

Listen Up!

Learning executives from Blue Chip companies share insights and examples of how to survive and thrive in a churning business environment. Outsourcing, decentralized training, and keeping your seat at the table were a few topics discussed.

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE a group of executive-level learning professional more experienced or successful than the five people who sat in front of an audience for a panel discussion in early September in the unlikely setting of Toledo, Ohio. It was a bit unreal for me, as I was on hand to moderate the discussion.

The discussion took place at an event called Sharing@LearnShare, which combined seminars and tabletop exhibits. In addition, numerous opportunities were provided for workplace learning and performance professionals to meet and network. The 75-minute session that T+D was asked to moderate was wide-ranging and ended way too quickly.

We asked Barry Melnkovic of Owens Corning: How does a learning organization maximize business strategies?

"If I look at where we were a year ago (in talent management), we were in a servant-leader model. We have transitioned out of that. We hadn't been as linked as we should have been (to the business) or been as out in front in terms of knowing what the business plans are globally, and what we need to do to maximize the outcome for those organizations," he told the audience.

"A lot of that work is measurable and (relates to) the bottom line. My title may be vice president of talent management and organizational effectiveness, but I am fond of saying that my job is making money for Owens-Corning and the employees of Owens-Corning. You can't lose focus on making money. If you talk about how learning can support business strategies, and its role, you set a tone. And that tone of support meant that we never said no to anything. We just put it on the plate."

The inability to deliver appropriate

learning for every single request meant that key requests would be passed over. Upon building a talent management plan that described what his group would do, Melnkovic also included a list of things his department would not do. "We ended up with an appreciation of the workload that we—and many of you—face. If you really focus on business strategies, then I propose that you focus on the few that really matter and drive the business."

Numbers that matter

When the questions turned to metrics and measurements, the panel had several slightly different opinions. "It depends on what business area you are trying to help. What are the outcomes or the results that will tell us we are improving or getting close to the goal we want?" asked Donnee Ramelli, president of General Motors University. "You have to break it down (to understand) what is the root cause of why we are not performing well. What are the performance management issues? Is learning an enabler (to improve performance management)? Is the learning built to help people improve their performance?"

Ramelli suggested that in addition to looking at the outcome measures, organization must also focus on getting people more capable and to narrow the skills gap to make sure they can perform at a higher level.

"You have to look at the profound relationship of what you want as an outcome and what will enable it. Sometimes we pick the wrong thing to enable because we misunderstand the resistance," Ramelli said. "If you do all the training and nothing improves, then the training was wrong or that skills gap was not the root cause."

"That's how we approach it – business process by business process, area by area. We try to tear down the relationship between the business result or the outcome you want and the right things to enable that to occur. You need to measure both, but don't make your measurement system expensive or bureaucratic or you will be asked to leave."

Melnkovic added: "I am a big fan of metrics that matter. We don't measure everything, but we do measure things that drive the business forward. In a downturn, we have to pass the 'sniff test.' And a downturn comes for every organization. Often, training is one of the first areas to be whacked. And the reason we get whacked is that we haven't shown how we offer enterprise value. You pass that test by having the hard metrics that are commonly understood by any of the general managers."

Time for outsourcing?

Among the panel members, the topic of training outsourcing met with mixed reviews. "There is a move among good companies to determine what is core to their training activities, or what is strategic for them and to focus their energy on that," Rick McAnally, director, global diversity & talent management, Deere & Company, told the audience. "There is a move in training, just as there has been in manufacturing, to focus on our core competencies and purchase or source those activities that other companies can do more efficiently with the quality level we require. At Deere, for instance, we do a lot of our strategic content development in-house and we source much of the programming or delivery of it."

But a global business needs other options. "A lot of companies like ours are creating service centers around the world to handle functions that they might not be able to do as efficiently or as cost-effectively as they do in the U.S.," McAnally added. "We opened an engineering and IT center in India and now we are in-sourcing. We aren't in-sourcing to the U.S., but we are bringing work back in from vendors because we can do that work more efficiently ourselves. Compa-

nies will continue to balance their activities. There are a myriad of advantages for doing it. Trying to find the most effective way to get things done will continue. And we have to be a part of that movement."

And some learning and development efforts will always stay inside, due either to company culture or the nature of the program. For example, at IBM the concept of leaders developing leaders is a core part of the company's approach. "It is so corporately imbedded that leaders are expected to participate," explained Frank Persico, IBM's director of learning partnerships. "All of our core programs have a senior-level executive sponsor who is not only responsible for it within the business (unit), but across the company. For example, the executive vice president for innovation and technology is responsible for one of our programs that develops the next generation of executives. He is responsible not only for that in the technology function, but also the six businesses across IBM. It gets executives involved but it also keeps them engaged."

Centralized or decentralized?

"That is an age-old question," said Stephen Krempf, who until recently served as vice president of Yum! University for Yum! Brands Inc., the franchiser of brands such as Taco Bell, KFC and Pizza Hut. "How much tolerance does your organization have when the pendulum swings back and forth (between the two extremes)? You need to define what needs to be centralized, just like you need to decide what can be outsourced. Then tell people about it."

"Like at Yum!, if corporate was working on something and we didn't tell anyone about it, and they start working on something similar, down the road they are not going to give up what they are working with to use yours. Often it is the fault of management for not sharing the one-two- and three-year vision of where they see the company going. If you are going to centralize training you need to tell people what you are centralizing. If you don't, you become your worst enemy."

Added Ramelli: "It has a lot to do with your business model. Do you have a lot of services and products? Do you have a

global leverage you are trying to achieve? The more we have global core knowledge and standards the better, safer, more affordable cars we can make around the world. We start looking at things, piece by piece. We think we save a lot of money and get a lot of leverage out of global development of learning or knowledge content."

But all of this has to be locally delivered. So the idea that you have somehow centralized training is a bit bogus. It has to be locally delivered to the individual in their circumstance so they can apply the learning effectively. I don't know how it develops into one of these 'pick one' (arguments). It has to be the right blend for the business you are in."

Keeping your job as a CLO

To end the session, we asked what a learning professional who has climbed to ladder to become a CLO can do to assure that he or she keeps the job. "The biggest mistake you can make is thinking that what got you there will be what keeps you there," explained IBM's Persico. "What got you to the table was your consummate professionalism as a learning person."

"Previously, you were a learning professional who knew something about business. What will propel you forward is you will become a business person who knows something about learning. Make sure you know what the business proposition is and what the company's value proposition is. You need to be relentlessly focused on answering the question: How does learning add value?"

The next Sharing event is Oct. 13-14 at Atlanta's Emory Conference Center. For more information on the LearnShare organization, please visit www.learnshare.com.

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