

A Market-Driven Approach to Learning

Learning for learning's sake is irrelevant to business. Relevant learning addresses current-day challenges and moves the organization toward its strategic goals. **BY GABRIELLA SALVATORE**



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In these turbulent economic times, establishing relevance and justifying bottom-line impact is more crucial than ever. Positioning learning as a "must have" rather than a "nice to have" is an important first step, and ensuring that line leaders believe it is essential. The key to executive buy-in is understanding that learning for learning's sake is irrelevant to business. Relevant learning addresses current-day challenges and moves the organization toward its strategic goals.

WHAT IS A MARKET-DRIVEN APPROACH TO LEARNING?

A market-driven approach to learning is one in which learning strategy is connected directly to business strategy. A market-driven approach starts with the end customer (the people or organizations your employees sell or provide services to), incorporating an in-depth understanding of their needs, perceptions, and loyalties; competitor strategy; market circumstances; and supplier and other partner dependencies. Reverse engineering from that end customer's experience, and considering business metrics across the organization, a market-driven approach then integrates the challenges and needs of line executives, aligning skill and behavioral development to strategic business goals.

WHAT IS THE BEST APPROACH TO ESTABLISHING SUCH A MODEL?

1. Listen to the market. Learning leaders can start by spending time outside of the firm, getting into the mind of the end customer and gathering information about external factors and influences that have direct business impacts:

- What aspects of the marketplace are changing?
- What does it take to remain competitive?
- Who are the organization's most significant threats and why?
- Is the firm staying ahead of the innovation curve, or is it losing to nimble competitors?
- Do internal concepts of brand and customer needs match external perceptions?
- Are key supplier relationships being maximized?
- Are outsourcing efforts going smoothly, and are they paying off from a cost-management perspective?

2. Look internally. Once they have amassed a

ESTABLISHING A MARKET-DRIVEN MODEL OF LEARNING

1. Gather external data from customers, prospects, and partners. Understand the marketplace.
2. Collect internal input from executives and end learners.
3. Vet findings with an advisory board to ensure consistency.
4. Generate learning strategies that drive business goals and address challenges.
5. Fine-tune proposed strategies with advisory board colleagues in an ongoing dialog.

comprehensive external view, learning leaders need to look internally and talk directly to both line executives and end learners, gaining an understanding of their day-to-day realities: strategic goals, buyer preferences, client needs, internal team challenges, cultural dynamics, pressures from senior leadership, organizational changes, etc.

3. Consult. Creating an advisory board of line executives with whom learning leaders can vet data-collection findings and begin to generate problem-solving strategies is the next step in creating a learning strategy that is market responsive.

4. Create. Once the data have been vetted and categorized, learning organizations are positioned to map overall business goals and challenges to corresponding needs and desired skills/behaviors. This may take the form of a competency model by division, function, or position, or it may develop into courses with any variety of delivery methods.

Regardless, proposed learning strategies must map directly back to the previously identified business goals and challenges.

5. Buy-in. Learning leaders then can revisit advisory board colleagues and present proposed learning strategies to those who will benefit the most from them. Preliminary strategies then can be fine-tuned to reflect feedback.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES?

1. When an organization's learning strategy is integrated with the overall strategy of the organization, one sees immediate bottom-line impacts, from increased sales to improved leadership and client retention. Learning, therefore, *is* "business"—not an after-thought to or an enabler of but rather synonymous with achieving strategic outcomes.
2. Likewise, incorporating current market happenings and customer challenges and addressing competitor influences ensures the output is relevant and increases real-time learning and the likelihood of employee adoption of new skills and behaviors.
3. Aligning learning with business goals ensures not only that a shared, universal message is communicated throughout the organization, but that employees are equipped to act upon those goals. Simply communicating a strategy does not empower employees to act upon it. They need the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that help them to do so.
4. Aligning learning with business goals helps establish buy-in and backing from line executives throughout the organization. If a learning organization has taken the time to understand line leaders' challenges and has incorporated them effectively, line leaders will perceive learning and development colleagues as crucial partners.

TAKE-AWAYS

- Learning for learning's sake is irrelevant.
- Learning strategies must address business needs and impact business results.
- The key to creating such strategies is in truly understanding your business. Look outside the company at the market (specifically the end customer's experience and how to improve it) and use internal resources to vet your ideas.

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES?

The key to an effectively implemented market model of learning is the integration of learning initiatives

and line leader goals. That tie increases the accountability learning leaders face. No longer a siloed afterthought, in this model, learning leaders are held to the same standards and are judged by the same metrics as their line executive colleagues. Just as bottom-line achievements can be attributed to learning initiatives, failure to reach a business goal can rightfully or wrongfully be linked back to perceived shortcomings in a development initiative. Though this may seem like a disadvantage, it does build credibility and relevance for learning and learning leaders.

KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL MARKET MODEL OF LEARNING

- **Skillful data gathering and solution generation:** Learning leaders must develop business-focused inquiry skills to elicit useful data from end customers, executives, and end learners. Likewise, they must establish credibility with their line partners by acknowledging what has been shared and effectively responding with an approach to learning that reflects an understanding of that business context.
- **The advisory board:** A line-based advisory board serves as a "business relevance litmus test" and, in the process, creates a collegial partnership that can be relied upon when developing future learning initiatives and establishing buy-in. That buy-in ensures goals are communicated consistently throughout the organization and reinforces the importance of developing desired skills and behaviors.
- **A market-driven mind-set:** A learning leader's mind-set needs to be balanced between that of a smart and confident business leader who understands the marketplace and corresponding learning gaps, and a humble-yet-credible partner who understands what it means to be an equal but differentiated contributor to the bottom line.
- **Agility:** Learning leaders must have an eye on the market, be open to input, and be ready with recommendations at all times. They must be prepared to shift gears and address the ever-changing needs of their colleagues. It is the responsibility of the learning leader to build the business case for learning. She must be prepared to answer questions before they are asked, such as "How will learning impact the bottom line?" "How will the curriculum enhance a team's performance and improve its interactions with end customers?" and "How will a learning program push the organization to differentiate itself in the marketplace?" 