
Learning for a purpose: building a corporate university

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Abstract

Considers the use of a corporate university, driven by the human resources department and adopted by operations. Uses action learning principles to achieve corporate goals. Puts forward the view that companies that utilize action learning principles will be market leaders in the future. Contends that the transition from "busy workers" to "busy learners" has begun.

Introduction

When referring to the previous articles in this special issue, the question emerges "where is all this study and discussion leading us?" When all of the pieces are put together, the puzzle is easily solved! What we, as advocates of learning in our organizations, must do is to create learning opportunities where it is best leveraged. In fact, the workplace is the very place where learning can be best leveraged and utilized.

Each year thousands of graduates enter the workforce with their advanced degrees (reflecting some form of learning) yet the traditional way of learning can only go as far as gaining placement of these graduates. Knowledge today is easy to access, with the e-learning opportunities too vast to catalog. We can learn from others inside and outside of the academic environment with ease today. Businesses possess their own brand of learning needs though. We in the business world have known for a long time that we have to pick up the pieces of learning that our new employees bring us and add to these pieces what is essential to running our individual business. It is surprising to businesses how much of what we consider basic learning has to be taught to the new employee. We know that if we cannot depend on others to teach our employees, we simply have to do it ourselves! The corporate university is a route that many businesses are taking to meet their learning needs for now and the future.

Learning for learning's sake?

The Learning at Work series that this article concludes has done a wonderful job of

pointing us to the application of action learning for businesses and answered many practical questions that have come to mind while reading through the articles. When presented in such a way that a problem is solved while learning, we are creating a new paradigm of learning. Learning, applied to problem solving is simply a more effective tool.

"Learning for learning's sake" is a concept that assumes that learning will turn into something productive for a business some day in the future. If we all had the capacity of a super computer, surely, we could store and search our old records and bring to the surface the appropriate knowledge to solve a problem, couldn't we? The problem with this approach is that knowledge solely from the past condemns this learning to leafing through dusty old notebooks. What is worse, problems are more complex today. For some reason, the problems we were taught to solve in school do not appear in today's business! When is the last time your business depended on surviving a snowstorm with an odd list of articles?

Today we have to apply multiple disciplines to solve increasingly more and more complex problems than ever before. Adding to this dimension we know that we need to work in teams to solve problems that today's business climate presents.

Knowledge has exploded at exponential rates in recent years. It is simply not possible for us to know in our heads the ideas that we need to be successful today. We can now leave much knowledge gathering to utilizing the e-learning opportunities that are available. We can explore a multitude of possible solutions in a very short time. Once we have a solution in mind, we have the additional consideration that we cannot appropriately implement solutions by ourselves any more. We need teamwork today. Action learning teaches us to work well in teams.



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How do I align learning to business goals and objectives?

Since we know that solving a real problem is preferable to a case study, we also know that the risks of failure are greater when solving real problems. Somehow we, as activists, are more committed to do a thorough job of examining and solving problems at work when they are real and our team is responsible. When problems are solved in alignment with the mission and values of a company the entire organization is aligned and energized to serve their customer.

Typically, businesses design their mission and goals at the top of the organization. Somehow, some way, these goals are to be sent down through the organization to be actualized. When the organizational model for learning is set to apply to each level of the organization, actions appropriate to the specific level of the organization are achieved. Results that are in alignment with the organizational goals are more realistic and more directed toward results that are needed to move forward in business. Rather than individual employees wondering what their part is in the organization, the team sets a course for success in alignment with organizational goals.

A paradigm shift from “busy workers” to “busy learners”

As time goes on, we will realize that busy learners out perform busy workers. When our workforce is aligned with learning and action, things get done. We all know that when we are not active in solving things that we are not nearly as committed to the solution. Workers who actively learn, develop a reputation for getting thing done! The result of all this learning and problem solving by teams is the long sought after “learning organization” that many of us have discovered is hard to achieve.

Do you remember loving the concept of a “learning organization” and having a great deal of difficulty figuring how to actually get your organization to realize the dream? The results that you wanted to achieve through a “learning organization” are achievable through the process of action learning. Action learning provides the process for problem-based, team-based learning focused on imperatives at work (e.g. Marquardt, 1999).

The whole process of action learning has opened up opportunities for massive numbers of employees. It is said that 60 percent of the workforce are not truly

engaged in carrying on the tasks they are hired to do. Sure they work. Surely it would be a great improvement in productivity if we could engage the average worker in activities that are aligned with the goals of our organization. There is a massive middle class of workers that need to be engaged in the enterprise of learning and achieving. Many have not had the advantage of a higher education and, frankly, many would have made it through the academic system. With action learning, all participate, as they are able. This concept when put into motion will give a company a market advantage that cannot be matched by traditionally educated company employees.

The time has come for HR to be a full business partner

The human resource (HR) department performs many valuable functions within most companies. However, in many organizations, the HR function has been relegated to policy compliance issues and providing basic orientation and education for employees.

Now though it is apparent that the HR is becoming increasingly important in moving companies forward in their hunt for successful ways to meet customer needs. Operations people have to learn to solve problems in other ways than “shooting from the hip”. Further, operations staff need to systematically attack complex problems that are not easily and quickly solvable.

We now need a systematic approach toward problem solving. We must overcome the past pitfalls of poor communications, lack of teamwork and misalignment with the true goals of our organization. The process of action learning can be the process by which we can crawl out the pit of the past into a brighter future.

A self-learning organization is smarter than any problem and more flexible than any organization to date. Human resources departments can lead this process and cascade the process throughout the company. Human resources can facilitate the process of action learning but operations must “own” the process and the results that are produced. Where HR does not perform this role, operations people can readily adopt action learning into their routine daily operations.

Our challenge today is to unhook learning from the traditional model of training. Our employees have had many years of traditional training that have, frankly, discouraged most of them. Learning has to be looked upon as alive and active rather than

spending time in a classroom sitting in a chair. We have to move our search for learning to outcomes that we “must know” from possible outcomes that would be “nice” to know. I look to the human resource professionals to help us bring this about. Now that we have a mechanism to rally around (action learning linked to a corporate university) we can link individuals in our organization both horizontally and vertically to electrify our business performance.

So how does HR get this process installed?

Corporate universities are a future driver of learning for companies. Generally, corporate universities are a function of the human resource department. While responsible for the structure of the university, the real learning and process of acquiring and utilizing knowledge is spread throughout the company. The day that knowledge is stored in any one group of individuals is the day that companies are crippled to growth opportunities.

The structure of the corporate university allows learning. Under the corporate university concept, trainers are not dispatched to tell the workers what to do. Trainers become coaches of the process of learning known as action learning and they inspire learners to learn from their environment. Curriculum is presented in terms of “inputs” and “outputs” where real live situations are addressed to cause the learner to use action-learning skills to acquire knowledge. Outputs, when measured, appropriately describe the learner’s true knowledge.

In this model, the learner is freed to solve problems in many more ways than previously taught. Now the learner can engage team-mates in unique solutions that solve problems better than ever before. Rather than being directed to a manual to learn, the learner is compelled to seek out and use the knowledge contained in a manual to solve a real life problem. The learner will quickly learn which references and which people can help them to solve a problem.

The Holy Grail that trainers have searched for is in sight. One of the benefits that come as a by-product of problem solving is that a

return on investment is more easily identified along with the solution to action learning questions. In fact, properly presented solutions must have a cost benefit in any rational company. In the past we have armed our workers with tools and could only measure that we gave them a toolbox filled with tools. Now, as a direct result of action learning, a properly presented and justified solution is required.

Conclusions and “call to action”

Enough is enough!

It is time to learn from our past experiences and apply the knowledge of action learning to our business. Rather than wait for others to guess what we will need our employees to know to run our business, we must take charge of the learning in our organizations ourselves! What we have learned from all of the action learning writings is a growing conviction that action learning principles in a corporate university setting can provide the dynamic mechanisms for companies that want to be on the cutting edge of their industry.

A quick walk through the operations of many companies would reveal that there are countless hours and days wasted where workers wait to be told “what to do” rather than learn “how to do”. This switch in thinking to a learner-centered dynamic problem solving way of working is catching on in corporations. We know better how to manage our business than anyone else. We just need to ask our people!

An added benefit to all of those identified in this article and previous articles in this special issue is that it is now possible to award university credits to a properly executed action learning project. This is an additional win-win where the company has problems solved (yes, the sticky ones) and the learner gains knowledge, satisfaction of accomplishment and even university credit toward a degree.

How is that for a tight package?

Reference

Marquardt, M.J. (1999), *Action Learning in Action: Transforming Problems and People for World-class Organizational Learning*, Davies-Black Publishing, Palo Alto, CA.