

Leading the Transformation from Training to Learning

February 2006 - Patricia Leonard

In an industry where buzzwords abound, seemingly similar terms are used within the business units served by the chief learning officer. Often, this has an undermining effect on getting a clear message from the in-house professional development team to the operating unit as to whom is responsible for what. The difference between the words “training” and “learning,” for example, isn’t a matter of semantics. These key terms strike at the heart of what everyone’s role is, including the CLO (or the CLO function if you don’t have that specific title), the managers and the individual learners. So whose job is it to turn training into learning?

Learning Versus Training

Some argue that a training seminar is a one-time event, whereas learning is ongoing, but this way of thinking is a bit simplistic. It is easy to get caught up with the majority of learning and development professionals who dislike the word “training,” but the term and its role in real development and learning needs to be better categorized.

Trained employees are exposed to the essence—the core—of a skill, behavior or knowledge and are shown how to apply this new talent or information. Training is a core step in the process of learning, but it is not learning itself. Even training that leads to a proof of mastery or certification cannot be labeled as learning. To learn is to do, to apply, to morph and adapt to the knowledge or skill acquired in training to the circumstance. So lest the training bashing continue, it is more important to focus on its role as a component of learning. Training without the rest of the learning context of why it is needed (to prepare) and what is to be done with it (to apply it) is a waste of time, money and talent.

In a clearer nomenclature, learning is a lifelong endeavor—but it is one whose responsibility lies with the learner, his or her manager and the organization for which both work. The learner should be alert to the danger of professional obsolescence in today’s fast-changing world. He or she should be continually seeking out opportunities to grow knowledge. And if the learner does not accept that responsibility, it is the manager’s role to supply the context of what the organization, at least, if not the individual, needs and expects him or her to know and, more importantly, do.

The supervisor should be focused not only on those skills, abilities and knowledge that the staff members need today, but also on the need to ensure that those skills are aligned to the needs of the organization in the future. It also is the role of the manager or supervisor to round out what is needed with the opportunity to apply what is learned. This is an essential part of the learning environment: Training on new skills or knowledge with no expectation or opportunity to apply what has been learned is a failure of the manager and the organization. Expectation means measurement, an assessment of doing things differently compared to past practices in order to move the organization forward. If managers are not willing to fulfill that part of their role and responsibility, it is the learning professional’s duty to question the investment in training to begin with.

Therefore, the CLO’s role is to help the organizations’ managers and employees identify what those needs are based on the challenges and opportunities at hand and ahead, and prepare or enable them to access the training needed. That sounds simple, but even the best-intentioned managers are often so consumed by the challenges of the here and now that they need help to look to future needs. And individual employees may need better context of the strategy of the overall organization—not just their department—in order to see the wisdom and opportunity of exploring new skills and capabilities. As the famous coach’s quote goes, “Success happens when preparation meets opportunity.” What are you, as CLO, doing to prepare your managers and their staff with training that affords them the chance to capitalize on opportunity? An adaptable,

prepared workforce is the essence of the organization that has a competitive advantage both in sustaining and growing the company and in fostering a workplace of choice to sustain the best and brightest. It's the best combination of attitude and aptitude within an organization that makes a difference.

In this light, it is the CLO's responsibility to provide opportunities for learning and ensure that there are opportunities to practice and apply that learning in the workplace. In short, training is a three-step process: preparation, training and application.

Learning as End Product

Companies can't be regarded as learning organizations if learning doesn't take place, even though there may be a lot of training activity going on. No matter how creative the training activities in a seminar, learning doesn't always take place. This was one of the conclusions confirmed in a recent study on global leadership development commissioned by the American Management Association with the Human Resource Institute. With the considerable leadership development efforts under way in numerous countries around the world, it was vital to explore the roles leaders now play, how the best-in-class organizations develop their leaders and how leadership may change over the next decade. Respondents to the survey found that the key competencies of leaders haven't changed much. Nor are organizations unaware of the drivers of change impacting the qualities needed in leaders. Regardless of this, many leadership development efforts fail. Too few companies know how to recognize, measure and acknowledge outstanding leadership behavior.

The study concluded, "Everyone in the behavioral sciences knows that what gets measured gets done, and what gets rewarded gets repeated." The importance of practicing learned tasks also was mentioned. It is the manager's responsibility, aided by the CLO, to find ways for staff to use what they have learned in hopes that the new abilities will be retained.

This kind of reinforcement is very much a part of the learning experience that CLOs need to develop within their organizations. All CLOs and managers of course registrants should sit down and discuss what aspects of the learning experience are critical and then develop an action plan that will ensure that new competencies are used immediately upon return.

We forget how common sense this is. Did you learn a foreign language or advanced science in college? At the time, there was plenty of opportunity to study and practice. You may have become quite proficient in that language or able to conduct an experiment with ease. How about now? How fluent are you in that language? Could you be trusted in a college laboratory to work with beakers of various chemicals? To be able to say yes to either of these questions, you would have recognized that early instruction is a part of an unending process of developing fluency in the language or capability in a lab, with opportunities or an express need to sharpen or refresh existing talents periodically.

It is vitally important that learning opportunities be a part of an organizational plan and that training programs become learning experiences for attendees. The investment of training dollars is wasted unless instruction results in learning experiences. CLOs need to incorporate four steps into any learning effort: determine the nature of the training, prepare learner-based training, demonstrate the need for the instruction and give the learners opportunities to apply what was learned.

Determine the Nature of the Training

In "How to Manage Training," Carolyn Nilson warns that "...one of the biggest mistakes a training manager can make is to get carried away by the enthusiasm of a fellow manager who says, 'I need you to develop a course for my people' or by the CEO who declares, 'We need more training around here at every level.' In the rush of excitement created by being asked, and in a

desire to please an important customer, a trainer throws a seminar at a problem that wasn't a training problem at all."

Because of this, Nilson writes, training evolves into an "adhocracy of unplanned responses," which is far from cost-effective. While each of the four stages listed is important, determining exactly what learning opportunity is needed helps CLOs direct the effort correctly, ensuring that the professional development evolves into learning with a return on investment. The assessment at this stage demands answers to questions such as:

- What problem are we trying to solve, or what opportunity are we trying to capitalize on?
- Who needs the training?
- Will this have only short-term value, or will the organization benefit over the longer term?
- Will the learning be supported when the participant completes the training experience?
- Should the learning experience be extended beyond one individual to a level or discipline within the organization?

Prepare Learner-Based Training

The intent of the learning experience should be to improve work both in the short and the long term. Instruction of abilities and knowledge should focus on the skills inherent in mastering the tasks being taught, should be alert to the ways that adult learners behave and should reflect on-the-job needs of those undertaking the learning experience.

CLOs also might need to address learning styles. We know that different people learn differently: orally, visually or using kinesthetic forms. Ideally, CLOs want a variety of styles. Blended instruction might ensure greater likelihood of learning since it affords the chance to blend more elements into both classroom and self-paced exercises.

Demonstrate the Need for the Instruction

A need must be perceived for the professional development—and not only by the manager or CEO who approaches the CLO. The stickiness of the training depends, in large part, on the attendees' belief that their active participation will enable them to do something new or differently or better than ever before. It is the "what's in it for me?" factor that will motivate registrants during the training and sustain their interest afterward as they apply what they have learned.

Once again, blended learning can support the learning objective. Pre-work that is a part of most blended learning programs should outline the manager's and organization's expectations and why the training is being offered, point to some of the benefits that attendees can expect from the experience, and ensure that all attendees are at the same level of instruction. Pre-assessment tests also can help training participants identify their own shortcomings in learning that the training will address.

Give Learners Opportunities to Apply What Was Learned

At the very least, there should be a means to determine if there was a transfer of skills or knowledge from the training experience. But more important is the opportunity, once a trainee has returned from a training event or seminar, to put new knowledge and capability into action. CLOs should ensure this happens by meeting with the trainee's supervisor to develop an action plan to apply the new competencies acquired.

CLOs also should support the manager by assessing participants from three to six months after class participation. This can help determine if learners still remember what they learned and are

using the newly acquired skills. Just as pre-training assessments help both the CLO and the attendees determine specific skill shortcomings that need improvement, post-learning assessments and online tools and resources ensure that the learning is retained—and interest in further learning is encouraged.

From Training to Learning

Today's CLOs have a goal: to provide relevant, effective, efficient and measurable training. They also must support the employees and the manager to make sure that the primary purpose of training—learning—happens. In achieving that goal, the true role of the CLO as a key contributor to an organization's ability to prepare for and enhance the likelihood of success will be evident.

CLOs are not just the source for training—they are partners in learning. They help build the people who will be important to their organization's future. In "Roadmap to Strategic HR," Ralph Christensen writes, "An employee's developmental strategy is part of an effort linked directly to fulfilling the customer's needs and the business strategy." The CLO is in a unique position to support the employee, the manager and the organization in achieving that goal.

Patricia Leonard is executive vice president of U.S. management education for the American Management Association.

©2006 Media Tec Publishing