Great Training Leaders Learn Out Loud

They're Hunters and Gatherers of insight, opportunities, and talent.

Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach.—Rosebeth Moss Kantor

Those lines sharpened our observation of the characteristics of great training leaders. With the preoccupation of the training community on product, program, and paraphernalia, it's time to take a fresh look at the importance training leaders play in facilitating powerful and productive human resource development.

Great training leaders nurture the spirit of curiosity and are perpetual hunters of insight. They're continually and noticeably on the prowl for new wisdom. They look around the corners of opportunity, feel the power of discovery, and keep an ear to the ground for fresh understanding. They learn all of the time. And they learn out loud.

By Chip R. Bell and Bilijack R. Bell

Searching on what is important for what's unknown is as and valuable as acting known.

Great training leaders learn for learning's sake. They almost get an adrenaline rush from always honing their skills, enhancing their understanding, and deepening their wisdom. It's the thrill of the hunt that distinguishes great training leaders. They're restless, hungry souls never satisfied with what they know because they appreciate the fact that antiquated is just around the corner and obsolete is just down the hall.

Great training leaders continually question employees' learning needs, as in the words of a world-class car sales professional, "I'll keep asking and listening and nosing around until something lights up." Leaders driven by curiosity know that until the target of their inquiry lights up, they haven't reached the level of understanding to truly inform anticipatory action.

A culture that values curiosity is inventive and exciting. Walk into the headquarters of USAA in San Antonio, Texas, 3M in St. Paul, Minnesota, or Lockheed Martin in Fort Worth, Texas, and you can feel the heat of originality cooking in the organizational oven. What you later learn is that you're in a place with an everlasting focus on perpetual growth. The popular label for such an environment is *a learning organization*. A more accurate description is *a discovering organization*. The term *learning* can imply the act of adding to or increasing what's already there; *discovering* means uncovering or finding. Learning can happen through osmosis, in which you're passively the recipient of growth, without much effort. Discovering suggests an active search and a deliberate exploration.

When Arie de Geus of Royal Dutch/Shell wrote, "Your ability to learn faster than your competition is your only sustainable competitive advantage," he was speaking of the power of the hunt for insight, not the glorification of the attainment of competence. What factors are common in a discovering organization?

In their classic book *The Management of Innovation*, Tom Burns and George Stalker examine the commonalities of the most renowned research and development facilities in the United States that have generated the most patents, Nobel prizes, and industry breakthroughs. The punch line's clear: Discovery was predictable when there were leaders who communicated a clear and compelling purpose, provided a safe and supportive work environment, and conveyed high but attainable expectations.

A clear, compelling purpose

A stroll through Universal Studios Hollywood with president and chief operating officer Larry Kurzweil says a lot about his priorities. He greets guests warmly and asks whether they're having a great time, queries associates about their needs to better serve guests, and even picks up trash. Bill Marriott, chairman of Marriott Corporation, is passionate about the nobility of service to hotel associates and guests. It's not unusual for employees to be queried zealously about their experience by Marriott in the hotel lobby or elevator. Kurzweil and Marriott know that observation is more powerful than conversation—that what people see leaders do is more important than what they hear leaders say.

Great training leaders demonstrate their passion for learning by constantly asking questions of managers and employees about the customers' experience. They look for every opportunity to learn and communicate to employees through their actions that searching for what's unknown is as important and valuable as acting on what is known.

Great training leaders are more than role models when it comes to discovery. Role modeling can imply actions selected out of a desire for those around to imitate. A discovery posture is too complex a stance to play-act. It must be from the heart.

Storytelling is a powerful tool that great training leaders can use to communicate a clear, compelling purpose. Stories are memorable and rich in their capacity to convey meaning. Stories also stir inquisitiveness. That trait—inquisitive pursuit of purpose—inspires and cultivates front-line employees to become mentors to each other. "We strive to provide legendary service," says Bridget Bilinsksi, VP of franchising for Courtyard by Marriott. "And that means we need legends to remember in order to guide us in creating legends in the future. Stories of mission-driven greatness give us guidance, as well as examples."

Stories telegraph a set of norms or mores unique to an organization. When Southwest Airlines employees tell the story of retired CEO Herb Kelleher hiding in luggage bins to surprise passengers as they board, they're really saying, "We're supposed to have fun." When FedEx employees tell the story of a West coast frontline employee authorizing a private jet to transport a piece of equipment needed to rescue little Jessica McClure trapped in a well in Texas, they're really saying, "We are empowered to make decisions on behalf of our customers."

Just as great teachers have always used stories to foster learning, great training leaders tell stories to serve as the glue to mold a gathering of people into a partnership of colleagues. When stories are told with consistency, conviction, and clarity, they are heard. When stories are followed by aligned actions and obvious accountability, they're believed. When stories are repeated by those who are not the subjects, they're remembered.

A safe, supportive environment

She was one of the most focused children in her neighborhood. You were never able to get past her on a walk without a barrage of intriguing questions. She played piano at age three, read fluently at five. Wise beyond her years, yet innocent, she was the darling of every adult in her Birmingham, Alabama, neighborhood. Some of her classmates viewed her maturity, perfectionism, and dainty manners as prissy; others knew they were witnessing the emergence of an intellectual powerhouse destined for greatness.

"I had parents who gave me every conceivable opportunity," she would tell a *Vogue* interviewer. "They also believed in achievement." Her innocent but probing questions of guests were met with warmth and affirmation, never disdain. She went to grown-up plays and concerts her friends thought were boring. She started college at 15, becoming a distinguished scholar, an award-winning author and professor at Stanford, an accomplished athlete and pianist—and, ultimately, the National Security Advisor to the President of the United States. When Condoleezza Rice speaks of her roots, it's always with allegiance to the support and encouragement of her parents, John and Angelena Rice, in nurturing her curiosity and cultivating her zeal for excellence. Curious people come from atmospheres that are quick to champion and slow to chastise. Their inquiring minds are celebrated not just by ovations, but also by opportunities to apply their insatiable interest in stimulating ways.

The experience of support (versus the promise of support) comes when training leaders spend priority time running interference, providing important resources, and using valuable time to listen and learn about employee needs and requirements. It happens when employees witness training leaders assuming the best in their associates and being quick to defend (and slow to criticize) when excellent efforts yield adverse results. It's affirmed when error provokes reflection and problem solving rather than a search for a culprit to blame.

High but realistic expectations

Lockheed-Martin depends on super-right, highly creative engineers to make the necessary breakthroughs in air defense that ensure long-term military preparedness. Despite the "analytical squared" nature

Great training leaders are clear about their expectations and are enthusiastic about communicating them.

of some of their engineers, the company manages to win major defense contracts and craft *Star Wars*-like defense systems. Lockheed's victory in the intensely fought battle for the coveted Joint Strike Fighter project, the richest government contract in U.S. history, came from showing uncommon curiosity about the customer's needs, expectations, hopes, and aspirations.

"We did two important things," says senior manager and Lean Sigma program director Mike Joyce, after winning the US$200 billion project from competitor Boeing. "We found ways to get inside our customers' heads by teaching our people to be relentlessly inquisitive. We staged countless focus groups with contractors and customers to unearth their blunt honesty on the good, the bad, and the ugly. We also fueled our expectation expedition by conveying high expectations to our people. Some would say that we won the JSF contract because we truly believed we would."

Great training leaders are clear about their expectations and are enthusiastic about communicating them. Hugh McColl, retired chairman of Bank of America, is credited with taking it from being the 30th largest bank (when it was North Carolina National Bank) to the second largest bank in the United States. While the media enjoyed focusing on his flamboyant and forceful public persona, those who worked directly for him found him to be a compassionate and determined leader. "He was very direct about his high expectations," says retired EVP Chuck Cooley, "and he was there in the trenches with you always learning and constantly supporting. I worked with Hugh for 30 years. He enjoyed developing winners as much as he liked to win. No one was ever bored working for him."

Great training leaders set a powerful tone when they show they're willing and able to learn out loud, as well as to encourage others in never-ending discovery. Customers are more confident in organizations that visibly learn and learn and learn. Employees are more devoted to organizations that pass the gift of growth to them.

Bottom line: Great leaders of learning create leaders of learners. TD

Chip R. Bell *manages the Dallas office of Performance Research Associates. A frequent contributor to* T+D*, he's the author of several bestselling books; chip@chipbell.com.* **Bilijack R. Bell** *is an associate with Atlanta-based Wilson, Hull & Neal, a commercial real estate firm. This article is adapted from their book* Magnetic Service: Secrets for Creating Passionately Devoted Customers (*Berrett-Koehler, September 2003).*