

# Leading Through Uncertainty

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When the outlook is fuzzy, business and learning executives need a blend of strategic thinking, flexibility and the capability to ask questions in order to lead their companies into the future.



**T**he range of possible futures confronting organizations today is great, and leaders might be paralyzed by the uncertainty. However, now's the time for executives to take stock of the market and begin shaping the future.

But how will they go about doing it? What issues will be top of mind, what challenges will they face, and what opportunities will they unearth? Here, industry experts and thought leaders share their thoughts on what business and learning leaders will need — and need to focus on — going forward.



### Cushing Anderson

This period of uncertainty is an opportunity for increased relevance through insight and targeted action. Most learning professionals feel their mission does not tie directly to the success of their enterprises. During periods of increased uncertainty, learning leaders can re-tune their organizations to focus on those activities that relate directly to company success. This includes careful consideration of those activities that should be added to the learning portfolio, reallocated or discontinued.

Among other priorities, the learning organization is typically in an excellent position to provide insight into individual, group and organizational capability. That insight is essential as the broader organization refocuses its attention on strategic priorities. And ongoing insight can help demonstrate the impact of organizational and learning initiatives.

Most importantly, organizational insight provides a tangible road map for the learning organization to target its activities on the most important populations and skill requirements. The activities might be as narrow as preparing a department for a new financial system upgrade, or as broad as helping the organization change its culture. And while important activities may focus on any level of employee — on-boarding new hires, up-skilling midcareer leaders or facilitating sharing knowledge between generations — the key is for every learning initiative to be driven by the broader organizational priorities.

This is a time to act with confidence in the face of uncertainty, to ensure alignment and to focus on the essential activities most important to organizational success.

*Cushing Anderson is the program director of learning services at IDC.*



### Elliott Masie

Uncertain times require leaders to be transparent learners. They can no longer assume that the knowledge they need resides in their own brains — or even within headquar-

ters. They must seek out and leverage knowledge from every corner of the distributed workforces, including their supply chain of partners and customers.

A leader who is a transparent learner will say:

- “We don’t know the answer to this — now.” Be honest that certainty lies in the future and stop pretending to be an oracle.
- “After we get more information, this is how we will make that decision.” If they can’t get actual answers to their questions immediately, workers at least want to have faith in the process.
- “We want to learn a lot more about these issues.” Demonstrating transparent learning is so powerful for leaders because it builds trust and confidence among colleagues.
- “These are the areas of high, medium and low certainty.” Categorize the elements of the situation that are stable and clear versus unknown and unclear.
- “Our values of X and Y will drive our decisions in these uncertain times.” For example, some organizations are concentrating on retaining customer respect even if they can’t make new sales.

Finally, a leader who is a transparent learner will listen for, gather and retell stories from the field that will inspire trust among workers.

*Elliott Masie is CEO of The Masie Center.*



### Susan Scott

In my view, two organizational practices that must now take center stage are human connectivity and radical transparency.

First, the next frontier for exponential growth — and the only sustainable competitive edge — lies not in strategy and tactics, but in relationships. Whether your goal is improved workplace relations or improved market share, your most valuable currency is emotional capital.

This is far from a naive, feel-good notion. Rather, it’s good business sense. Everywhere, people are hungry to connect — and this has an immediate and powerful impact on how we design business strate-

gies and market our products and services. Ultimately, it affects whether our businesses succeed or fail.

Second, if you want to become a great leader, gain the capacity to connect with your colleagues and customers at a deep level — and no more truth-telling squeamishness. If a problem exists, it exists whether we cop to it or not. Yet in organizations around the world, people are withholding details from the very people who are central to their success. We must come out from behind ourselves and address these issues upfront. The bonus outcomes of this transparency include increased market share, deep pleasure in the work and execution muscle to spare.

*Susan Scott is the founder of Fierce Inc., a leadership training services provider, and the best-selling author of Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time.*

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**Josh Bersin**

Every quarter, we look at set of 18 corporate talent indices based on interviews with several hundred senior business leaders in a range of industries. One of these indices is business execution. We ask leaders to rate their workforce in its ability to execute across different job roles. Our most recent data shows a nearly 12 percent drop in business execution ability from one year ago, indicating that the layoffs and restructuring of the last 18 months have cut real muscle from organizations. On top of that, leadership skills and capabilities continue to be flat. It appears that businesses today are less ready and able to execute than 18 months ago.

State and local governments, pharmaceutical companies, manufacturers and retailers in particular have shown significant drops in business execution capabilities. This tells me that investments in hir-

ing, employee development and other forms of talent management will need to increase dramatically in 2010, as leaders realize they need more talent to compete for growth.

There are reasons to be optimistic, though. For the first time in about a year and a half, organizations are shifting their attention to customer-facing strategies. The number of companies focused on the development and launch of new products and services nearly doubled from the previous quarter. This positive outlook has changed the program priorities in most organizations. In fact, Bersin has had a flurry of requests from our members for help with innovation programs. It is time to shift from a cost-cutting and restructuring mentality to one of moving people into product, service and customer-facing roles again.

We're excited to see that the number of organizations expecting strong future growth has almost doubled over the previous quarter. On average, respondents feel positive about their current business. In the coming year, companies will need to focus on strategies for leadership development, skills training, performance management and employee engagement.

*Josh Bersin is president of Bersin & Associates.*



**Martha Soehren**

The current economic climate is driving efficiencies and process improvement across many functional groups, including learning. As learning organizations transform, it's paramount that relationships with key business leaders and operational business partners be built around learning as a key enabler to business results and the customer experience. In doing so, there is a need for unanimous agreement for a consistent learner experience that is driven by the needs of the business and that contributes to improvement in how customers are served.

More than ever, learning is recognized and measured as being as important in the employee life cycle as talent acquisition, motivation and rewards, performance management and retention. Organizations that had learning as a separate entity have a new norm with learning as a critical pillar within the HR organization.

Survival in this altered environment requires new skill sets for learning leaders. They will need to develop facilitation skills for synchronous virtual learning environments that serve in-house and virtual employees. They must navigate through learning portals while creating an engaging learning experience that accommodates the various generations of learners in the workplace. And as they begin to talk the talk of business and not "edu-speak," they also

must learn to work cross-functionally.

While the economic climate has been tough on people and organizations, those working more efficiently and effectively are likely to be more resilient in both the short and long term. We might never go back to the old ways of doing business. The increased importance being placed on learning as a key contributor to business success will drive continued need for excellence in learning.

*Martha Soehren is the chief learning officer for Comcast Corp. and senior vice president for Comcast University.*



**Jim Hackett**

The recession amplifies that business is tough and challenging and competitive. But when the recession abates, it still is the same thing: New models are emerging, or new competitors are gaining share, or challenges abound because the customers, over time, expect more value than what you used to [give]. This requires a mindset that if you choose to go into the sphere of business, you have made a distinct and important choice to work on constantly making yourself able to compete to win.

So how do you prepare for that? The mindset part is an important thing because you don't want to be subdued or disillusioned or delusional; you'll get in a lot of trouble.

The second thing is that if you can see the problem clinically instead of emotionally — so you see that you have to design better models and better systems for competition — you're going to help yourself be ready for that. You have to have the ability to discern which models are working and where the fitness is deteriorating.

The third level of preparing for something like this is similar to the second, but it's that you're constantly trying to understand what things in other businesses — generally not in competitive [industries] — are winning ideas. You'd be searching the world for best practices. That's not a new idea, but it's an important idea coming out of this.

In addition to these frameworks and the priority of importance of learning coming out of the recession, I do think that because we've got to distribute [learning] around the world, we've got to design methods for fast and detailed distribution of learning and development. So as you look at the future, we're going to have the capability to make our distance learning just as effective as our on-site learning.

*Jim Hackett is president and CEO of Steelcase Inc.*



**Ken Blanchard**

According to Ken Blanchard, author of *Leading at a Higher Level*, there are four things leaders should remember during uncertain times.

- 1. Be a bearer of hope.** “If [leaders] aren't hopeful, then everybody is going to be down in the whole organization. That doesn't mean that they need to turn their back on the truth about the present reality.”
- 2. Be realistic, but don't listen to all the negativity.** “They need to be sharing good news stories — finding industries and companies that even in tough times [are] still able to operate in a values-driven, effective way.”
- 3. See your people as business partners.** “You're a bearer of hope, but you also have to involve your people as your business partners. Assume that they've got some brains: Not all the brains are at the top of the hierarchy. I see so many people who get behind closed doors and try to make all the decisions.”
- 4. Be servant leaders, not self-serving leaders.** “Servant leadership is the basis of leading at a higher level. What you're trying to do is to help people accomplish worthwhile goals. Making money is not a worthwhile goal — it's a byproduct of taking care of your customers, creating a motivating environment for your people, being a good citizen in your community.”

## The organization with the most leaders wins.

“When operational leadership is done well, philosophically the pyramid is turned upside down. So now top managers are the bottom of the hierarchy, cheerleading and supporting and encouraging, and when they treat their people as if they have brains and as if they're business partners, then their people get passionate about their work and they go out of their way to try and serve the customers. Then customers get loyal and they get excited and they start bragging about the people, which then drives them on even more. The real action for organizational vitality and success comes from the interaction of passionate employees and loyal customers, and that's driven by operational leadership. The organization with the most leaders wins.” **CLO**

*Ken Blanchard is a management consultant and the author of business best-sellers such as The One Minute Manager and the recently revised and updated Leading at a Higher Level.*