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TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE
FOR DEVELOPING TALENT



TURNING TRAINERS INTO STRATEGIC BUSINESS PARTNERS

atd

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Ingrid Guerra-López and Karen Hicks

TURNING TRAINERS INTO STRATEGIC BUSINESS PARTNERS



AUTHORS

Ingrid Guerra-López

Ingrid Guerra-López, PhD, is CEO of the Institute for Needs Assessment & Evaluation and professor of design and performance systems at Wayne State University. Her work focuses on improving performance through strategic measurement and alignment, mapping key performance indicators and linking them to specific performance improvement solutions and management decisions.

Karen Hicks

Karen Hicks, PhD, has more than 15 years' experience helping organizations build measurement and evaluation and talent development capabilities. She works to demonstrate the value of talent development through strategic alignment, assessment, and improvement.

Community Manager, Learning and Development

Amanda Smith

Editor, *TD at Work*

Patty Gaul

Associate Editor

Caroline Coppel

Production Design

Maggie Hyde

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Talent development solutions, while at the heart of an organization's success, can be expensive endeavors. Their value can be questionable if they're not clearly linked to organizational priorities.

As learning and talent development (LTD) professionals, we need to make sound decisions about which strategies will have the biggest benefit to our organization. To do so, we must have information that guides us toward solutions that measurably help the organization achieve strategic objectives, providing us with hard evidence of our contribution to organizational success. Documenting these successes is critical for our credibility and sustainability as true strategic partners.

So how do we get that information?

Systems for aligning learning and performance (SCALE) is a set of processes and tools for measurably aligning LTD solutions to strategic objectives. It addresses questions we, and our stakeholders, may have about the tangible value of our talent development efforts. SCALE is based on extensive research and practical application in the areas of strategy, systems theory, needs assessment, transfer of training, performance monitoring and evaluation, organizational culture, and change management. SCALE outlines both the what and the how for choosing and effectively integrating LTD solutions into the work environment, while providing a framework for measurably demonstrating how the solutions helped achieve organizational objectives.

This issue of *TD at Work* will describe:

- how LTD professionals can change their roles in their organization
- essential skills for the new generation of LTD professionals
- the SCALE process, and how it can help you match training initiatives with business objectives
- how to uncover stakeholder perspectives, optimize strategic alignment, and check in on your training effectiveness.

RETHINKING OUR ROLE AS LTD PROFESSIONALS

Consider your last talent development initiative and reflect on whether you had clear answers to the following questions before the solution was selected:

- What performance results do we expect from employees after implementing the solution?
- How will we measure the impact of our solution on the organization's performance?
- What are the organizational barriers that may interfere with the impact of our talent development solution in the workplace?
- How do (and will) our managers support performance in the organization?
- How do we ensure that desired workplace performance is maintained?

The LTD team has an important responsibility in uncovering the answers to these questions, as they help the LTD team and other organizational members clarify strategic priorities, determine the use of resources, and offer guidance on how products and services may be offered to external clients. All of these decisions are focused on creating a sustainable strategic advantage for the organization, rather than on fulfilling training requests.

Organizations spent approximately \$156.2 billion on employee learning in 2011, according to ATD's 2012 *State of the Industry* report. What would your stakeholders consider to be a valuable use of spending on your LTD initiatives? What returns and benefits has your organization received for its investment in LTD solutions? Organizations that use performance data to inform their actions have a much better chance at sustainable success and can make more effective decisions proactively.

The Goals and Purpose of LTD

People make the difference in organizations; they are what distinguishes you from your competitors. Think about your personal experiences with companies. Would you pay a little more for a product if you knew you would

receive exceptional service? Would you purchase products from an organization whose quality was inconsistent or unreliable? We use these and other criteria to make decisions about which businesses we patronize.

As LTD professionals, our job is to develop our organization's workforce capabilities so that the employees are indeed the competitive advantage. When we focus our efforts on leveraging and developing this advantage, our work becomes aligned with business needs and generates real value.

Our Expanding Sandbox: Organizations as Systems

While performance improvement efforts like training are often viewed as expenses to the business, we can change these perceptions, our results, and our impact with a new mindset and new ways of approaching and carrying out our work. First, we must expand our thinking of organizations as systems and the role we play within these systems.

Have you heard the saying, "If you put a good worker in a bad system, the system always wins"? It describes the power of an organizational system, and how critical it is for us to think about how our work influences the performance within this system. It also guides us in our thinking about the performance of others in our organizations.

AS LTD PROFESSIONALS, OUR JOB IS TO DEVELOP OUR ORGANIZATION'S WORKFORCE CAPABILITIES SO THAT THE EMPLOYEES ARE INDEED THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE.

Our performance is influenced by our interactions with our work environments. For successful implementation of our performance improvement initiatives, we must have an understanding of an organization's anatomy and how our work fits within this anatomy.

Consider the analogy of human anatomy. When you feel pain in a part of your body, you visit the doctor to treat it. The doctor examines where it hurts and what triggers the pain, and considers how various treatment options would affect not

only the area of pain, but also other parts of your body.

Just as the doctor considers your whole body, performance improvement professionals consider all parts of organizational systems when a problem has to be solved. We do this by reverse engineering performance in organizations. We start with the goal in mind, uncover the gaps and important factors for reaching the goal, and engineer human performance that's aligned with organizational performance.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE NEW LTD GENERATION

It is important to be aware of the cognitive habits that drive our technical tasks and behaviors as we seek to improve human and organizational performance. These cognitive skills frame our worldview and, in turn, how we approach our technical work. This provides us with a strong, flexible, and scalable base for understanding performance problems and selecting the best solutions.

If the LTD function is going to evolve to provide real value to an organization, it must take a system view of the organization to understand the interactions across various issues, events, and consequences. It must also apply strategic thinking to determine where the organization wants to go, where it currently is in relation to that destination, and how to best get there. System thinking is present at every phase of a strategic process because it involves clarifying relationships and alignment of a series of elements and steps.

Critical thinking is foundational for both system and strategic thinking, and is in fact a basis for most, if not all, leadership skills. Those who don't master basic critical thinking skills are not likely to go far within their organization. Likewise, collaboration skills are key to getting things done. Organizations comprise groups of people. People must work together to make things happen and achieve results. Therefore, effectively working in groups, and partnering with other groups, is critical to organizational (and LTD) success.

These are all complementary processes that the new generation of LTD professionals will have to master if we are to build credibility, become

strategic partners to management, and add real value to our organizations. Below, we provide specific tasks and steps associated with each of these core skills. These will be integrated into the SCALE alignment process described later in this *TD at Work*.

System Thinking

System thinking is critical for today's performance improvement practitioner. This approach to problem solving and decision making identifies the impact of a problem (and potential solutions) on the various segments of an organization, such as personnel, departments, customers, and suppliers. It is a way of thinking about how people, processes, and structures work together. Rather than perceiving performance issues as isolated, we see the relationships and interactions among the various parts of the organization. This view is holistic and essential to understanding the root causes of performance problems, as well as the potential success of any solution.

Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking is a long-term perspective to problem solving and decision making. Performance improvement practitioners consider three timeframes—long term, now, and in between—with a focus on what has to be accomplished to achieve desired results. A strategic thinking approach to performance improvement offers opportunities to generate value, and supports the strategic priorities of the organization. As LTD professionals, we purposefully facilitate this strategic value by creating the links, or fit, between the work we do and the value it ultimately brings to our internal and external customers.

Some of the ways we do this include:

- Objective analysis: investigating what, when, why, where, and how.
- Planning ahead: anticipating multiple scenarios and appropriate courses of action.
- Thinking of how people, processes, and structures fit together in the organization.

- Focusing on the organization's competitive advantage. What is the organization's differentiator? How is that differentiator leveraged? Strategic thinkers leverage these differentiators for today and for the long-term sustainability of the organization.
- Identifying gaps between where the organization is today and where it wants to be in the future and devising appropriately aligned improvements to help the organization realize desired results.

Critical Thinking

Those in performance improvement roles use critical thinking to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to support the performance improvement decisions they make. These critical thinking activities are found throughout the SCALE process. Some examples are:

- recognizing that a problem exists
- developing an orderly approach so that tasks are prioritized and problems are recognized based on severity and urgency
- being aware of your own performance or thinking process
- asking the right questions
- synthesizing information from a variety of sources
- determining credibility and using this information to formulate and communicate decisions
- remaining open to a variety of solutions
- generating a reasonable method for selecting among several solutions
- explaining the rationale for decisions to different audiences
- presenting a coherent and persuasive argument on a controversial issue.

Collaboration

Working collaboratively means we have to ensure all stakeholders have a voice and the various people and teams involved are all communicating

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