

The Critical Importance of (and Practical Approach to) Becoming a “Learning Organization”

...Love the ones you're with..... Crosby Stills Nash and Young sang this age-old mantra in the 1970s and it still rings true in today's corporate environment. Sure, the current economic challenges are temporarily distracting our focus from long-term organizational development. Yet the impending shift in our nation's demographic paradigm over the next ten years is impossible to ignore.

We used to answer productivity challenges by releasing marginal employees and simply hiring new ones. The demographic shift is forcing major changes in staffing practices, namely heightened focus on retention and the development of mid-level on-board talent. Over the next two decades, 80 million baby boomers will be replaced in the workforce by approximately 40 million “gen-x”ers and “gen-y”ers. Never before in modern history has the drain in intellectual capital portended such ominous consequences.

Becoming a learning organization is THE critical success driver in the long-term productivity, even viability, of today's businesses. Only through a focused, systematic effort can knowledge effectively be re-distributed throughout the organization. And that initiative must start now!

Learning as Corporate Strategy

The notion of learning as a strategic objective is not new. However, the evidentiary support underscoring the importance of learning in the workplace is becoming quite compelling. Consider how the notion of employee retention has, in a subtle way, taken on renewed relevance among business leaders.

As our nation moves toward an increasingly knowledge-based economy and away from agriculture and industry, employers have come full circle. The recession of the 1980's gave way to layoffs and rising unemployment. Continuing the trend, the 1990s saw employees lose their last vestiges of loyalty to their employers.

But it was a “buyers' market” then. And while the current economic environment has temporarily turned the market back in favor of buyers, the long-term demographic cannot be ignored. Today's Gen X and Gen Y employees have gained absolute confidence in their ability to find replacement positions and, before this economic meltdown, would frequently leave for just a few cents more in hourly wage equivalent. And the current market challenges will not change their view.

Over the long term, employers must develop credible competitive advantages to attract and retain talent beyond compensation and benefits. And the only way employers can do this is to demonstrate their commitment to their workforce through tangible investment in the professional and leadership development of their human capital.

Commit and Retain

So how does a company demonstrate its commitment to develop its most important resource—its people? By implementing programs and committing both financial and professional resources toward professional and leadership development.

Employers must be able to say to their recruits and their young leaders, “Here is our commitment to you. Here is what we’re doing to ensure the ongoing development of your career and your capabilities. You are our most valuable asset.”

- There is no greater proof of commitment to organizational growth than direct investment of an employer’s precious capital in education, learning and development programs to improve corporate competencies and expand its knowledge base.
- There is no greater indicator of a corporate leader’s view of the importance of developing a “learning organization” than asking the corporation’s stakeholders to commit growth capital to expand worker competencies and enhance the knowledge base of its human resources.

Convergence of various technologies and the challenges posed by economic cycles have forced corporate recognition of the importance of organizational “learning” as never before. And workforce demographics are pressuring employers to work harder to retain not just top performers, but mid-level performers; thus the need to “invest” to develop competency and knowledge across its workforce. For top performers, the critical element is investment to reinforce productive leadership and retain key talent. For mid-level performers, progressive employers understand that they must enhance productivity to achieve incremental increases in earnings.

With Today’s Technology, Resistance is Futile

The proliferation of new technologies has placed more computers on more desks providing any occupant with the means to learn. As more computers find their way into everyday business relations, employee resistance to technology and online learning tools is waning. Employees worldwide are actually embracing the use of computers as they realize that computers can support and underscore their performance, reinforcing the notion that the more they learn, the more valuable they can become. Thus the learning process becomes a critical business tool contributing to the success of learning organizations, yielding a distinct business advantage.

Systematize Learning and Knowledge Resources

Deploying “knowledge content” (not just training modules, but *relevant* information on products, services, customers, markets, geographies, industries, etc.) in a convenient, accessible online environment is a critical component of enterprise knowledge development. Adding blogs, forums and wikis can expand learning opportunities into the social interactions between employees. However, online deployment of knowledge content is only one leg of four on the learning culture stool.

A true learning culture thrives on regular and deliberate human intervention and group experience as the second and third legs to the learning culture stool. The value of a learning

initiative is boosted when traditional learning methods are combined with technology tools to yield measurable benefits that translate into:

- Higher baseline of fundamental business knowledge
- Higher levels of critical content-specific knowledge directed at specific constituencies
- Identification and assessment of knowledge gaps across the enterprise workforce and across “specific” groupings of workers.
- Improved customer satisfaction and higher levels of customer appreciation.
- Better ability to mold and manage workplace behavioral expectations.
- Improved ability to mitigate workplace behavioral risks, and encourage productive practices
- Enhanced worker communication, capabilities, competencies, and contributions
- Effective reporting tools that proactively promote worker responsibility and manager accountability

The final requirement is enterprise-wide commitment, from the very top levels of an organization down to the feet on the street. Only with this final and essential leg can the stool withstand the weight of its occupant! When all components are in place, enterprise benefits appear across business boundaries including:

- Corporate Mission
- Profitability
- Efficiencies
- Customer Appreciation
- Employee Satisfaction and Retention
- Organizational Controls
- Consistency

Developing a comprehensive learning and workforce development program involves the deployment of capital, technology, key personnel, and an enterprise-wide commitment to elevate the workforce knowledge base. And when these resources are combined, the yield becomes truly significant.

Set Achievable Objectives and Celebrate Successes

So what are the objectives that should be established by companies seeking to be a learning organization:

1. Establish, prioritize and benchmark strategic competencies and targeted corporate objectives that must be developed to ensure leadership and program success respectively.
2. Include learning culture at the apex of corporate strategy along with more tangible “business” objectives.
3. Establish and commit a funded budget to underwrite an organizational initiative both at start-up and on an ongoing basis.
4. Solicit and retain the personal commitment of every key business leader and stakeholder in your organization to support and promote learning initiatives in your company.

5. Name an “owner” to be directly accountable for the learning initiative that is truly committed to the learning process. Reward committed effort, embrace trial and error to ensure “fit” inside the organization, and demand follow-through including periodic reporting of program results to stakeholders.
6. Stage rollout, emphasize broad-based commitment, and support energetically to ensure early successes, and CELEBRATE/ DEMONSTRATE those successes.
7. Focus on a few key fundamental and widely accepted challenges to demonstrate impact of knowledge on problem solving and professional development.
8. Measure and report on results incrementally to all staff, key managers and members of your Board of Directors.
 - a. Focus on learning activities and celebrate progress at the departmental, divisional and enterprise levels
 - b. Seek employee feedback constantly at all levels, encourage and reward suggestions to improve process, and ask tough questions to determine employees’ view of program efficacy.
 - c. Seek customer feedback where possible to assess outside impressions of general employee knowledge levels to validate initiatives.
 - d. Measure against pre-determined corporate objectives and test correlation to learning initiatives—seek tangible examples of situations where learning made a difference.
9. Promote the learning initiative and its impact on an organization-wide basis.
10. Re-dedicate your efforts and re-commit capital if:
 - a. Results don’t achieve stated objectives and feedback is not positive
 - b. Results do achieve stated objectives and feedback is positive

It’s a Wrap

The real and tangible benefits of building a Learning Culture are available to all companies. Learning works, but the return is only commensurate with the level of REAL enterprise-wide commitment (and “commitment” does not directly or solely translate to financial investment). That commitment must be applied by corporate leaders throughout every level and division of their organization. And if the corporate leaders can successfully ingrain the mantra and the value of learning into the forefront of their organization’s collective mind, the culture will change. Buckle up!!