

## Rise to the challenge (Jan 09)

With most organisations facing tough trading in the year ahead, Nigel Paine explains how to rethink your L&D strategy for the economic downturn.



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I have just spent a week in Philadelphia teaching doctoral students on the world's first programme that combines business with learning. It is the first course out of a business school (and arguably the world's best business school) that combines an MBA-type of course with a detailed input on adult learning from the Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and topped off with a serious bit of workplace-based research related to workforce development.



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So I have been immersed, for about 14 hours a day, with 22 great corporate executives who run or have oversight of the person who leads the learning function. Between them they influence the lives of nearly two million employees and they come from every imaginable area of work: from manufacturing to hospitals, financial services to retail. They work in small consultancies or huge companies.

What did I learn? Here are my ten tips for the New Year. And I hope it goes well for you all.

1. The first message is don't panic! Many programmes are on hold, many learning functions are on notice but this is a time to align, plan and look closely at what delivers real value back to the organisation. Some of the group were having some of the best and most profound conversations with their top executives that they had ever had. This is a time to look hard at what skills and attitudes will get everyone through the next year or so. And many organisations are not taking the knee jerk reaction of reaching for the knife in terms of staffing...yet.
2. Know when the game is up. There are times when the learning function will not get a look in. Recognise this, and either get out or deliver the minimum necessary to keep the place ticking over. The time may come when it switches round, but the time may not come.
3. This is an opportunity to innovate. Everyone is looking for creative solutions, and rolling out the same old stuff may no longer work for you.
4. Get faster! This is the time to accelerate. What ever you are doing, there is some urgency to do quicker than you did before. Offering that up as a partial solution will be welcomed.
5. Time to go on line. **ASTD's** *State of the Industry* report shows that e-learning has grown strongly over the past year. It is practically the only area where major investment is still being put in. The current climate is the right one to introduce something that can increase dissemination, and cut the time for learning, and the time off the job. The nay sayers, may well be willing to give this a try now.

6. Time to listen closely to staff. Not just learning staff but staff right around the organisation. What has changed and what can you do to support people at the front line who may be having a tough time? Redirecting budget into new areas of need could have a quick pay back in terms of increased efficiency.
7. Use free tools or cheap tools. This is not the time to be expansive in terms of budget requests. There are more and more tools around that have fabulous functionality and little cost. You can make a case for them, and the lack of upfront investment will be very attractive.
8. Argue strongly for a place at the top table developing new strategy. Losing your best people now is the shortest of short-term solutions. There are many smarter ways to move forward, but many opportunities will be lost if the people development expert is excluded from the discussion. This is an excellent time to look backwards for a while and marshal your arguments about the value you have already delivered. What your boss won't want to see is a pile of smiley face review sheets. What is required is an attempt to measure what your function's contribution to your organisation's core objectives has been.
9. It really is time to entirely rethink your overall evaluation strategy. Ask what metrics would be the most useful and would allow you to focus on impact rather than throughput.
10. At periods like this it is easier to argue for realignment and repositioning. Use that opportunity wisely and you will help your workplace re-emerge stronger, leaner and fitter. You will also have got rid of some of your own, old baggage that will allow your team or department to have adapted ready for a changing world.

This is the time for thought not panic. Follow the [Wharton](#) team's lead: be optimistic but realistic!

*Nigel Paine is a former head of training and development at the BBC and now runs his own company, Nigel Paine.Com which focuses on people, learning and technology.*

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