way to learn, it shouldn't be the only way.”

Peerman, who has spent more than 30 years working in organizational psychology, leadership development, human resources, and operations, believes organizations also need to begin developing leaders before positions become available.

“Future leaders won’t wait until we have an opening on the organizational chart,” she said. “They are already on our teams. The question is whether we are intentionally helping them develop the judgment, communication skills, confidence, and ability to lead others that they will need next.”

A Back-to-School Checkup for Your Leadership Bench

Peerman suggests organizations use this Fall to ask five questions:

1. Who are we developing before they get promoted?

2. What support do our first-time supervisors and managers receive?
3. When did our experienced leaders last intentionally invest in their own development?
4. What will our leaders need to know and be able to do two or three years from now, not just today?
5. If a key leader left tomorrow, who would actually be ready to step forward?

Leadership development, Peerman emphasizes, should not be limited to a single class or reserved only for senior executives. It can include mentoring, facilitated learning, stretch assignments, coaching, peer discussions, reflection, feedback, and opportunities to practice new skills.

It also needs to continue throughout a leader's career.

"The workplace keeps changing, so leadership has to keep learning," Peerman said. "We're asking leaders to navigate new technology, changing employee expectations, increasingly complex workplaces, knowledge transfer, and ongoing change. Continuous learning isn't an extra anymore. It is part of the work of leading."

For organizations considering where to invest as they finish 2026 and begin planning for 2027, Peerman encourages them to look beyond filling current positions and consider the strength of their entire leadership pipeline.

"Your next leaders are probably already working for you," she said. "Give them opportunities to learn before you desperately need them to lead."

Future leaders won't wait. Neither should their development.

About Dr. Celina Peerman

Dr. Celina Peerman is an organizational psychologist, leadership strategist, professional speaker, and author with more than 30 years of experience in human resources, operations, and leadership education. Through The Peerman Group, she and her team work with organizations to strengthen leaders, teams, and workplaces as they navigate change and prepare for the future of work. Peerman is a four-time author, two-time TEDx speaker, and Certified Speaking Professional (CSP®).

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