

The (beep, Rules

Welcome to a completely new era of enterprise: The rules that formerly guided organizations and the operation of business are no longer relevant.

Organizations were previously organized around time, as in 9 to 5, Monday through Friday; place, as in corporate versus field; power, as in size, resources, secrets; and organization, as in boss, staff, front line. But what happens when all of the guiding principles are obsolete or totally reframed? It calls for new rules of engagement. Welcome to the age of the Road Runner!

Have you ever seen the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote cartoons? The Road Runner is as different from Wile E. as the new paradigm of business is different from the old.

Consider:

- ❑ Wile E. Coyote relies on a sole-source supplier; the Road Runner relies on no one, and everyone—depending on need.
- ❑ Wile E. Coyote relies on instructions; the Road Runner relies on his own ingenuity.
- ❑ Wile E. Coyote never learns from his mistakes; the Road Runner never stops learning on the run.
- ❑ Wile E. Coyote relies on speed and stealth; the Road Runner relies on agility and adaptability.
- ❑ Wile E. Coyote looks back; the Road Runner looks ahead.
- ❑ Wile E. Coyote is always grim; the Road Runner is always joyful.

It's not that Wile E. is a creature wholly without merit. We admire his endurance and tenacity. But which one would you bet the farm on—the canine or the bird? Which one is the better model for successful teams and organizations? Let's zero in on a few of the differences between these two characters that can be applied to the HRD, training, and workplace learning world.

New Rule 1: Everyone is a full player. Wile E. depends on blind loyalty to his sole supplier, Acme Manufacturing. We want to scream, "Get new resources! Cut free of Acme! It never even sends a sales rep, and the products stink!" The Road Runner, however, isn't wedded to any particular resource. He travels light, using what he needs when he needs it. We see him dri-

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ving a bus, truck, or train. Does he own any of those? No. But he gets them somehow.

The roadrunner HRD organization's primary asset isn't the number of permanent employees. Instead, it's the number of contacts and networks among energetic, talented, powerful roadrunners who share information, expertise, ideas, imagination, and hard work. Whether inside or outside of the HRD organization, the best minds are on loan—crossing functional, hierarchical, and company boundaries.

The name of the game is collaboration—creating trusted alliances of powerful, driven, full layers rather than the traditional scheme in which nonpowerful “subordinates” work as permanent employees to fulfill hierarchically imposed tasks and processes. If the Road Runner were predictable, Wile E. Coyote would catch him.

Roadrunner training organizations want every player to be fully engaged: No benchwarmers. *Fully* means “bounty” or “abundance”—players with all of the necessary tools and opportunities. Those players live in an environment with easy access to ideas, information, resources, mentors, and growth. *Fully* also signifies being eligible or qualified. Full membership means complete rights without restrictions. A full player is owner-like. *Authoritative* is replaced by *facilitative*; *in charge* means *in tune*. Leaders are facilitators, not power brokers or power mongers. Old-fashioned power (a.k.a. control) is irrelevant because businesspeople don't respond to dominance; they rise to opportunity. They seek a partner, not a parent.

Be a Road Runner, not a Wile E. Coyote.

By Chip R. Bell
and Oren Harari

Main Points

- ❑ An organization can't play by the old paradigms and still survive.
- ❑ One new rule of work is that everyone is a full partner.
- ❑ The Road Runner is the free-agent model: adaptable, intuitive, and not predictable.

New Rule 2: All boundaries are permeable. Roadrunner HRD organizations are populated by people who are perpetual boundary poachers. High speed in the business world takes permeability—the capacity to move freely without artificial impediment. All organizational boundaries—departments, units, and roles—are artificial, created for convenience and efficiency.

Yet, too often form dictates function and structure supplants sagacity. That yields ridiculous retorts—such as, “It’s not my job” and “You’ll have to check with another department.”

Former 3M CEO Lew Lehr put it well: “If you place too many fences around people, they can easily become pastures of sheep. And how many patents are assigned to sheep?”

Permissions, paperwork, and red tape are byproducts of a team or organization that cares more about being procedural than about being resourceful. Roadrunner HRD organizations are famous for easy access, around-the-clock availability, a fun-to-do-business-with spirit, and can-do responses.

Permeable boundaries make it easy for people to get to the people and resources they need when they need them. Permeability is an orientation that fosters childlike wonderment—the basis of ingenuity. Boundaries are for the too-serious grown-up in us, not the wide-eyed, adventurous kid. Albert Einstein is credited with saying, “Ingenuity is more than simply good ideas. It is good ideas and solid insight borne of a childlike innocence.” Too little socialization and we get disjointed anarchy; too much, and our natural bent to be inventive is stripped away.

When a retired Hallmark Cards executive visited a group of elementary schools as part of an artist-in-residence program, he was stunned to see the effect of socialization and structure on the children. When he asked a first-grade class, “How many artists do we have?” every child raised his or her hand. But only about half of the third graders he asked had the same excited response. As for the six graders, only one or two were willing to admit to being an artist.

Road Runner or Wile E. Coyote?

- Do you approach training projects or tasks by focusing first on who you have available? Or do you figure out first what you need to accomplish and then go after the best minds wherever they happen to be on the planet?
- What actions can you take to become known as a champion for permeable boundaries between units, and between customers and the company?
- If your colleagues and customers gave you a grade on how much you helped them become a more effective learner, what grade would you get?
- Would your colleagues and customers say that your loyalty is to a product, program, or approach, or would they say you’re loyal to finding a great solution?
- If you were required to alter every aspect of your work role (except your ethics or values), what change would leave you feeling the most anxious? What does your choice imply?
- If your customers and colleagues measured your marketplace value solely by the joy you bring to others, how much would your operation be worth?

Does your structure free people to be artists? Are associates encouraged to move freely wherever they need to be to achieve excellence?

New Rule 3: Mastery is the magic. Wile E. Coyote never learns from his mistakes; the Road Runner never stops learning. Roadrunner HRD organizations create a curious enterprise. They seek to become the fastest learners in their industry. They value wonder, vitality, and boldness. And they view ceaseless learning to be just as vital to company survival as air is to human survival.

Roadrunner HRD organizations think of learning as a thread to be woven into every fabric of enterprise. Every memo, meeting, and communication carries a growth-enhancement property and helps associates sharpen their skills as learners—not just adding to the storehouse of knowledge but improving competence in focused inquiry, problem solving, efficient research, warp-speed retrieval, and extensive access. Roadrunner units organize think tanks, brown-bag discussion groups, and study gatherings. They reward and celebrate mentors—leaders who excel at being sponge growers.

Roadrunner training and learning organizations know that a company’s ability to learn quicker than its competitors is the only enduring competitive advantage and that mastery begins with mistakes. As such, roadrunner units seek interesting blunders and share wonderful errors. One such organization gives an annual Green Weenie award to recognize the biggest mistake in the pursuit of excellence and that results in the greatest companywide learning. That’s not an invitation to be foolhardy but an incentive to nurture learning and ingenuity.

Does your HRD team or organization focus on competence or credentials? Is learning seen as an exciting adventure enthusiastically pursued or as a required drudgery to be dreaded? Is it measured on impact and influence or by the number of people trained? Does the rest of the company view HRD as a critical element of every business action or as a frivolous staff function to be jettisoned when times get tight?

New Rule 4: All enterprise is virtual. *Saving Private Ryan*, a critically and financially successful movie produced by DreamWorks, required hundreds of people to take the project from book to box office. Only a handful were employees of DreamWorks. That model—used by Hollywood, conference planners, consulting firms, and exercise machines sold on infomercials—is fast becoming the preferred form of enterprise: Assemble the people uniquely suited for a particular project, and then disassemble the team the minute the effort is over.

Roadrunner HRD organizations assume they’re in the fashion business, meaning that nothing lasts longer than a season—a very short season. It means obsolescing your own unit before someone else does. Nothing is static. Consider all products, programs, and services to be experiments and all elements of enterprise to be ephemeral. All stakeholders fickle. That’s not a plea for the pursuit of fads but rather to operate with constant change as an ally, not a foe. Recently retired GE chairman Jack Welch said, “You can’t proceed in a calm, rational manner. You have to be out there on the lunatic fringe.” For-

mer Hewlett-Packard CEO Lew Platt says, "Whatever made you successful in the past won't in the future."

Roadrunner HRD organizations know that everything is virtual, including jobs, roles, where work is done, who you work with, and what you learn. In a digital world, distance and geography are dead; motion and mobility are alive. So, appear anywhere. Challenge (or eliminate) anything that's fixed—from job descriptions to lateral functions to entrenched supply chains to "We've always done it this way" policies. "Don't look back," advised the great baseball player Satchel Paige. "Something may be gaining on you."

Wile E. Coyote should take heed. He looks back again and again; the Road Runner looks ahead. Wile E. relies on speed and stealth; the Road Runner relies on adaptability and agility. That agility comes from avoiding anything that bogs him down, that ties him unnecessarily to an allegiance, a policy, a program, a product, a fixed asset, or a tradition.

The "everyone is self-employed" cry is heard throughout the corporate world, so it's incumbent on all smart teams and companies to rethink exactly what is core. Tom Peters says, "Subcontract everything but your soul."

New Rule 5: Breakthrough is the road to prosperity. Prosperity is in the present and future, not the past. Roadrunner HRD organizations are always on the road to something, never stuck or anchored. Think about it: The Road Runner has no address. If he did, Wile E. would have caught him long ago. Wile E. has an address; otherwise, Acme couldn't deliver all of that stuff.

Roadrunner HRD units are organizational nomads—mercenaries able to pick up and move on a moment's notice. Their "looking forward" attitude keeps them forever inventing, creating, and discovering.

Be first, be exceptional, be unique. Go in a different direction from the mass. Continually raise the bar. Start by breaking the rules. Incrementalism is about surviving, not thriving. Companies that try to squeeze another ounce of quality out of continuous improvement, shave off another second in deadlines, and increase participant evaluations a percentage point will always be just "pretty good." Roadrunner excellence

comes from revolutionary breakthroughs. Race on the lunatic fringe. Lunacy is today's market and tomorrow's conventional wisdom.

Redefine risk. Nowadays, it's riskier not to go for breakthroughs. Invite magicians, inventors, and artists to your staff meetings. In the age of the Road Runner, if you're not on the edge, you're taking up too much room. Roadrunner HRD and learning organizations know that breakthroughs begin by breaking something. That means supporting failing on purpose. We all have comfort zones that are three sizes too small, but a forward-thinking bent pushes for wacky, wild, and way out. It's always easier to tone down what is challenging to think up. That's not an invitation to be foolhardy. Failing on purpose implies a miscarriage with the mission, vision, and values of the unit, or failing on principle. New Rule 6: The last word is laughter. In an era with nonstop stress and ever-increasing pressure, it is the joyful HRD unit that customers want to do business with. Look at some of the companies that people want to work for—The Container Store, Southwest Airlines, SAS Institute, Nordstrom, FedEx, and Marriott. They make having fun a key part of their values and cultures.

Roadrunner organizations make chortling a competitive advantage and giggling a strategic priority. They laugh all the way to the bank. They know that laughter is the prescription for corporate disease: grimness and uptightness, formality and intimidation, anxiety, secrecy and anxiety, politics and gamesmanship. Without joy, there's no soul; without soul, there's no inspiration. If it's not fun, the great ideas don't come, the customers aren't wowed, and the best and brightest people don't stay.

Fun means recreation, as in recreation. Open the drapes, install more windows, go outside for workshops and meetings. Place funny art or posters in your work area, and change them often. Put up a chalk wall in a public area and let people doodle. Find occasions to wear costumes. Hold an annual Baby Day when workers are encouraged to bring in their babies and toddlers. Link associate recognition with humor. Instead of awarding a gold watch for tenure, consider giving a comic book

collection or the complete Dr. Seuss books.

Human resource development is the one profession most crucial to organizational success. HRD is the change agent, the primary source of organizational learning. If your company is to become a roadrunner, HRD must be the chief roadrunner. □

Chip R. Bell is a senior partner with Performance Research Associates and manages its Dallas office. Oren Harari is a professor of management at the University of San Francisco. They are the authors of *Beep Beep: Competing in the Age of the Road Runner* (Warner Books, 2000).

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