

20 July 2008

Upper Hand

All C-level executives should make sure they are working towards the strategic objectives of the overall business. The question now is how many learning executives really consider the strategic benefits of organization-wide learning?

Executive power

Executives can make the strongest of business cases for learning. However, only a few actually attempt to link business and learning strategies. While harping about how important learning is in the knowledge era, these executives must remember that level lip service alone will not help. Executive level support ensures that essential learning or training activities continue to receive adequate funding and resources.

Learning experts believe that if executives develop a keen understanding of core business processes and goals they can focus their learning efforts directly on them. Thereby, they can serve the organization better. There is a four-step approach that learning executives can use to guarantee their support and participation in essential learning activities.

Steps to success

Step one: Develop a keen and clear understanding of strategic business processes and priorities.

If learning must continue making value-additive contributions, it is critical that those in charge know what the organization's business is all about.

Completing step one at the executive level is moderately challenging. What makes this task easy is sharing a good rapport with counterparts in the executive and financial chambers. The CEO, CFO and other senior level executives are considered the most reliable sources for first-hand information on an organization's business goals, strengths and weaknesses.

Step two: Identify target audience and assess their learning needs.

Everyone in the organization does not need to learn anything. As important as it is to identify the organization's training audience, it is equally important to:

- Categories them based on their training needs and readiness to learn
- Impart that amount and type of training for which they are ready and from which they would benefit the most

More-over, executives must make conscious efforts to ensure that specific audiences receive training that impacts their work performance the most. More so, the training should come when they are ready for it. However, doing so at the executive level is a difficult task.

As most organizations follow hierarchical patterns of reporting and instruction, it becomes difficult to segregate audiences based on their genuine eagerness, willingness

TenStep Supplemental Paper

and readiness to learn. Nevertheless, a little extra intervention by the higher-ups is essential to make this possible.

Experts recommend adopting a policy where employees are made responsible for enrolling in those performance-improving learning activities that benefit them the most. Another approach is to reward or fund employees when they opt for performance-enhancing learning.

Step three: Identify the pre-requisite skills and knowledge levels

In the absence of fundamental skills and knowledge levels, employees may not benefit from the learning they receive. For instance, a non-techie employee does not attend the first few classes on computer basics. He joins the class when they are learning to run PowerPoint presentations. He may not thus be able to appreciate how PowerPoint can improve presentation skills. Additionally, a little knowledge of computer basics may lead to disinterest and in worse cases, an aversion to learning.

Thankfully, identifying the pre-requisite skills and knowledge levels needed in employees (so that they benefit from learning received) is easy even for C-level executives. The biggest clues lie in an organization's key business objectives.

As part of achieving key business objectives, an organization begins with identifying key positions and defining key responsibilities. Keeping track of these positions and responsibilities can help executives identify essential skills and capabilities. Being the easiest of the four, executives usually sail through this identification process.

Step four: Provide and maintain appropriate and adequate delivery systems.

Globalization has opened doors to new challenges. Learning too is affected. In the case of learning delivery, in addition to individual differences, learning professionals have to battle the challenge of delivering learning to globally spread out, multicultural and multinational employees. Equally important is to address the dynamism of a global business environment.

Surmounting these challenges requires executives to realize the futility of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach. As the workforce grows more dispersed and diverse, simultaneous efforts to sanction the most effective and appropriate of learning delivery methods must be on.

However, as each employee learns differently, providing adequate delivery systems is at times both financially draining and impossible. Hence, key positions and key audiences should not be allowed to be victims of poor delivery systems.

Executive roles and responsibilities

As organizations evolve, the responsibilities of learning executives will include:

- Linking tangible business results and learning
- Demonstrating returns on learning investments in the business lingo



TenStep Supplemental Paper

- Participate with universities and colleges for curriculum designing and learning delivery to provide real-time and relevant learning

The road ahead

In the face of competition, the increasing pace of technological changes and a diverse workforce, learning is growing into an irreplaceable part of the objectives- achieving process.

With both, the workforce and workplaces racing towards sophistication, organizations and employees will use the business value of learning to reach the finish line. This undoubtedly requires an increase in executive level participation.

Executives can leverage resources and budgets to support mission-critical learning. With access to the 'bigger picture', they can match their strategic services to create a 24/7, 360 degree learning environment. The task can be accomplished easily with the four-step approach!