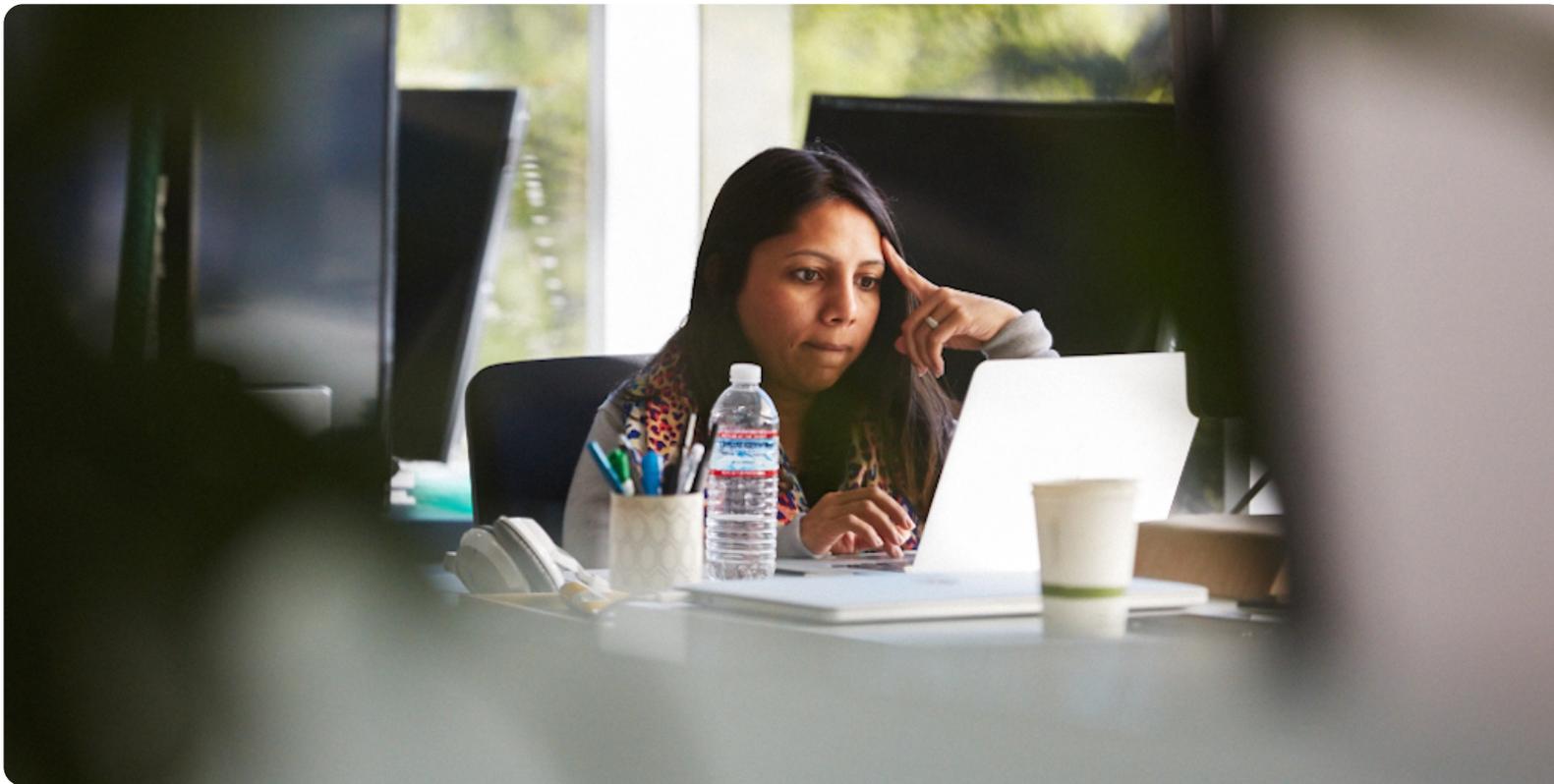


AUTHORS: DEBBIE NEWHOUSE AND REGINA GETZ-KIKUCHI, GOOGLE | DECEMBER 12, 2017

# Whisper courses: on-the-job microlearning with email



Make learning stick. See how Google uses bite-sized lessons to help managers build psychological safety within their teams.

Learning doesn't always happen in a classroom. **Research on learning** (<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0120644>) shows that even within an hour, people can forget about 50% of the information. So when our team of learning and development specialists at Google was tasked with teaching thousands of Googlers about fostering a **psychologically safe** (</guides/understanding-team-effectiveness/steps/foster-psychological-safety/>) team culture — an important factor of team effectiveness — we looked at options outside of the traditional classroom environment.

**Microlearning** (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microlearning>), a method of learning through bite-sized lessons, was one approach we considered. Our take on this was a “whisper course,” named for the idea that you need a reminder and not another class to try what you know — like a whisper into a manager's ear. A whisper course is a series of emails, each with a simple suggestion, or “whisper,” for a manager to try in their one-on-ones or team meetings. Over the course of ten weeks, managers could build better psychological safety on their team by trying these whisper suggestions.

In one of these whisper emails, we reminded managers of the importance of regularly showing genuine and explicit appreciation for their team members. The lesson was accompanied by two concrete examples of how to do this, like saying “*I noticed and appreciated the way you [did X]*” or “*That's a really thought-provoking point that you brought up because [X].*” As a bonus tip, we encouraged managers to use part of their one-on-one meetings with team members to ask how each person prefers to be recognized — for example, publicly, privately, or via email. Other nudges included advice about how to be more present during meetings, cultivate trust, and share feedback with team members.

*Sample nudge email:*

## Acknowledge & Appreciate

*"Appreciation can make a day - even change a life. Your willingness to put it into words is all that is necessary." — Margaret Cousins*

### Read & Apply

Especially coming from you, a little acknowledgement and appreciation goes a long way in validating the work of your team members. This week, pay extra attention to the contributions each person on your team makes, whether big or small – especially if they have not been recently recognized by you or others. Authenticity is crucial here— only use these experiments when you genuinely appreciate what your team member said or did!

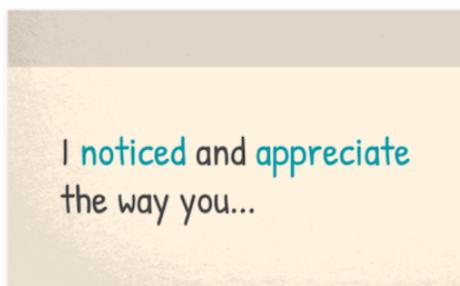
In 1:1s, you might say:

- *"I noticed and appreciate the way you [did X]"*

In a team meeting, try:

- *"That's a really thought provoking point that you brought up because..."*

P.S. Bonus experiment: Not everyone likes to be recognized in the same way. In your 1:1s, ask "how do you prefer to be recognized?" (e.g. privately vs. publicly, over email or in person)



**[Please rate]** Overall, this Whisper was worth my time.



Googlers were invited to rate each whisper email and reflect on their personal takeaways from the lesson. Ratings for this particular lesson on appreciation were 98% favorable, and an internal analysis of **retrospective pre-test** (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0193841X8000400105>) survey responses spanning one year indicate a 33% increase in favorable responses to the statement "I look for ways to acknowledge and appreciate each of my team members, and make sure to communicate this in a timely manner." To date, approximately 95% of participants who have rated the course indicate that they would recommend this whisper course to fellow Googlers.

Google now uses microlearning to nudge managers to take action when they receive their survey results on how they're doing as a manager. Managers see a whisper lesson relevant to the lowest-scoring management attribute in their personal survey results. Internal analysis showed that Google managers who received a whisper lesson improved on that attribute in the next survey by 22-40 percentage points versus a control, leading Google to implement whisper courses as a standard practice for manager survey results distribution.

Google has used whisper courses to support on-the-job microlearning across a variety of topics, from coaching to inclusion. When people are busy, these short, spaced lessons may help them retain what's important. One Googler shared, "I love that it was practice-focused. Often times you leave a course overwhelmed with info and it's hard to implement a real change. Because you're encouraging stepwise change, it feels like a slow, steady progression of understanding how you can evolve the way you work." Any organization can adopt this approach – **use this simple guide to develop your very own whisper course** ([https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XKmeej5Q309aaLSyjF4xABiYnAHsd5cR7WY\\_WY5s4JY/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XKmeej5Q309aaLSyjF4xABiYnAHsd5cR7WY_WY5s4JY/edit)).

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