

Recognizing learning at work

Are we ready to learn at work?

The pace of organizational life means that change in its many forms, is never far away. In theory then, there is a significant opportunity to learn from change. This cannot be easily accomplished from outside because the organization itself provides the best place for learning to occur. By exploring and capturing the issues that really matter, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for learning that connects individuals to each other (for shared learning) and in turn, small groups to the challenges that confront them at work. So what if the outputs from individual and collective work could be recognized and certified, so that people are recognized and rewarded for their respective contributions to learning?

The aim here is to consider the benefits of linking external recognition to learning at work. In part, the e-learning revolution pointed the way towards larger scale, lower cost learning, though for many, web-based learning does not appeal. Why is this? While web-based resources provide access to a wider range of materials than ever before, people generally engage (and learn) more readily with their peers and (learn from) the issues that they confront each day at work. What next then? We believe that if the organization runs its own brand learning initiative to recognize and celebrate achievement, it will help to embed learning.

Interest in the corporate university concept can be traced to the late 1980s when computing and high technology firms in the USA began using their own products to craft new style educational initiatives, which they called corporate universities. As there are no external constraints, there is no reason why a training function shouldn't reinvent itself as a corporate university or business school. The digital revolution has already brought with it a change in expectations and behaviour. Dixon (1998) observes that many executives now refuse to attend on-site training, insisting on remote learning wherever possible. This is partly a reaction to learning overload in a changing world where Dixon believes, almost all their knowledge base is redundant in five years.

The ideal solution is to align learning and development behind the strategy of the business, but this is easier said than done. In a world that is already fast and getting faster Dixon thinks that the fundamental challenges for both leaders and learners centres on the pace of life issue. Here are some of the questions he poses:

Fast and getting faster...Some key questions for the executive team: Is our organization sufficiently flexible and adaptable to keep up with change? Do our people understand the key business priorities? Are we harnessing intranet/extranet power to learn effectively? How do we capture what we are learn?

Fast and getting faster...Some personal challenges for managers: How do you cope with constant, rapid change? If you find continuous, rapid change stressful, what must you do to restore work-life balance? When did you last learn something new and unrelated to what you 'do'? When did you last assign time to think 'out of the box', with people outside your own discipline, and area of work?

The relative success of corporate universities at firms like Motorola and General Electric is linked to a concerted effort to maintain alignment between learning and corporate vision. Here, learning is viewed not only as a means of personal and organizational development, but as a tool for initiating cultural change and sustaining competitive advantage during periods of internal re-organization.

If so, is our vision for learning visionary enough?

Vision is essentially about crafting and sustaining a picture of the future. It involves unearthing (or creating) images of the future that foster genuine commitment and engagement rather than compliance. The door to success generally opens when an organization's leadership manages to bind people together around a common identity and sense of destiny. For example, Henry Ford led his company to success in part because he had a clear vision - providing inexpensive transportation for all. With a genuine vision, people learn and excel, not because they have to, but because they want to.

Will our people want to learn at work?

In any organization, communities tend to break down into 15 per cent of individuals who are active, continuous learners, 60 per cent of individuals who have potential for some form of learning (if they can be convinced of its necessity), and 35 per cent 'couch-potatoes' who are blocked from learning for various reasons.

Given executive sponsorship, an active enquiry-driven approach that places greater emphasis on outputs (than inputs) is more likely to engage the silent majority of people in any given organization. Speaking on the theme of 'learning and leadership' at a corporate event, a UK board director talked of his firm's drive to become the world leader in its field. His view was that the growth needed to achieve this objective could only be achieved by ensuring that learning for everyone - not just organizational leaders - received top priority. What might this mean in practice? A wide array of learning resources is available to choose from - from traditional, campus-based courses to hi-tech multimedia, so how do you decide what to buy, when and where to use it and more to the point, how to track the return on investment in learning?

A common element in most, if not all of the courses that are commercially available is input activity. This is usually instructor-led or via programmed sessions, drawing on pre-configured content that provides structure, context and information. The mode of delivery is designed with specific learning objectives in mind and written in behavioural terms, so that instructors and/or students can check their progress. However, the emphasis on directed input even when purpose-designed, means that it is less likely to connect with the specific learning needs of course participants or their varied learning styles. Adult learners can also draw on a pool of experience that may be greater than the value of the material in use. The idea of a course without a curriculum or even specific learning materials may seem strange, but it has the potential to engage the hearts and minds of participants and to liberate them. How? By focusing attention on the personal and organizational value of the output (or application) they create rather than the here and now value of the input, which may be lost from short-term memory retention if it is not owned and used.

Reg Revans argued that organizations that fail to learn (and change) as rapidly as their environment are doomed, no easy task but achievable in his view, via the formation of action learning teams and an emphasis on questions to generate learning rather than relying solely on what is already known. His philosophy is a sensible one: '...tomorrow is necessarily different from yesterday, and so new things need to be done. What questions need to be asked before solutions are sought?' Action learning is the only process that actually lends itself to customization and its potential is both elegant and practical. Meister (1998) offers the following insight:

Rather than simply sending high potential managers to external executive education programs, organizations are developing focused large-scale customized action learning programs with measurable results. These hands-on, application-driven programs are based on actual business challenges facing an organization and give participants an opportunity to actively discuss, diagnose, and recommend solutions to real-life business challenges. (Meister, 1998, p. 15.)

What would happen if your organization were to champion action learning? Employees might feel more engaged as they work on their own professional development. If they are encouraged to make the links between ways of enhancing their own capability and potential, then they will experience for themselves a process that is timely, relevant and meaningful. Action learning is never a solitary, competitive process as it is organized and facilitated via small groups that share openly and compare outcomes. The key point here is that organizational benefits must also flow from small group activity that helps build and sustain cohesive networks with common goals. Here, group members discuss and share insights and use a questioning approach to find, then implement solutions that enhance team (and organizational) performance. Above all, the aim is to hold in balance personal and organizational agendas for learning via an action learning process that uses a dynamic, questions-driven curriculum to create new knowledge that will help to deliver on the business strategy.

Where does recognition fit and what benefits will it bring?

If the structures and processes for organizational learning can be assembled, how can they be made to stick? External recognition can provide the much needed glue. How? First, the employee's work drives the agenda for learning, the classroom is the workplace and return on investment in learning is the key measure of success. Here, 'credit' can act as the currency used to track the return on investment in learning. It can be used to:

- Connect input events to output applications - this sustains and integrates professional development.
- Build from challenges - outputs can take many forms, from written text to audio / visual work. Evidence of learning in output form, can be designed to reflect work realities.
- Help people to learn from each other - shared insights help to sustain interest and engagement.
- Reward people for staying engaged - credit is awarded for outputs.

External recognition helps to promote, sustain and integrate active learning by providing purpose - employees obtain professional qualifications that are fully aligned with their work. It also helps external providers of learning services to customize pathways to awards, based on organizational specifications for specific inputs.

Further, the award structure motivates, recognizes and rewards the learner at work. In fact, all of these elements can be combined and integrated under the banner of the organization's own brand for learning. Own brand action learning can be:

- Tailored to meet organizational imperatives, focused on the agenda and workplace challenges.
- Determined by the issues, realities and best practice today and the likely challenges for the future, a focus that promotes cultural change and innovation.
- Used to demonstrate a return on investment in learning, increasing employee value to the organization, and offering measurable improvements to the bottom line.
- Facilitated by a blend of approaches - this reduces the cost base.
- Integrated with personal career development.

In some respects, it is easier to think and plan for the here and now but action learning holds a key to unlocking the full potential of the organization in the longer term. Consider for instance, some of the forces that are shaping the future (Table 1) and the ways in which you might customize your responses to learning challenges.

Table 1: Customizing responses to forces that are shaping the future

Learning challenge:	Response needed:
Prepare for the unexpected	Be ready to deal with 'wild cards' that might undermine the organization's future.
Faster reaction times	Embed action learning at all organizational levels.
Flatter structures	Create learning 'cascades' that formalize interdependencies within a leaner structure.
Teams and partners	Build learning partnerships with customers and suppliers.
Globalization	Better communications, information exchange and knowledge management.
Cultural sensitivity	International action learning teams working together f2f and virtually.
Invest in technology	Encourage employees to use computers as they learn at work.
Creating family	Encourage people to learn from each other and in so doing, sustain knowledge networks.
Purpose and meaning	Always customize learning so that it is relevant to the learner and to the business.
Leadership and learning	Organizational leaders must set an example and sell the benefits of learning at work.

Source: Adapted from Dixon, (1998)

A set of learning challenges like these requires a radical, internal solution. By capturing the issues that really matter, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for action learning that connects individuals and small groups to a powerful way of learning at work.

References

- Dixon, P. *Futurewise: Six Faces of Global Change*, Harper Collins, London, 1998.
 Meister, J. C. *Corporate Universities: Lessons in Building a World-Class Workforce*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998.

Key points: 2 Recognizing learning at work

- Where corporate universities succeed it is because of a concerted effort to maintain alignment between learning and vision. Here, learning is viewed not only as a means of personal and organizational development, but as a tool for initiating change and sustaining competitive advantage during periods of internal re-organization.
- Action learning is never a solitary, competitive process as it is organized and facilitated via small groups that share openly and compare outcomes.
- External recognition helps to promote, sustain and integrate active learning by providing purpose - employees obtain professional qualifications that are fully aligned with their work. It also helps external providers of learning services to customize pathways to awards, based on organizational specifications for specific inputs.
- An award structure motivates, recognizes and rewards the learner at work. These elements can be combined and integrated under the banner of the organization's own brand for learning.