

TRENDS



By Jennifer J. Salopek

The New MBA for Trainers

The best way to stay alive these days is to amp up your business savvy.

As the U.S. and world economies continue to falter, many training and development professionals may be wondering how to recession-proof their jobs. We asked two practitioners to give some practical advice on staying alive—as well as staying current and relevant—during tough times, each from her own perspective.

Beverly Burton, consulting vice president at Right Management Consultants in Philadelphia, identified some long-range trends and issues. Marlene Ferris, director of learning at VWR Inc. of Westchester, Pennsylvania, addresses how to put some of Burton's recommen-

dations into practice on the job. (Ferris and VWR have worked with Burton and Right through a consulting relationship.)

Here are these professionals' chief recommendations.

Become an MBA—master of business awareness. “People are focusing on development in alignment with business strategy more than at any time in my career,” says Burton. Training and development folks must be partners in their organization's strategic business focus in order to bring added value, she advises, and to do that, they must widen their own knowledge and understanding of the company and its goals.

“One of my pet peeves is that many people in training don’t have a clue about business,” says Ferris. Her background in operations has helped her to be “very bottom-line oriented.” To become the new MBA, she suggests these techniques:

- Find someone in your organization with business strengths and pick his or her brain. Ferris says that she has benefited from working under a senior vice president of HR who also has a business and accounting background.
- Learn to understand the numbers.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Spend some time in the real business. For example, Ferris worked in a warehouse at VWR when she joined the company, getting a firsthand look at what the firm really does. “You’re making a serious mistake if you don’t [do things like that],” she warns.
- Read, and stay up-to-date. “Keep your feet in both worlds”—the training arena and the overall business world, Ferris recommends.
- Invite yourself along. “I try to participate in meetings in which I think I might learn something,” says Ferris.

A large part of becoming the new MBA is mindset, says Ferris. “Ask yourself the right questions; that helps build your credibility in the organization.” Ferris also points out that much MBA knowledge is gained through experience.

Change your mindset about your role, then change others’. Once you’ve gained some basic knowledge about your business, change your mindset about your role. That will also change others’ perception of you. “Don’t stay in alignment with your traditional role. Get out of the ‘I’m a trainer’ mentality,” says Burton. “Instead, think: ‘I’m a performance consultant responsible for raising the bar on performance in my organization.’” Redefine roles and functions based on that performance focus. Then, recognize that this sea change will take a lot of patience and persistence.

Burton adds, “Not every organization is ready for t&d folks to play that role. You must step out, take risks, [and possibly] get knocked down.”

“Define what matters, and translate that into your contribution,” says Ferris. For example, VWR has identified leadership development and bench strength as priorities. Therefore, Ferris’s primary focus is professional development as opposed to technical-skills training.

Be careful with limited resources. In order to focus on professional development priorities, Ferris had to find a way to get technical-skills training delivered. But her two-person training department serves 3200 employees in five major distribution centers in North America. Clearly, a creative solution was called for. Ferris uses generalists, managers, and HR staff to provide tech training; they volunteer their time and perform those tasks in addition to their regular jobs. Ferris provides facilitation training and measures performance against a list of mandatory criteria. She also ensures that trainers have plenty of backup, and she uses a team teaching structure to make sure all of the gaps are covered.

Find innovative ways to develop people in their jobs, Burton advises. “Use exemplars; use incumbents as coaches and mentors. Some learning can manage itself from a grassroots standpoint, but activities might need organization and oversight. Look for ways to use day-to-day pressures to develop people’s skills.” Burton also recommends that you look for job-related experiences tied to competencies. Use a blended approach, which could combine

- action learning, especially stretch assignments
- e-learning
- just-in-time training
- rotational assignments
- mentoring and coaching.

“The opportunity is the blend,” says Burton. “Link the pieces together. Re-

vamp and revise traditional methodologies, and connect to many other things.” **Develop relationships with the organization’s business leaders.** Be proactive. “Invite and involve yourself,” says Burton. In that way, you can understand line management’s issues and concerns.

Not that it’s easy: “Organizations struggle to interact with their core constituencies as businesspeople rather than training people,” she notes. “However, the people doing it well are the first ones consulted, often before performance issues occur.”

Get line leadership buy-in. Certainly that will be easier once you’ve identified the decision makers and developed relationships with them. “There are always people in an organization who get it,” says Burton. “Select them carefully; they also should be influential and credible.” One approach is to develop a pilot project and ask the influential, credible people to help you refine it.

Wage a public relations campaign. Once you’ve conducted some of the building steps and developed relationships with the people who matter, start educating them about what you do. “Training and development needs to be on its own PR campaign,” says Burton. “You must demonstrate your brand and the value it brings.”

One way to do that, Burton suggests, is to make sure you understand and can articulate your company’s business and performance development needs—in appropriate business language. “Watch your training-ese,” she says. “Prepare yourself to have a business dialogue.”

Another crucial part of your PR campaign is to measure and report on results. “Measure what matters, share it with those who matter,” Burton says. “You must demonstrate ROI and your contribution to the business.”

Through those activities, you can also inspire cultural change: “Help to create a culture in which employees

themselves are pushing for learning, development, performance, and accountability,” says Burton.

Become a good coach. “Develop your own skills to maximize your contribution,” Burton advises.

“Coaching is a buzzword again,” says Ferris. Why? “It’s viewed as cooler, more positive than training. It relates to sports and sounds less costly, less formal. Further, it’s a way to maximize the contribution of people who are already there.”

Demonstrate your long view. “Have a visionary focus rather than an annual one,” says Burton. “Be willing to evolve.” Says Ferris, “It is part of my responsibility to have a long-range plan.” Ferris feels that shows your commitment to the organization and your ability to anticipate and plan. Ferris has a roadmap that outlines her stepping-stone approach to professional and leadership development for the next five years, and she shares it with whomever she can. Also, map out your own development plan.

“Organizations need continuing expertise to build culture and manage expectations,” notes Burton. “Layoffs in the t&d area constitute cutting off the nose to spite the face.” Publicizing your long-range plan will help ax-wielders realize your value, both in the present and the long-term.

Jennifer J. Salopek is a contributing editor of T+D; jsalopek@covad.net.