Developing Learning Professionals for the New World of Learning & Development

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A CLO asked for my thoughts about developing learning professionals for today and the near future. I appreciate her concern about that question.

Here I attempt to answer her, focusing on what I think cannot be ignored now, concluding with some thoughts on methods for the professional development of learning professionals.

My hope is that you will want to use this document to nudge and engage your learning leadership in helping you to be all you can be.

Practices that Matter

Here are practices that contribute to award-winning efforts.

1. **Data are collected and used to focus, tailor and improve programs and people.** When BMS acquired a small biotech company, they used needs analysis to determine key areas where managers would be developed to facilitate onboarding the biotech employees into the larger BMS culture. Award-winning UPS used driver behavior data to focus job training that saved 14.5 million minutes of engine idling time in 2010. But it’s more than data for programs. It’s also the use of data to target individual development needs and opportunities.

2. **Solutions are systems that go beyond the classroom to where people work.** Often, it boils down to less training, more reference on demand, more supervisory engagement, more online and in-person conversations with peers, and learning experiences that smack of reality.

3. **Great learning enterprises never stop striving.** Great organizations are on the lookout to get better. They pilot. They seek their flaws. UPS said, “We’ve always been known to be constructively dissatisfied, and we continuously look for new ways to do training better.”

Culture Counts

Learning people and units must step up to nurture and improve organizational culture.

Josh Bersin of Deloitte Consulting stated that “research on learning culture shows that, among all of the different investments in learning you can make, creating a culture of learning is the most important of all.” What should this culture look like?

   1. **Learning starts with onboarding and continues through performance management and learning experiences.** What does your onboarding say about your organizational culture? Is it what you want it to say? What of your performance systems? Your learning experiences? Are they congruent? Do they second each other?
2. Investments in learning and development (L&D) are measured through links to business outcomes. Initiatives are measured by the value of the solution rather than money spent or the number of offerings consumed.

3. Information exchange is encouraged and happens. WakeMed Health & Hospitals (2012 ATD winner) addressed the taboo topics of errors and patient safety by enabling nurses to share information about errors on an education department blog. Then teams tackled issues identified on the blog.

4. The line and the learning enterprise are really, truly partners to make learning and knowledge sharing happen. Learning isn’t owned only by the learning organization. Everybody does it.

5. Everybody talks about what they are learning and what they will learn in the future—and these learning experiences take many forms, from mentors, to e-learning, to instructor-led classes, to reminders delivered on phones.

Into the Future

While instructor-led classroom training still reigns (per recent ATD study, it’s 70%!), change is on the horizon. Really, it is. What is emerging in the best learning enterprises?

6. More digital and mobile and in the workflow. Who doesn’t want it when they want it, where they want it? The cloud enables a worker to start something in the office on a laptop, continue via mobile device on the way home, and finish on a tablet at home or in a hotel.

7. More, yet smaller. As the amount of information explodes, great organizations offer up answers and guidance in manageable chunks. In comes microlearning -- learning on the fly, “digestible bites,” or short-form training. These small, task-oriented morsels are “pulled” by employees as they need them, or served up by systems, when employees are stuck in the midst of a problem.

8. More self-directed and technology-enabled. Of course. The challenge is what to deliver and how to guide employees as they turn to these resources. More choice makes it urgent to deliver clarity of expectations. Choice without guidance won’t work or satisfy. We must do more than serve up a library of content. Such a library can overwhelm.


10. More social. Social learning can be as familiar as the traditional study group. A friend posted a question about her new Smart Watch on Facebook and had an answer in minutes. If she had used Twitter, it would have been seconds.

11. More individualized. On the flip side of social, the top aspiration in many learning units is personalized development for each employee. A data-rich culture makes it possible to use performance and assessments to curate and guide efficient, individual learning paths. Compliance training, for example, must be more than a mass spray job. How do your compliance programs match jobs, needs and accomplishments?

12. More skeptical. It relates to the hunt for data and data-driven ways to strive and improve. I remember visiting a consulting firm that brought people together to look at trends in data. Why did that happen? What worked? What did not? What would we do differently? What more do we need to know?
Developing Workplace Learning people

It had better be good. These are learning people, after all. Not only do they deserve the best, they will know it when they see it. And they’ll recognize a perfunctory effort.

Since I have worked on this for my long career, let me share my favorite strategies—

- **Communicate expectations.** Look above. The list of opportunities and related competences is long and various. What are your 2016 development priorities? Are you honing in on individualization, perhaps? Will the organization work to use technology to deliver more learning and reference closer to work? Are there expectations associated with culture change and systems? If your people were to move towards selected priorities, what would they know and do? How would we know they were making strides? **Tell people what you want from them? How different? Why now?**

- **Provide a way for people to examine themselves in light of expectations.** Self-assessments? Structured conversations with managers? Online tours of examples with commentary about the reasons leadership is highlighting these examples? White papers that focus attention on emergent priorities? Lunch chats that share successes and the opposite and ask employees to consider their strengths and areas for improvement in light of these efforts? Data on the impact of interventions with inquiries about how they could do more, be more?

- **Offer a menu of development opportunities that match individual needs.** Those opportunities should:
  - Provide concise descriptions of approaches and results, based in the literature, and linked to performance improvement
  - Offer courses, access to coaches, registrations for conferences and seminars, opportunities for stretch assignments in new and priority realms
  - Offer up examples that show what works and what doesn’t
  - Provide data on successes and failures in real organization on real problems
  - Invite and expect managers to participate
  - Include expectations for employees to tackle real work challenges as part of their development. If, for example, they are attempting to use more data for decision-making, then ask each employee to gather data, tease out meaning, recommend actions. How would they do it better next time?
  - Seek short and sweet ways for learning pros to work together on authentic challenges. Then expect individuals and groups to report back
  - Ask for reflections. What did you learn? What resources should be shared? Where to from here?

- **Tell a public story of investment in learning professionals.** We shouldn’t be the shoemaker’s children. When learning leaders invest, it’s a strong statement to the entire organization about the importance of a learning and sharing culture.

- **Tell the story of your own development efforts.** Yes, you. Learning executives. Who better to model systematic growth and change?