

ELearning! Magazine

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April/May 2008

Building a Learning Culture

IT'S NOT TOP-DOWN, BUT A WEB OF KNOWLEDGE-SHARING WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION.

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You've established a great e-learning program within your organization. But that alone will not assure its effectiveness.

You can't just implement e-learning into an organization that's not ready for it, doesn't support it, or doesn't have a culture based on knowledge sharing. Corporate culture — be it good or bad — will always win out. So e-learning professionals must build a positive learning culture within their organizations in order to ensure the success of their elearning strategies.

The exciting thing about a true learning culture is all the horizontal knowledge-sharing. It's not top-down or bottom-up, it's an I-share-with-you, you share-with-me mindset. Employees work as teams. Trainers collaborate, sales people in different regions collaborate. Networks are built and communication channels are established.

DEFINING A LEARNING CULTURE

A learning culture can be defined as an organization that knows how to learn, with people who freely share what they know and are willing to change based on the acquisition of new knowledge.

Certainly, one of the most important elements of a learning culture are high quality, sound learning programs that are evaluated not only for their effectiveness but also for their potential for really making a difference. That kind of corporate appraisal is a self-check on the quality of the program and whether it's being endorsed and supported.

Organizations that simply release large catalogs of training courses without consulting their clients or assessing their unique needs exhibit more of a course culture — the more courses, the better — than a learning culture. Trainers

that are satisfied simply to publish a large e-learning course catalog, and not much more, will be less likely too be seen as business problem-solvers.

Another indication of a good learning culture is senior management support — and I'm not just talking about words, but long-term funding. For learning to take root, senior managers must do more than just endorse learning; they must embrace it and become users themselves. This will make them good role models for the rest of the organization.

Good learning culture requires an investment in good learning measurement and evaluation. It's critical to show that learning makes a difference and that its benefits are not simply conjecture. Some organizations that are just focused on design and delivery tend to miss out on the front end (needs assessment) and the back end (evaluation), which are very culturally specific.

Good learning culture gets out of the classroom and out of the instructional mode to become involved in the workplace. If employees get two or three weeks of training a year, that's pretty good. But what are they doing for the other 48, 49 or 50 weeks? They didn't stop learning; they're learning on the job. So the ease by which employees access information, form communities of practice, and use performance support to learn and improve their performance in the workplace is a sign of a good learning culture.

Another aspect of a learning culture is how well and how thoroughly we integrate front-line supervisors into our learning strategy. Do they approve whatever training the employees request but not pay any attention to outcomes, or are they integrally involved in developing their people?

Then there's the whole performance appraisal and performance review system. To what extent is learning really incorporated and embellished, and to what extent are employees encouraged in the review process to teach one another and share their knowledge? This is where it becomes very important to review not just whether the employee took the requisite number of hours or the requisite number of courses. That becomes very mechanical. Employees — managers especially — have to be evaluated on their coaching and support for learning. Managers must presume that energy comes in large part from learning and growing. They must really think about their own "learning quotient" (their interest in, and capacity for, learning new things) and the learning quotient of their employees.

Also, a learning culture cannot encourage knowledge hoarding, but rather knowledge sharing. If I know that I'm going to be rated on what I know, why would I share information with someone else — which would give them an advantage in the appraisal system, especially with companies that rate on a curve? If I come up with a brilliant idea and share it with everybody, I should get credit for sharing it, even though the idea then would not be to my exclusive benefit. The design of a performance appraisal system has to balance any kind of required rating and ranking with criteria that focuses on knowledge-sharing, learning and teamwork.

BENEFITS

>>With a good learning culture in place, the first apparent benefits are **higher employee satisfaction**, morale and — probably — retention. Employees are more motivated and more inclined to do a good job when they feel their ideas are heard, when they can share and be recognized for what they know, when other people are available to help them, when they learn from mistakes rather than being punished.

>>A company with a good learning culture tends to **surface ideas** more efficiently. Employees are not hesitant to come up with ideas for fear that they'll be shot down. The simplest example of a learning culture is the old

suggestion box. When management ignores suggestions, they are discouraging employee participation. But when management welcomes ideas, the culture changes and even more ideas are generated.

>> Another benefit of a good learning culture is **reduction of redundancies**. If two people or teams are working on the same type of project in different parts of the business, a good learning culture might expose those people to each other, thereby combining resources and ideas to eliminate the redundancies and concentrate more creativity and brainpower on the critical needs at hand.

>> A good learning culture has the potential to yield an **improved reputation** in the business community for the organization itself, plus a better value proposition for that organization's training department.

>> Finally, a good learning culture will integrate a company's **talent management** strategy. Learning will not be separated from incentives, rewards, pay, working conditions, tools, recruiting, selection, retention, selection, and long-term employee support. All of those factors seem to be merging in the business community, and without a learning culture you have a big gap in your talent management strategy.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

You can't turn around an organization — or its learning culture — overnight. You have to start developing the culture where employees are more apt to be supportive of learning. There may be groups of people who are too autocratic and too top-down oriented for a true learning culture, so I would start by looking for opportunities where people are more inclined to build this kind of a culture — even if it's in a small part of the business — and showcase it. Let everybody else see the benefits.

If you are thinking about significantly increasing the level of technology in your overall learning strategy, one of the initial problems you may encounter is the differences in the levels of computer savviness among employees. Some people are more comfortable and some less. The more computer technology is imbedded into their work, the more comfortable they will be in using it to learn. So we have to take special care in helping develop these skills and a comfort level. Over time, that usually works out, especially if you design the interfaces and technology right.

Building a learning culture will become more and more a key skill area for top managers. You can't do it for them, but you can help them do it. If a key manager is not inclined to working in this area, there may be others who are, which gets back to choosing the right projects, because you have to find a place to demonstrate value, and then it'll take off. But certainly, everyone can benefit from analyzing what your cultural situation is and whether the training function is even organized right and sending the right messages.

All the well-best, well-intentioned, well-designed learning and training programs run great risks of failure if they're implemented in a lousy learning culture. It's a two-pronged attack: create the best, most valuable programs, both in the classroom and in the workplace; and get the organization to value learning as a strategic initiative. That's the learning culture imperative, as important — if not more so — as anything else we do in our field.

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