

WHAT IF THE PROBLEM IS **YOU?**



Barry Sampson pulls no punches as he reflects on a decade of change and asks: "Why has L&D stayed the same?"

In 2013 I'll be celebrating a personal milestone. It is ten years since I entered the world of e-learning. In that time I've seen many things change (where do I start?). But sadly some things stay the same and all too often the L&D department is one of them.

The 2011 Corporate Leadership Council's *L&D Team Capabilities Survey*, revealed some home truths. When asked if they would recommend working with L&D, barely 14% of corporate leaders said yes, they would actively do so. Of the

remainder, 34% had no strong opinion and just over half would actually recommend *not* working with L&D. And they have also given us their reasons. The same report discloses that less than a quarter of line management is satisfied with the impact that L&D has on achieving business outcomes. Stop reading for a moment and let that sink in...

More than half of the manager's surveyed would recommend not working with L&D and over three quarters were dissatisfied with L&D's impact on business outcomes.

EQUAL, INVOLVED AND ALIGNED

At the root of these depressing statistics is a lack of ownership on the part of L&D. This isn't about ownership for designing and delivering a piece of training, or of creating a good piece of content and giving a good experience. It's about sharing in the ownership and responsibility for delivering actual performance results. How do we do this?

For a start, we act as partners. To qualify this, I'm not just talking about a change of job title; I'm talking about a change of

behaviour. There are plenty of people who have gone from Training Manager to L&D Manager and on to L&D Business Partner, without any significant change to the role that they play. This is not about position, it's about partnership, and partners.

Real partnership and real partners are equal, involved and aligned. **Equal** in status, **involved** in the decision making process, and **aligned** to the organisational plan. Forget job titles. No one needs to give you permission to start acting like a partner instead of an order taker. And let's be clear, that's the choice. Do you want to be an order taker forever? Being a partner is hard work. It certainly takes more effort than being an order taker.

It's riskier because it requires you to take on your share of responsibility for the success or failure of the business. As L&D specialists, everything we do should be working towards achieving the organisation's goals. When someone comes to talk to us about a perceived learning need, it is within those business parameters that we should be discussing their requirements. In other words:

- How does this align with the organisation's goals?
- What specific measurable goals will be achieved in doing this?
- What will people do differently as a result of this initiative? Not what will they know, but what will they *do*?
- How will things be improved by implementing this? What are the results we expect to see that will tell us if we have succeeded?

It's important that people understand what we do, and what we could do – the potential benefits that we can bring to the organisation. We can only do this if we can talk credibly to the rest of the organisation in terms of achieving their goals, not ours. We must be talking about organisational results and not courses run or modules completed. Of course, we also need to understand what our customers need and want.

BUILD ALLIANCES

This doesn't mean coming away with a shopping list of functionality in an LMS or a list of courses to deliver. It means getting a real understanding of what they are trying to achieve, so that you (as the learning expert) can offer solutions. The better you understand what your partners need to achieve, the better your understanding of how you can help. And in the long term, the greater the chance you have of winning their support.

If we are to take ownership for business results, this just isn't going to cut it. At the very least we need to make reasoned arguments as to why these things are true or untrue.

Partnerships are mutually beneficial but they don't magically materialise when someone has a particular training need. We should be proactively and continuously building alliances. Ask yourself:

- Who can I build alliances with?
- Who can help me identify the ways in which L&D can demonstrate more business focus?
- Who can help me to demonstrate our business focused approach?
- Who would benefit from the support of a truly business focused ally within L&D?

There may be some obvious candidates; line managers who you regularly work with, colleagues in IT, senior HR stakeholders. But don't limit yourself. Look for anyone in the organisation with whom it would make sense to develop a real solid relationship. Identify people with whom you can align your short, mid and long-term goals and share resources.

INFLUENCE THE INFLUENCERS

One of the biggest benefits of forming the right alliances is that we are better able to influence organisational decision-making. If you want to establish a really effective L&D department, it doesn't do any harm to get somebody senior on board as a cheerleader, especially if we're starting from the kind of position typified in the *Corporate Leadership Council Survey*. Perhaps it's obvious, but if you can't directly influence the decision makers, then you should influence the people who can influence the decision makers. Use your alliances!

There is one other aspect of ownership that we need to cover, and maybe I'm being a little tough, but it is tough love I promise you! Stop making excuses. We really have to stop making excuses. In ten years I've heard the same three excuses trotted out, whether the subject covered was e-learning content, social learning, mobile devices or the LMS. Excuse No.1 – It won't work here. Excuse No.2 – It won't work with our people. Excuse No.3 – IT says we can't do it.

If we are to take ownership for business results, this just isn't going to cut it. At the very least we need to make reasoned arguments as to why these things are true or untrue. Let's just consider the last excuse, "IT says we can't do it". It's a pretty

common to hear this. But by just accepting "no" for an answer you become the single point of failure. So what do you do?

TOUGH LOVE

If we want be partners we should be able to develop a mature relationships with IT; one in which we partner with them, but are not dependent on them. Even then, it may be that they say "no" anyway, and for perfectly good reasons. So what else can we do? Here's how to explore the possibilities. Are there external relationships that can offer us a solution? Do we have suppliers who can do what we need, without the requirement for support from IT?

What about your existing tools? Can you adapt something you already have to do what you need, or at least get close to it? Or is there an alternative your IT team *will* support? It may not be exactly the same as your preferred solution but if it gets you closer to your desired result, then it's a winner. Remember that you're also building alliances, so look for mutually beneficial solutions.

If you want to install social enterprise platform 'X' and IT say no, but you know they really want to build something with collaboration platform 'Y', don't treat it as second best. Get on board and find a way to use their preferred solution and support their goal too. Clearly, what I've said doesn't apply to *everyone* in L&D but, be honest with yourself; does any of this sound familiar? If so, it's not too late to change.



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