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Learning Interventions: A Tool for Change

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The need for on-going learning and development in business today is apparent. Developing people is a **growth industry**, and the design and delivery of learning programs is critical to this process. Training professionals must be **consultative** in order to design ways to grow people in **transformative** ways. Transformative learning is high value learning that can be created to build talent that benefits the business.

Stable business models are the horse and buggy of the digital age.

The global e-learning market is expected to grow to over \$250 billion as we head toward 2022.¹ Estimates of training expenditures in the U.S. are nearing \$56 billion.² Hybrid models combine instructor-led delivery and experiential practices with on-line components to improve outcomes. The assessment industry is fast entering and innovating as the appetite for technology-centered delivery increases. In this sector, we see assessment experts building platforms and inventing new ways to teach using simulations, on-the-job experiences, multi-media, shared multi-source assessments and more. Learning as a profession and as a set of tools, is under construction.

It is interesting to note that in corporate settings, learning professionals are embracing all modes of delivery. **Recent research (Citrix, 2016) indicates that instructor-led training accounts for 33% of learning delivery, pure e-learning 17%, and hybrid programs also about 17%.³** There is little doubt that in this disruptive, dynamic business environment, “keeping up” is getting harder and harder. Beyond enhancing knowledge and skills needed for technical aspects of the job, the managerial side of the work too requires constant adjustment. Managing in a changing business environment is not the same as managing in a stable organization. Stable business models are the horse and buggy of the digital age.

The workforce is changing as well. Expectations of new entrants are different than for those who have been working for some time. Work-family conflict is evolving, global mobility might be key to progression, the business model that anchored the organization on Monday is yielding to a new model by Friday, and through all this, the workforce is trying to get things done. These pressures and more, impose themselves on leadership, management, and the entire enterprise.³ How can we keep up?

If change is the only constant, then there is little choice but to embrace it, learn from it, and align behavior with demands from customers/consumers/users. It is important to realize that the driver of learning is outside the organization, not inside. Workforce behavioral change is necessitated by the need to meet the needs of your customer. So, for most organizations, learning interventions build the talent that drives the business *if* behavior change meets customer expectations.

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¹ <https://www.reuters.com/brandfeatures/venture-capital/article?id=11353>

² Training Magazine, 2012. “Training Industry Report.” Retrieved from: <http://www.trainingmag.com/content/2012-training-industry-report>

³ https://www.trainingindustry.com/content/uploads/2017/07/citrix_2016benchmarkreport.pdf

⁴ National Study of the Changing Workforce, Society for Human Resources Management <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/special-reports-and-expert-views/Documents/SHRM-NSCW-Effective-Workplace-Index-Brochure.pdf>

Out with Learning and In with Outcomes

Learning Interventions for Consultants (APA, 2018; <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4317489>) reminds us that, in the corporate context, Human Resource professionals are best served using an orderly, business-centered, research-based approach to design and delivery. This translates into strategic needs assessment, skill and knowledge identification, and modalities for knowledge/skill transfer that will stick.

More than that, training professionals need to be *nimble*. Competencies are a moving target. Consequently, needs today are not the same as needs tomorrow. How then do you address your immediate, pressing workforce demands while also building the case (or developing people) for requirements not yet realized? Learning professionals rapidly transform to a more consultative orientation by partnering with business leaders to identify knowledge and skill gaps. This often requires competency modeling in conjunction with learning design.

The future state of learning is the future state of customer demand. Great learning design is focused on meeting the expectations of the business. Of course, doing this in a way that “sticks” with learners is terrific, but learner “joy” is not a training goal. Customer/user/client joy is. Results count. What is the tangible business result of the learning program, what are the numbers?

The term development is often used in conjunction with the term learning. To the astute, development happens all the time – through formal and informal learning programs (on-line, instructor-led, or hybrid) as well as through work experiences, both positive ones and not so positive events.⁵ The challenge is not to build a learning program, but rather to build a learning *process*.

The Value of Learning is Evident in Business Results

Learning can be distinguished as adaptive, generative, or transformational. These are not the same. The build is different. The delivery is different. The outcomes are different. Organizations are advised to build what they need rather than what is trendy, do-able, or only cost neutral. **Best practices are not the same as popular practices.** Here’s why:

- Delivering adaptive learning is valuable when there is a need to build knowledge and skills that are readily handed to the learner: concrete skills which are usually designed in incremental fashion where a sequential, developmental hierarchy drives the program. This process begins with an assessment of the “**knowledge gap**,” identifying where the learner is, and where they need to go.

The power of learning, the returns on investment for learning are optimized when continuity and developmental sequencing are embedded in design.

- Generative learning is a level up from adaptive design. The learner is placed in circumstances that require him/her to decipher how to best apply acquired knowledge and skills. This requires different learning design than new skill acquisition or transfer of knowledge. It is a problem-solving based approach that requires exploration and reflection.

The challenge is not to build a learning program, but rather to build a learning *process*.

⁵ Senge, P., et al. (2014). *The fifth discipline field book: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York, NY: Crown Business.

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Learning professionals build generative opportunities that are not just learning events. Generative learning consultations include complete talent management lifecycle review to identify when (and how) managers will be required to solve new problems or be asked to do things they've never done before. Stretch goals motivate the learner when they capitalize on what the individual already knows to address newfound challenges.

Generative learning consultations are driven by emerging threats and/or opportunities that require leverage of talent in the organization. Indeed, organizations can take a hard look at challenges being faced (now and in the future) and look back into the talent pool and assess the extent to which capability exists. Again, this is not a “what do you know?” question but rather “what else are you capable of?” Can you take us to a new level? Can your expertise be applied to help us manage better, lead more effectively, differentiate us more visibly in the industry, and/or enable us to attract the audience we want/need (i.e., investors, stockholders, customers, consumers, clients).

Invest in People Who Invest(ed) in Themselves and Stretch Them

It's an era of path-breaking. Innovation is free, and expression of it knows no bounds. Technology of course, is a driving force behind this. But the prime mover is ... learning.

Not just any learning. *Transformational* learning.⁶

Unlike other forms of learning, transformational pathways require the use of existing knowledge, skills, and abilities in new ways, or for new reasons, or for goals never previously pondered. Enabling an individual to break free of automatic ways of doing things, to question personal assumptions, to connect that which has never before been connected – these are all processes that can lead to learning something new: about yourself, about others, and even about your industry or organization. Disruption is the word of the day, and transformational learning interventions are by nature disruptive – personally disruptive as a method of catalyzing growth.

Organizations are seeking, hiring, and investing in leaders who think like change agents. A change agent is a disruptive force that questions, alters, modifies, and acts in ways that are often uncomfortable initially. But, over time new behaviors take hold. That's where building transformational learning processes comes in. The process is not new to leaders who are cutting new paths. **Transformational leaders are easy to identify. They invest in themselves.** They build value all the time. For themselves. For others.

⁶ Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

It is important to realize that transformational learning processes can have various goals. These can be personal, as in engaging in reflection with a skilled professional to produce a better, more satisfying way to live, and they can be organizational – utilizing processes that also nurture reflection and moving forward differently. Stretching leaders using transformational learning interventions builds both talent and organizational capability.

Talent Recommendations

Find people who have a track record of success and stretch them – not by doing more but by doing *different*.

There are many ways to learn. But the path to transformational learning (and business success) is paved by credible leaders who understand that talent drives everything, and talent requirements evolve. Rapidly.

Learning in organizations is a multi-faceted, strategic process that builds organizational capacity. One-off events rarely sustain behavior change or for that matter redirect the trajectory of an enterprise. Learning design is critical to success. While there are many options in terms of learning products and services in the market, the science of learning reminds the Learning Officer and the Business Leader to be prescriptive when building ways to improve what people know and can do.⁸

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As CCA's Learning Practice Leader, Dr. Diamante leverages his years of HR and Organizational Development experience to direct the firm's offerings and develop solutions to address complex HR issues. He offers expertise in change management, culture improvement, learning and development, HR compliance, talent management, C-level executive coaching, HR Strategy-Business alignment, and leadership development. Dr. Diamante holds a Ph.D. in Psychology with an industrial & organizational specialization from The Graduate Center, CUNY. He is a deeply published thought leader; his most recent book, *Learning Interventions for Consultants* (APA Press) outlines a 5-step process for designing effective learning interventions.

Transformational learning interventions must have a quickened pace. Here are some ways of building learning interventions targeted at taking your organization to the next level.

A checklist for building transformation by learning:⁷

- Get sponsorship by a credible leader who exemplifies transformational learning.
- Create transformational learning processes as a competitive business tactic.
- Identify great people who want to do new, better, bigger, different things and engage them.
- Check for a history of personal learning, stretching themselves, investing in themselves.
- Build learning experiences that allow people to breathe, think, analyze.
- Build learning interventions as part of your culture development initiative not as your culture initiative.
- Get the learning climate right, it's not a content proposition.
- Think process not event – transformational learning during the age of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity is now an essential daily requirement.

⁷ Warner, J. (2017). "Cracking the culture code." National Association of Corporate Directors. September Issue.

⁸ Diamante, T. (2011). "Leadership development that works: Individual transformation by design." In the *Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, Oxford Library of Psychology, (London, Ed.), Oxford University Press.