

NUDGES THAT MAKE LEARNING STICK

A Practical Playbook for L&D Pros (Because knowing ≠ doing.)

1: What Nudging Really Means

Let's be honest – most training fails at the follow-through. People nod, smile, and then go right back to their inbox. Not because they don't care, but because habits, distractions, and friction win.

That's where nudges come in.

A nudge is a small, timely prompt that makes it easier for someone to do what they already intend to do. It doesn't force, guilt, or nag – it simply shapes the path so action feels obvious.

Think of it as marketing meets behavior science. You're not pushing harder; you're designing smarter.

The Science Bit (Without the Jargon)

From *Nudge* by Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein:

- **People follow defaults.** Make the desired action the easiest one.
- **Timing matters.** Catch people right before they act.
- **Framing counts.** Show benefits, not rules.
- **Social proof wins.** We copy what others do.
- **Environment shapes behavior.** You can't "train" your way out of a bad system.

Combine those ideas and you get a powerful shift:

Training isn't an event – it's a **campaign for behavior change**.

2: How to Nudge Like a Marketer

Marketers don't run one ad and hope for the best. They run **campaigns** – a series of messages that meet people where they are, at the right time, in the right place. L&D can do the same thing. Here's how.

Step 1: Pick One Behavior

Start small. Identify one concrete action you want people to take.

- "Use the 3-step feedback model in your next one-on-one."

- “Ask one open-ended question before jumping to advice.”
- “Add accessibility checks to every new slide deck.”

If it takes more than one sentence to describe, it’s too big.

Step 2: Design a Sequence, Not a Reminder

People don’t change because of one message. They change through rhythm and repetition.

When	What to Send	Example
Before training	Set intention	“You’ll get a few short prompts next week to help you apply this right away.”
2 days later	Action nudge	“Have a one-on-one today? Try the 3-step model.”
1 week later	Reflection	“What worked when you tried it? Reply with one thing.”
3 weeks later	Reinforcement	“Ask for feedback this time — same model, new angle.”

Think: **mini-campaigns** that keep the learning alive.

Step 3: Reduce Friction

Nudges work when the right action is the easy action.

- Pre-fill forms.
- Link directly to the tool or template.
- Auto-enroll people in reminders (opt-out > opt-in).
- Give one clear next step, not five options.

The brain loves shortcuts — give it one.

Step 4: Make It Feel Human

Drop the corporate tone. Write like a colleague, not a compliance officer.

- “You’ve got a 1:1 today — want to test that feedback thing you learned?”
- “Quick win time: ask one open-ended question in your next meeting.”

Small tone shift, big difference in engagement.

25 Ways to Bring Nudges to Life

Here's your buffet of ideas — pick a few and start experimenting.

Before Training

1. Add a “why this matters” line in calendar invites.
2. Ask learners to reply with one skill they’ll try.
3. Have managers ask, “What will you do differently after?”
4. Send a 1-minute reflection form to set intention.
5. Share a short video teaser showing relevance.

During Training

6. End each module with “Your next small action...”
7. Use polls or chat prompts (“Which of these will you try first?”).
8. Give learners digital cue cards with key actions.
9. Have them post one action commitment in chat.
10. Replace summaries with “What you can do right now.”

After Training

11. Send a “moment-of-need” reminder before relevant tasks.
12. Share quick peer stories of success.
13. Post a checklist inside the workflow tool.
14. Highlight early adopters in Teams or Slack.
15. Auto-schedule manager check-ins one week out.

Environmental Nudges

16. Make the new process the default in templates.
17. Add quick visual cues (desk cards, posters, screensavers).
18. Add micro-tips inside software (e.g., “Try this feature you learned last week”).
19. Create “Apply It Now” buttons that link to real work.
20. Embed prompts into dashboards or reports.

Social Nudges

21. Publicly celebrate people applying new skills.
22. Run short team challenges.
23. Have people post 30-second “how I used it” clips.
24. Share weekly prompts in your learning community.
25. Pair people as “learning buddies” for accountability.

Pro Tips

- Stack multiple nudges into a **campaign**: before, during, after.
- Keep them **short, visual, and friendly**.
- Time them for **the moment of need**.
- Track actions, not just completions.

Want to Go Deeper?

If you’re ready to level up, check out:

- *Nudge* by Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein → nudges.org
- *Design Tactics for Training Transfer* — TD.org
- *How Nudges Can Prompt Changes in Behavior* — IMD.org
- *From Learning to Leading: Nudges Drive Lasting Behavior Change* — L-TEN.org
- *Levers of Behavior Change Guide* — Rare.org
- *Nudge Science: 5 Micro-Interventions That Increase Training Effectiveness* — Arist.co

Final Thought

Training lights the spark. **Nudges fan the flame.** You don’t need a new LMS, a massive budget, or a behavior lab. Just a little curiosity, a few smart messages, and the mindset of a marketer who knows that every action starts with a gentle push.

For more on how marketing thinking transforms learning design, check out our book [Think Like a Marketer, Train Like an L&D Pro](#)—it’s your guide to creating training people actually want to use.