

# Building a Learning Coalition

BY MARK BOWER

How can learning leaders form a true coalition of a diverse group of people with limited resources? By demonstrating how such an arrangement can add value for everyone involved.



**T**he concept of building a learning coalition is interesting. There is a fairly large body of knowledge, research and documentation regarding the composition and characteristics of a coalition. The nature of a coalition becomes apparent when it's contrasted with a team:

- A team is a group of individuals with similar values, characteristics and priorities working toward a common goal.
- A coalition is a group of individuals with dissimilar values, characteristics and priorities working toward a common goal. The members of a coalition forgo their own goals for the mission of the coalition.

It's interesting that the key difference between a team and a coalition is the similarity or dissimilarity of the members. This seems academically sound but not especially useful if you're actually trying to build a coalition.

When Kathy Wojcik, manager of leadership development and learning at Gates Corp., was asked to contribute her thoughts to this article, her first question was, "What is a learning coalition?" It's not an easy thing to define, let alone assemble. This got the ball rolling on a discussion about what a learning coalition might look like and how it might operate.

The term "coalition" is most often associated with organizations that are working toward a broad and altruistic goal, such as eliminating world hunger. The word also is used when referring to a governing body that contains several factions, such as a coalition government. These all sound nice, but don't quite capture the essence of what a useful learning coalition should be.

Why would anyone build a group that by definition is comprised of members who have dissimilar values, characteristics and priorities? It seems a team approach — in which members are similar — would create less conflict and allow for quicker decision making. After all, the aim is to have a learning solution that adds value to the business.

While it is true that a team would probably come to a consensus more quickly, there is an advantage in bringing together individuals with diverse values, characteristics and priorities, and the coalition actually provides two important benefits over the team:

1. The coalition generates a broader range of alternative solutions than a homogeneous team.
2. It is easier to receive ultimate buy-in and support for a solution from individuals or organizations that participated in developing the solution.

A learning coalition should have the following characteristics:

- A clearly defined mission regarding learning initiatives or resources.
- Members who put their individual priorities aside and work in the interest of the overall mission.
- Represent and solicit input from a broad range of business functions.
- Evaluate a wide variety of solution options with no predetermined outcome.

Thus, a learning coalition should be a diverse group of learning organizations, business units or other resources dedicated to developing learning solutions that support the achievement of a common business goal.

Based on this definition, we can look at where learning coalitions already exist and where a learning coalition might be implemented to optimize the impact of the learning organization. A widely used example of a learning coalition is the corporate learning council.

To truly qualify as a coalition, the corporate learning council should have broad representation from many business functions. The goals and composition of corporate learning councils can vary from organization to organization, but generally they are composed of individuals from a variety of business functions. They exist to set a company-wide learning strategy, prioritize and allocate learning resources or evaluate and implement company-wide learning technologies such as a learning management system, e-learning or even a wiki.

Once again, the diversity of the learning coalition members not only brings a wider variety of options but also creates a higher level of specialized expertise

## EVENTS

Building a learning coalition involves going beyond the boundaries of learning, the theme of the Spring 2009 *Chief Learning Officer* Symposium. For more information, go to [www.clomedia.com/events/Symposiums](http://www.clomedia.com/events/Symposiums).



## IN PRACTICE SUN'S COLLABORATIVE EFFORT FOR SALES TRAINING

Two significant and seemingly unrelated pieces of information crossed the desk of Sun Chief Learning Officer Karie Willyerd. First was a report summarizing the results of a skills analysis conducted for the sales force of a major business unit. The report found a significant number of skills gaps for this group that related directly to its performance. Second, a business-unit executive discovered there was no clear way for him to understand the competencies of his 1,000-person sales staff.

Willyerd immediately recognized these two situations as something that clearly needed to be addressed. In response, she gave Joe Campbell, director of sales and marketing training in Sun Learning Services, the mission to develop a sales training strategy that would align it more closely with core competencies the sales force needed to effectively achieve targeted sales objectives. In addition, a new learning management system was needed to support the delivery, access, management and reporting requirements of the new sales training curriculum.

Campbell assembled a team representing field sales, sales operations, marketing, learning technology and program management. Through collaboration, joint decision making and the input and support of multiple business functions, Sun Sales University was born with a strategy that focused on three primary areas:

### Governance

Sun Sales University implemented a new learning management structure that gave the decision-making power for sales training programs to the business units. The role of the existing training organization became more consultative and added value by focusing on the educational effectiveness of the program and its content.

### Training Content, Design and Organization

The design of Sun Sales University focused on developing the key competencies required by sales and utilized a formal curriculum, as well as informal content. Sun Sales University also provided an accreditation framework for development planning and performance management that

enabled managers to evaluate progress and offer ongoing feedback and coaching to their staff. Accreditation focused on a more effective educational strategy: combining formal learning with practice and documented results.

### Technology

Sun Sales University is supported by two technologies. First, a new learning management system was designed to support the storage, delivery, management and reporting requirements of the new sales curriculum. The Sun LMS was architected by Charles Beckham, Sun's chief technology officer for learning, and is designed specifically to support Sun's new sales training strategy and lay the groundwork for a company-wide learning strategy.

Second, Sun Learning eXchange was created as a repository of information that can be posted by any Sun employee and includes everything from video recordings of successful sales presentations to best practices in server maintenance.

The new sales strategy touched many areas of Sun's organization and required changes in organizational roles and responsibilities. Participation by stakeholders was critical to the initiative's success. Here are some examples of this participation:

- Sun Sales University was designed with extensive input from sales staff and addresses many of the historic inhibitors to participation in sales training.
- Two system pilots were initiated to test the system and demonstrate success, enabling participating executives to champion and vouch for the positive value of the program.
- The team gathered input from domestic and regional sales executives who would be asked to give up control of their own training resources.

In the end, the collaborative team approach, executive sponsorship and Sun's commitment to innovative practices in workforce development won the support and funding required to implement this ground-breaking initiative. **CLO**

— Mark Bower

in decisions by providing proficiency in marketing or information technology. In addition, the corporate learning council, when structured as a true learning coalition, can optimize available resources and maximize business impact by selecting projects that produce the highest positive business return for the company as a whole.

An excellent example of a learning coalition is CH2M HILL's Enterprise Learning Steering Committee (ELSC), cited in the May 2007 issue of *Chief Learning Officer* magazine. Established in 1946, CH2M HILL is an employee-owned, \$6 billion glob-

al company in the full-service engineering industry. CH2M HILL's ELSC is comprised of representatives from 12 business groups, as well as regional operations and other functional areas within the company.

This diverse group helps set priorities for the annual learning budget and determines course delivery frequency. Having input from across the firm gives a balanced perspective on the value of training projects and helps provide training that has the greatest business impact.

Another example of a learning coalition frequently is found in large organizations with decentralized



learning governance structures. These decentralized structures typically are comprised of autonomous learning organizations that are funded and controlled by a specific business unit or function. From these separate organizations, a coalition can be formed to optimize the impact of these independent learning organizations by supporting company-wide learning initiatives, making joint decisions and sharing resources.

While these examples focus on broader, company-wide utilization of learning resources, there also is an opportunity to employ a learning coalition on a less global and more project-oriented basis.

Typically, these projects fall into one of two categories. The first category is projects whose goal is to produce a learning deliverable. Examples might be Sun Microsystems' Sales University, a leadership development initiative, on-boarding of new employees or compliance training. In these examples, a coalition might be formed to solicit input and support from business functions that are stakeholders in the learning initiative. As learning initiatives, these projects impact multiple areas of an organization and may require changes in organizational roles, responsibilities and resources. Committed representation and participation by affected organizations is critical to the success of such a learning initiative.

A second category is projects that provide a learning deliverable as a component of a larger project or initiative. For example, a sales-force automation project's ultimate goal is not a learning deliverable. However, it might be organized as a coalition that includes participation by the learning organization to ensure an effective learning strategy is in place to support the project's success. While not defined specifically as a learning coalition, a learning strategy is fundamental to the appropriate and effective application of a solution in support of the sales-force automation project's overall business objectives.

In project support, a challenge for the learning coalition is matching the right option out of a wide range of learning solutions available with a variety of possible business situations. An appropriate and effective learning solution will not necessarily be a predefined solution but rather one that is highly dependent on the specific business situation. In most situations, designing the appropriate and effective learning solution will require input and resources from a number of individuals and functional groups.

While this analysis identifies the characteristics of learning coalitions, it begs the questions of how to effectively build one and who should be responsible for it. In today's business environment, a major challenge with any initiative is attracting and allocating limited financial and human resources. Budgets seem to be getting tighter and workloads larger. To many individuals and

organizations, the idea of participating in a coalition appears to be just one more thing on the to-do list.

In the face of dwindling time and resources, how do you build a learning coalition? What are some of ways to attract people to participate when it seems their participation may not have a direct impact on their organizations, businesses goals or bottom lines?

One key to building a successful learning coalition is to demonstrate and provide value to its members. It is certainly easier to get support when participation increases members' knowledge, visibility or effectiveness. In CH2M HILL's case, the ELSC provides value to its participants by soliciting input on the prioritization

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and allocation of company-wide learning resources that ensure these resources are equitably distributed and devoted to overall organizational business objectives.

Another effective strategy in developing learning coalitions is to gain the endorsement and support of a top executive. While participation in a coalition may not provide specifically identified business benefits to members, being part of a successful company-wide initiative that has high visibility and top executive support can increase the personal visibility and status of an individual or organization.

The learning coalition is an effective vehicle to support company-wide business and learning goals, as well as to allocate and deploy learning resources. Not surprisingly, many companies already have a learning coalition in place, although it's often defined in other terms. Perhaps it is time to introduce and build learning coalitions as a means to achieve a wide range of important learning objectives. **CLO**

*Mark Bower is the president and founder of Edge Interactive and is a consultant, speaker and author. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.*