

# THE ROLE OF GOVERNANCE IN LEARNING TRANSFORMATION

HR still thinks that Training shouldn't wholly 'own' training, says Steve Barden. In the first of two articles on learning transformation in today's workplace, he assesses the power of learning governance in establishing L&D as a force for innovation and change.

A combination of top-down and bottom-up forces within organisations is creating the context and challenges which today's learning and development departments have to understand.

Taking the long view, we can see that many of the problems afflicting L&D today arise from a rebalancing of these forces, driven by social, economic and technological change. But it often seems that L&D gets caught in the middle here – working to meet the demands that come down from the top team while at the same time struggling to meet the expectations that come up from the workforce.

The feelings of powerlessness this often causes – the sense of having to work to an agenda it has no part in writing – we believe has led to a growing focus on the need for better **learning governance**. Having a good framework in place not only allows L&D to be more proactive; it will also bring efficiency and bottom line improvement, i.e. business results.

We hear time and again from conference platforms that L&D needs to get off its back

foot. Be less reactive. Shoot for a place at top table. A focus on learning governance is seen as one of the stepping stones to achieving this. But why should this be the case and, for that matter, what does it really mean?

## WHAT IS LEARNING GOVERNANCE?

Deloitte defines learning governance as 'the formal framework for managing decisions about learning and talent development'<sup>1</sup>. Fleshing this out a little, learning consultant Charles Jennings says that good governance:

- Assigns accountability
- Defines priorities
- Allocates budget and resources
- Drives actionable decision-making
- Facilitates transformation<sup>2</sup>

These two definitions tell you what learning governance does, but not much about where the idea originates, what it's for or why it is so critical to new learning organisations.

Learning governance sits within the context

of organisational or corporate governance, which is balancing the interests of stakeholders. These might include shareholders (whose interests loom large in corporate governance models), management, customers, suppliers, financiers, government (of high importance in public sector bodies) and the community.

In theory, governance models for different functions – e.g. operational financial and marketing governance – inherit priorities from the over-arching governance model of the organisation.

It's all about alignment. And if there's one message that arises loud and clear from the babble of voices bidding for the ear of L&D – from analysts, learning gurus, consultants and business leaders – it is that learning and development departments nowadays need to align themselves more closely with the goals of their organisations. As Richard Beaven, customer services director at Lloyds, says in *e.learning age*, "Our L&D colleagues need to spend more time understanding what the business is trying to achieve".

To understand why this push for L&D to



gain a strategic focus is so strong at the moment, it helps to remind ourselves of why training as a discipline has historically been so remote from such concerns.

**BORN ON THE BACK FOOT**

2008 research<sup>3</sup> found that 86% of organisations in the US did not have an enterprise-wide plan for learning, and more than two-thirds (69%) said that learning roles and responsibilities were not optimally aligned across their organisations.

In 2011, a World of Learning poll showed 71.9% of organisations had no council or other governing body for learning.

So, although at the level of programme design we might point to an unhelpful rigidity in the traditional model of training, it seems that when it comes to governance, training has in fact been rather overlooked.

A large part of L&D's problem in tightening up the governance of learning stems from the lowly status of training within organisations, and its aetiology as a discipline. Some of the views within HR about how it should be managed arguably militate against forming any view of it as a planned, concerted activity distinct from HR. An example of this can be seen in the Table below, a summary of the different classes of stakeholder involved in organisational L&D, indicating their various roles and responsibilities, as identified by Salaman and Mabey (1995).

Martyn Sloman (2006) of the CIPD defined the role of trainer as: "A people developer and it is about supporting, accelerating and directing learning that meets the organisation's needs and that are appropriate to the learner and the context". This seemed to move things on a bit (it at least contains the word 'directing'). But consider this passage from the 2007 book *Human Resource Management*<sup>4</sup>, (now in a seventh edition).

*'Most organisational examples suggest that the formation of training and development strategy is not something that should be 'owned' by the HR/HRD function. The strategy needs to be owned and worked on by the whole organisation, with the HR/HRD function acting as specialist, expert and coordinator.'*

In other words, there is a highly prevalent view within HR at least that Training shouldn't wholly 'own' training.

Such a view is bound to be problematical for New Learning Architects and CLOs who want to take a strategic approach to learning and lead change. Serious technology innovation at scale requires strategic level sponsorship, not to mention leadership.

With the status of 'facilitator', 'specialist expert' or 'coordinator' an L&D head is going to struggle to bring about change on this scale within an organisation. True, many heads of L&D have far more power in practice than the academic model suggests; but the day of the US-style CLO has not yet dawned in UK business – if it ever will.

For now, L&D struggles to make use of technology innovation at strategic scale, with a resulting tendency to focus on authoring tools, online content that replaces classroom courses and (largely) tactical platform development. Since technology is where decisions become operational tools, the balancing of local- and enterprise-needs, along with decisions about which processes to standardise, often results in technology initiatives. If you are caught implementing an LMS before these issues are thoroughly resolved, no amount of change management will salvage the project.

**LEARNING GOVERNANCE BOARDS**

One important way of squaring this circle is through the use of a learning governance board, council or committee – a route

highly recommended by Charles Jennings and others. This allows learning to be provided in a controlled manner across the organisation according to a strategic plan, but with all stakeholder interests represented though the board.

Learning governance boards can also provide a forum for tackling the turf issues that often come up with strategic-scale programmes. Developments in learning technology such as mobile and JIT increasingly cause learning to cross the borders into other organisational disciplines, such as marketing and knowledge management. We have noted a trend within learning transformation for training to be driven ever closer to the working situation – for knowledge to be integrated into workflow – but realising the benefits of this change requires liaison with operational units, which a learning governance board can also help in facilitating.

Forming a governance board is just one of the necessary steps to be taken in having an effective governance structure for learning. But it is an important one. If L&D is truly to be the champion in an organisation for change and innovation in learning, having a governance structure that puts L&D at the heart of learning, and allows it to get buy-in and assistance from other key disciplines within the organisation is going to be a key requirement.

[Read Part Two of Learning Governance in our January 2014 issue.](#)

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.deloitte.com/view/en\\_us/us/223dcde4b2be4310VgnVCM1000001a56f00aRCRD.htm](https://www.deloitte.com/view/en_us/us/223dcde4b2be4310VgnVCM1000001a56f00aRCRD.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.slideshare.net/charlesjennings/learning-transformation-governance>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&ved=OCDwQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.learnin-gwiki.com%2Ffiles%2F102%2FShared%2520Learning%2520Services%2520-%2520Learning%25202009%2520-%2520Session%2520102.ppt&ei=f9E6UoC5L8rBQgWij4GQB&usg=AFQjCNGMgFM2vdexCAJqwEQxs1m7BCrw6A&sig2=2zSmlkZhhnFVjWhhv706Cg>

<sup>4</sup> [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=x8\\_C9NJHtYMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Derek+Torrington,+Laura+Hall,+and+Stephen+Taylor,+2004+Human+Resource+Management.+Pearson+Education.+pp.+363.+ISBN+0-273-68713-1&hl=en&sa=X&ei=drTtUNraG8W70QWQmIHQBQ&ved=0CEkQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=x8_C9NJHtYMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Derek+Torrington,+Laura+Hall,+and+Stephen+Taylor,+2004+Human+Resource+Management.+Pearson+Education.+pp.+363.+ISBN+0-273-68713-1&hl=en&sa=X&ei=drTtUNraG8W70QWQmIHQBQ&ved=0CEkQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false) ] by Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2004.

*Table: Classes of stakeholder in organisational L&D*

JOB ROLE	STAKEHOLDER ROLE IN L&D
Senior managers	Sponsors
Business planners	Clients
Line managers	Coaching, resources and performance
Learners	Participants
Human Resource Management staff	Facilitators
Providers	Field specialists

*Responsibility for performance, coaching and resources rests with line managers. Learning professionals can presumably be found either in the categories of 'HRM staff' and 'providers' as either facilitators or field specialists. In other words they have no direct responsibility for resources or performance.*

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# FIVE TIPS FOR BETTER LEARNING GOVERNANCE

In the second of two articles on learning transformation, Steve Barden highlights the benefits of learning governance and recommends best practice.

**W**e hear time and again from conference platforms that L&D needs to get off the back foot and shoot for a place at top table. A focus on learning governance is seen as one of the stepping stones. Having a good framework in place allows L&D to be more proactive. It brings greater efficiency and a raft of benefits including bottom line business results.

#### THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GOVERNANCE

There is growing interest in tightening up

the management of learning through better learning governance; interest driven by new opportunities provided by technology for enterprise learning, particularly cloud-based tools and platforms. The global economy has sharpened this in recent years. The drive to do more with less has spotlighted alignment of training with business objectives as the route to greater efficiencies. Better governance of learning is touted as the way to achieve this goal.

It's an appealingly simple idea. At its root, if

you are better at organising training you can stop doing all the stuff that doesn't impact the bottom line.

Organisations are aware that significant amounts of their training is duplicated, tick-box or simply ineffective.

This is the result – arguably – of too little strategic focus within the learning function and too many important decisions made on the fly at too low a level. This results in confusion and even chaos. A symptom of this confusion is the common phenomenon



**Benefits of the *right* framework**

Though it might not be easy to get right, defining and implementing such an effective governance model will be well worth the effort. According to Deloitte, by instituting effective learning governance, it is possible to:

- Align L&D with strategy
- Improve the prioritisation of initiatives and resources
- Improve the learning function while retaining indispensable talent and essential employee development programmes that deliver real business value
- Advance the maturity of the learning function
- Move L&D from an administrative function to a valued, strategic partner in the business
- Help prioritise the right learning programmes to build the workforce skills necessary to support business growth and reduce risk

So how do you do it? Here are **five best practice actions** for new learning organisation governance.

1. Start with a learning strategy that reflects your organisation’s business strategy (for example, LINE’s HealthCheck).
2. Constitute a learning council that comprises business, learning and HR stakeholders.
3. Consider the internal and external customer drivers that define the objectives and culture of your organisation.
4. Define accountabilities, priorities and measures.
5. Give high priority to communications from the governance council to all stakeholders.

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of organisations waking up to the fact that they are running multiple learning management systems on completely different software platforms.

Good governance and better alignment ought to tame such tendencies – cutting out waste and delivering more *Bang!* for the learning buck. However, things are rarely as simple as we would like.

**CENTRALISED, DECENTRALISED OR FEDERATED?**

A significant complicating factor is that learning is not always centralised. Individual regions, or business units, might have a large degree of autonomy.

Figure 1 (below) shows three different options, depending on whether learning is: centralised with all decisions being made at the hub; completely decentralised, with individual business units controlling their own budgets, resources and supplier; or somewhere between the two. Realistically, learning governance is hard to exercise within a completely decentralised organisation.

great deal of debate and change at the moment.

In our experience learning initiatives, even strategic ones, are quite often content-driven. A particular skill area needs to be improved for a particular subset of the organisation; objectives and content of the desired learning experience are defined – and only then is a decision made on the best way to publish, promote and assess that particular piece of learning.

This is a perfectly valid way to conceive a programme that might have a decisive impact on business performance. However, it is an approach that might well bypass or conflict with the terms of engagement of a shared services governance model.

This is not intended as criticism of the shared learning services model *per se*, rather an example of the complexity of the



Figure 2: Example of Governance Structure

with an existing organisational structure, rather than attempting to reorganise training around the capability of specific technologies to deliver efficiency improvements (see Figure 2 above).

All things considered, what the organisation needs, might well turn out to be training created and delivered at local level (irksome, perhaps, but true).

Aligning with organisational goals might involve working with cost/benefit equations that look across the whole organisation, and this might be found to conflict with a view that looks solely at those related to the administration and delivery of learning as a discrete line item.

Or more simply, it could make more sense to allow a little duplication of training if the ultimate result is an uplift in sales or profitability that dwarfs the cost of the duplication.

And then there's the issue of what should be done, versus what can be done – given the organisation's culture, and the power of L&D to effect change within its immediate situation.

For all these reasons, while different governance models are useful to study, an individual organisation's model will most probably be highly bespoke. In essence, it will have some common factors like a continuum that covers the strategic and the tactical, the global and the local, the business and the personal needs. An effective governance model will cover the whole spectrum.

Read the first part of this article in our December 2013 issue: *The Role of Governance in Learning Transformation*

Learning Governance Models		
Decentralised	Federated	Centralised
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business units (BU) own and operate independent learning teams</li> <li>• Each learning team manages their own budgets, metrics, resources, learning systems and 3rd party vendors</li> <li>• Increases organisational redundancy / Decreases bureaucracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centralised learning organisation develops enterprise programmes, sets standards, and manages enterprise learning systems</li> <li>• Business Units responsible for local learning strategy alignment / development as well as learning delivery for BU specific functional learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control over all aspects of learning through a single centralised learning organisation reporting to CLO</li> <li>• Accountability for enterprise-wide budget, metrics, resources, systems and 3rd party vendors</li> <li>• Reduces redundancy / Increases bureaucracy</li> </ul>

Figure 1

This image is from Peter M Jones' presentation, *Shared Learning Services*, a learning governance model that 'shifts common activities from individual business units to a centralised operation to reduce costs and improve service quality'. It's a technology-driven idea, and one that replicates, in this manifestation at least, a fairly rigid course-based model. As such it now looks out of step with training transformation as we have described it. It falters on issues such as content creation, assuming this should be entirely centralised, and evaluation, the subject of a

issue when it comes to laying down hard and fast best practice guidelines.

**HOW BESPOKE IS A LEARNING GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE?**

Introducing an idea of governance into a situation where there is none, will inevitably tend to imply a degree of centralisation.

Centralising dispersed activities will almost always achieve attractive cost savings since duplications are weeded out.

However, alignment might involve working