

# Learning: A Day-to-Day Activity

BY GABRIELLA SALVATORE

The purpose of a learning initiative is behavior change: the sustained integration of new skills. This requires consistent leadership messaging, accountability and measurement, in addition to delivery.

A conversation topic on the minds of learning leaders everywhere is the “businessification” of the learning function. How do we align to strategy and enable improved business results as an output of development?

Assuming the purpose of a learning solution is behavior change — meaning the sustained integration of new skills into day-to-day activity — it is important to think of the ramp up and delivery of the program as one component of a broader change strategy. Undoubtedly, the front-end processes, such as needs assessment, development of learning objectives, curriculum design and logistics, are critical, but equally critical are supporting and reinforcing the learning after the classroom experience. These are important mechanisms for holding the learner accountable for the use and integration of the concepts into his or her daily work.

There are four key drivers of behavior change that leverage classroom learning for ultimate impact: learning clearly tied to business goals; leadership messaging; actively involved managers; and metrics and measurement.

## Defining the Need: Tying Learning to Strategy

Mike Woodard, director of the sales university at Georgia-Pacific Consumer Products, recently shared his thinking about how to most effectively leverage learning strategy as a business driver and differentiator. Woodard said the top imperative for learning leaders is to align with business goals by understanding the specific issues, challenges and problems that the company is facing, along with how those relate to current learning and development needs. Woodard says he does not advocate that we ignore or disregard formal needs analysis processes. Rather, being responsive on the spot to a business need may mean we have to “punt” — with acumen and accuracy — as opposed to not reacting because it is not in the training calendar.

First and foremost, Woodard said learning leaders must know the business their organization is in down cold. He suggested they undergo a thorough needs analysis — be it formal or infor-

mal — and align the solution with the recommendations from that analysis. He said it's also important to know the impact of the changing environment — i.e., the market — and the organization's customer base and its priorities. Learning leaders should ask themselves, "How do we leverage skill and knowledge to solve challenges? What do our people need to be able to do to 'win' in that context?"

Woodard said learning executives should establish an advisory board of line leaders who can offer vital insight into current challenges and serve as a sounding board on questions such as, "Are we addressing your business needs and those of your people?" This advisory board can be used as the final test of relevance for any recommendations. When learning leaders are actually in front of their internal customers, they should

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ask focused questions about the business and about people's performance as it relates to the business. The purpose of doing so is to elicit what their needs and interests are and to understand how the evolving nature of the business is impacting team performance. Ask them: "Where are the pain points? How might a learning solution help address a business need?"

#### **Leadership Messaging: A Resounding Echo**

When learning is strongly tied to business needs, it is easier to support and reinforce with the right messages from line leaders — a critical step in ensuring behavior change. Woodard said learning leaders need to be continually looped into the organization and aware of current business needs and challenges. And they need to be willing and able, in the moment, to ask for executive endorsement and sponsorship. For example, the CLO should be able to say to the president: "Yes, that is a problem — and if you want to see change, you

need to step up and endorse this capability building."

Consider the following example. Let's say a medical device manufacturer was forced to raise prices on one of its product lines. In this particular market, this is a rare occurrence. The sales training team is charged with designing a learning experience that would prepare the sales force to roll out the new pricing strategy while maintaining or improving volume and without damaging relationships in key accounts.

In this instance, leadership messaging should come in several distinct forms. Let's assume the company opted for a train-the-trainer model whereby field sales managers served as the delivery team. The senior vice president of the group would kick off the train-the-trainer session — and participate in it as well — and frame the initiative in the larger context of the business imperative. This would not be simply a nice investment in the company's people, but rather a strategic and urgent requirement for hitting targets, maintaining market share and keeping shareholders happy.

The SVP would also stress the importance of the choice to use field sales managers as trainers. Yes, doing so would take people out of the field to do the training and then deliver the programs — but it was a trade-off that promised strong results. After all, to get this particular set of relationship management skills into the DNA of the reps, the organization needs to give them constant reminders, reinforcement and repetition of the content. And the best way to learn is to teach.

#### **Managers: The Accountability Tool**

Short of having sales management actually deliver training, there are many important ways for managers to hold their teams accountable for the use and uptake of new skills. Deal reviews as well as coaching, preparation and debrief of customer conversations are the main tools that managers can rely on to not only encourage but actually drive the use of the skills in day-to-day activities. In the example of the medical device manufacturer, the relationship management skills introduced in the classroom became integrated into the daily approach to account management, sales discipline and process. Having the managers learn how to train on the skills themselves has increased their own competency while giving learners the necessary day-to-day reinforcement they need to effect behavior change. It also translates to increased value for customers, accounts and the company in general.

#### **Measurement and Metrics: The Ultimate Test**

A high school teacher knows never to answer the question, "Is this going to be on the test?" with "No." If the answer is no, students tune out. The same is true in business. We all manage to the test. In the case of learning, measurement and metrics are the ultimate test.

Woodard recommends building out measurement and evaluation strategies that hit Kirkpatrick's level three for all curriculum and level four for advanced and mastery levels. Mapping the use of the skills to key indicators is an important way to create a self-fulfilling loop of application and uptake.

In the example of the medical device manufacturer, it's reasonable to assume that the skills of relationship management introduced in the initiative better position the company to implement the new pricing strategy while maintaining customer relationships and market share. But the learning leaders still must prove it. In this scenario, the metric is the average sales price (ASP). Therefore, the field managers' ASPs are tracked to monitor how effectively the new skills are being applied.

### Learning Applied Is Learning Success

Learning impact is better guaranteed when initiatives are focused on supporting business strategy because of the immediate relevance and application to real life. This goes a long way toward sustained behavior change as learners can see the relevance — the “what's in it for me” quality — of the initiative.

However, this is not enough to ensure the “stick” factor. Also required is the consistent drumbeat of reinforcement: leaders championing the learning effort by anchoring the skills in the larger strategic context of the business; the organization as a whole saying, “Use the skills because they are essential for our success;” managers integrating the skills into daily activity and feedback on the floor; and learning executives measuring key indicators. These strategies combined ensure learners will continue to build on and use the new tools and concepts beyond the classroom experience.

Sometimes this requires that learning be able to sell itself to non-learning leaders. Woodard offered five tips for doing so:

1. Understand the business you are in.
2. Know how to sell and, in so doing, understand the features and benefits of your product and how they address the business needs of

your customer.

3. Live the value proposition of your learning product. You need to be willing to get out there and be your biggest champion — breathing life into it.
4. Respond to customer requests; adopt a customer-service attitude.
5. Demonstrate the value of the products and the way learning integrates with overall strategy by having a learning team that is composed of true consultants: individuals who are on the cutting edge of their abilities, are able to lead enterprisewide initiatives and speak the language of their constituents.

“The most effective organization is an interdependent, cross-functional one,” Woodard said. “So it is true for learning: Keep it in a silo and it will stay there with minimum impact. Integrate it into the life and breath of the company, and it is here that learning creates true value through improved business results.” **CLO**

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