Has the demand for candor, openness, and personal responsibility in society—a.k.a., “transparency”—effectively affected the field of learning and development?

Transparency is more essential than ever as we dig ourselves out of a U.S. financial crisis due to a lack of trust and dishonesty around subprime loans. China faced the music over its milk scandal as milk powder and infant formula were adulterated with melamine because a general plant manager was greedy. And the Greek economic crisis is simply due to too much spending and borrowing over too many years. These and many other failings often result from a lack of transparency in all aspects of our lives.

Are we being transparent within the field of learning and development these days? Have we been totally open and honest about what we are doing? Do we hide and cover up the real facts behind the results of training dollars spent?

OPENNESS: SEEING THROUGH TRAINING

Transparency means being able to see through something, especially when light is shone through an object. Do we make time to shed as much “light” on our training plans, our needs analyses, and desired outcomes with required leaders and learners? Are we involving everyone who can make a performance difference with the application of the learning?

Do we mess up and make unintentional mistakes? One key to transparency is to admit when we make mistakes, or neglect something, right away. One time, I had not recorded a learning team’s results from a transfer of learning exercise in a session and had to reach out to a participant afterward for their help. Apologize first and then suggest a solution or solicit input for a remedy from others.

Transparent procedures include open meetings with all business stakeholders in the learning experience so training objectives truly have an impact on key performance metrics. We can’t think that because we are the learning specialists, we know everything a front-line employee goes through in a typical workday. The more we understand our learners’ world, the better we can train to solve problems rather than just relaying information or providing redundant skills.

COMMUNICATION: TALKING TO EVERYONE

Being transparent with learning involves much more communication than normally is associated with everyday work activities. We easily can end up “talking” to only the learning participants, whether directly through in-class learning sessions or by online, written, visual, or verbally delivered content.

While we know application of learning is most affected before training begins, have we regressed in our practices by not consistently involving the learners’ immediate managers ahead of time? Being open with a learner’s manager prior to training and involving them with goal setting and follow-up processes afterward can make the difference in making training a part of the business strategy and not just a “nice thing to do.”

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, Harvard Business School professors and authors of...
“The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work,” highlight the need for business leaders to help employees feel they are making progress at work as a critical factor to engage employees. How often do we as learning specialists put in place a vehicle or methodology for having learners know they are making progress with the ideas, information, and skills taught to them?

ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPACT AND RESULTS
Transparency in training is about taking action on a constant basis. If we don’t know something, we need to find out. We need to be the one-stop resource for making learning produce results. Find ways to improve efficiency, customer satisfaction, and revenue growth by measuring the improvements training contributes to.

This means helping the leaders who sponsor training by determining the impact our learning initiatives have on business results. The ROI Institute’s Jack Phillips encourages us to ask, “What percentage of this change actually was caused by this learning program?” Not all training produces a clear monetary return on investment. But the ROI Institute produces valuable ways, such as estimation analysis, to provide levels of impact on targeted business results. Part of our transparency should be expecting to deliver a measurable return on a business leader’s investment for every training session.

There are many aspects to transparency in the workplace and public domain. Transparency applied to learning and development will include being more open about what we do and why; the necessity of constantly and truthfully communicating with all the players involved; and not forgetting we are accountable for the time, monies, and energy expended on training.

When transparency is fully embraced in the training arena, learners become better learners and trainers become better trainers.