Interactivity, creativity and strategy are key to General Mills’ success.

“Our learning execution is grounded in current business strategies,” said Kevin Wilde, vice president of organization effectiveness and chief learning officer at General Mills. “Since innovation is a core company value, it’s reflected in our approaches to meet business needs.”

Wilde leads the company’s corporate and functional learning and development teams. Each functional team determines short- and long-term strategies. For example, General Mills’ marketing function holds an annual planning process called Plan to Win to make sure that learning and development are in line with business strategy and brand building. This process ties into Brand Champions, a five-day program to clarify brand-marketing knowledge and give junior marketers external and internal tools to create winning plans. The company also uses monthly electronic case studies to broaden thinking.

“In general, we have a defined process that starts with business or functional strategies, heavily involves line leaders in planning and is well resourced for executional excellence,” Wilde said.

Many factors enable General Mills to have elite learning and development. Wilde said the CEO and senior leaders recognize the link between business success and great talent, and they value growth and development. The link he referred to has been in place for many years and allows the company to be consistent in its commitment to learning investment in good times and in challenging times.

Further, the learning role senior leaders play in sponsoring, aligning and teaching is important. Wilde said talented leaders throughout the company ensure that high-quality impact learning aligns with business objectives and priorities.

“We’ve had numerous examples of great learning — helping business teams create new products, unlocking productivity and improving sales effectiveness,” Wilde said. “Year after year, the learning leaders throughout the company work closely with their line leaders to ensure we are working on the most important priorities and we have the support to make these programs successful.”

General Mills has been conducting an annual climate survey for more than 20 years to provide insight into its culture and business capabilities. Wilde said learning solutions have been a key result of the score responses.

“We’ve been systematically tracking learning and development climate metrics and have continually seen improvements that show we out-index external benchmarks,” Wilde said.

For instance, one survey point states, “I believe I have opportunity for personal growth and development.” In 1999, 70 percent of respondents agreed, and today that number is around 82 percent. Also in 1999, 52 percent of respondents felt cross-divisional teamwork was recognized; the number rose to 80 percent in 2010.

One part of the survey resulted in the Great Managers initiative. Data received about management prompted the corporate learning and development
team to create the Great Managers scorecard to rate managers on a 1 to 5 scale. As of 2010, 95 percent of respondents rated their managers as great, good or average. Only 5 percent identified them as bad. In the Great Managers initiative managers receive feedback and theatrical leadership simulations, and they can take part in the Managing People program where senior leader faculty share experiences and reaffirm their commitment to development.

Employees are also evaluated each year through Master Planning. Plant leadership teams go through data using a technical mastery grid to determine key skill gaps and make action plans to address them so that each plant can reach its objectives. For example, the Green Giant plant in Irapuato, Mexico, has more than 2,700 employees; each time it had to wait on a mechanic, the product line went down. To circumvent the delays, employees were given the skills needed to address the issue, and pay was tied into skill development.

In preparation for the future, General Mills already has lined up goals to enhance corporate organizational effectiveness. The company also has plans to create new digital learning devices and a new social media networking platform to support its learning environment.