



How L&D leads to better performance

Sue Young examines how L&D practitioners can work more closely with line managers to ensure that learning helps improve performance

In times of heavy cost pressures, the onus is on L&D to justify its existence. The budget for traditional L&D activities can expect drastic cuts in many organisations but there is evidence that many organisations are moving towards more selective spending on a wider range of initiatives to which L&D could make a major contribution. More attention is being paid to the output of L&D and its contribution to the business. The very term ‘talent management’ is representative of this shift.

L&D practitioners often have to fight to be heard. Most training is seen as having a temporary effect at best: ‘Don’t worry, she’s just been on a training course; she’ll soon be back to normal...’ is a typical

comment when someone returns from training. L&D is often seen as being separate from the core business and its priorities.

In a recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2010) report¹, a major trend is identified in the increasing integration of coaching, organisational development and performance management to drive organisational change. At the same time, the role of line managers is seen to be critical, with just under half of organisations reporting that line managers are taking a greater responsibility for training and developing their staff.

So what does this mean for L&D? Even when budgets are being drastically cut, L&D practitioners can still add value to their organisations in a number of ways.

Linking learning to improved performance

The issue of assessing impact on the bottom line has been the subject of debate for some time. Learning is not a simple input/output mechanical process but organisations can examine the effectiveness of the performance management processes and systems they already have in place.

There are practical actions that can be taken to assess the impact of learning:

- Individuals having follow-up discussions with their line managers after learning activities should be linking what they have learned to the actions and development priorities in their roles
- Each individual has responsibility for his own personal development plan, which is linked to the performance management process
- Support for line managers in developing the attitudes and coaching skills required for them to have more effective conversations with staff about their performance. Output that counts from these conversations comes down to the quality of discussion and relationship built between the individual and his line manager
- In advance of all learning activities, the training that is to be undertaken should be linked to an overall organisational priority. Line managers should be enabled to explain to staff how the learning activity will contribute to delivery or improved effectiveness in an area that is linked to business needs. They should also explain how the improvement will be assessed in terms of measurable outcomes
- Higher levels of attention to development planning should be made part of all L&D activities. In all development activities there should be time allocated for individual reflection on links that staff can see, from insights and learning they are gaining through to actions they want to take away. Staff undertaking training should consider what they are going to do on Monday morning
- Sponsorship from senior management is key, particularly for leadership development and talent management initiatives where the focus is on an accelerated learning process and programme for those identified as having leadership potential.

Recognising the nature of the learning required

Traditional training approaches are not really up to providing the learning needed for the complex task of management in today's organisations.

Managers will come up against numerous challenges, for example staff may question what is required of them in their fast-changing

organisation, when their job description now might be vastly different to when they started. Staff will question how they can develop their general business awareness and apply it to their situation, as well as how they achieve their increasingly ambitious organisational goals with fewer resources.

Line managers should equip their staff with the knowledge that enables them to cope with an ever-increasing workload while retaining a strategic perspective, as well as overcome the challenges of working with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and with differing interests. Another consideration is how line managers educate their leaders to effectively influence the people they depend on for results but over whom they might not have any direct authority.

Much development takes place instinctively and intuitively. It embraces a complex, interrelating series of factors all operating at the same time. A key factor is how readily people learn from their experience. A recent concept emerging in research and best practice is that of the agile learner². Highest

Learning cannot take place in a vacuum

potential employees are shown to be differentiated by their ability to learn quickly and adapt as a result of their experience.

For any learning activity to translate into improved performance, its design should be informed by some fundamental principles of how people learn from experience. These are the key points that line managers should consider:

The importance of motivating and engaging the 'learner' If people cannot immediately see the relevance of a billed 'learning activity', they are not going to be motivated to learn.

Often companies do not give sufficient attention to this and employees can attend learning activities purely because they've been told to go, but with no expectation that it will be useful. At worst they can be hostile, at best not ready to take responsibility for their learning.

Attention by L&D practitioners to the communication and briefing process is critical to creating a mindset receptive to learning. Also, a focus on developing positive strengths rather than addressing weaknesses is proven to engage people more in taking charge of their learning.



Self-awareness as a pre-requisite to learning

When people don't even know there is a problem, let alone what it is, they are unable to consider or take in new information or perspectives. By developing an objective awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, people are more likely to learn how to extend their capabilities in more demanding business situations.

Seeing oneself as one is generally seen by others requires a balanced acceptance of oneself, combined with the judgment to be able to manage oneself and flex one's behaviour according to the demands of the situation.

Good use of feedback from a range of sources can lead to enormously increased self-awareness and positive changes in behaviour.

Line managers having a clear view of how enabling learning is an inherent part of their role

Learning cannot take place in a vacuum. This means starting with understanding the needs of the business and how this relates to what is required of people within their roles.

High quality L&D activity helps people interpret and make sense of what is happening in their organisation as it has an impact on their role and stimulates them to see what they should be doing differently or additionally. This requires really understanding what is going on in the business in order to judge what is needed in that context.

This is an area in which senior managers potentially have a major contribution to make, sharing more of the bigger picture they hold and can easily take for granted.

To achieve sustainable learning, you can't tell people what to do, you have to help them see what to do

This is partly about creating an environment in which people's natural awareness can be accelerated, and partly about providing frameworks and experiences that help people make sense of it for themselves.

Learning and awareness take place stage by stage. If people have not yet developed a certain level of awareness about themselves or their environment, anything they are told will miss the mark as they will be unable to relate to it from their experience.

You have to start with where people are and build on that. Coaching can be powerful as it works with that fundamental dynamic in the learning process.

Individuals taking charge is an essential part of learning

Part of the objective of any learning programme should be to build a foundation of awareness, confidence and capability that enables individuals to manage their



continuing development. In fast-changing times, this is an essential management capability.

Learning is a personal experience for each individual

There is increasing recognition of the need for high quality attention to individual needs leading to more sustainable learning and performance outcomes. Any group development and training activities can have built into them the opportunity for the individuals to make sense of their experience, identify what they are taking away from it and what they need to do back in their role. This requires the design of development programmes and the processes around them to build in a blend of approaches that allow the individual to draw out personal meaning, reflect on the implications in his particular context and apply the learning.

The changing role of central L&D

In a climate of greater focus on performance improvement, and return on investment, the role of L&D staff is moving on from one of simple provision. The most effective are taking more of an internal consultancy role, in which they develop a



closer understanding of the business priorities and challenges and are able to come up with a flexible range of learning solutions that embrace more experiential and work-based learning approaches.

L&D professionals are likely to get more senior attention by engaging with, and influencing, senior management by talking their language. Communicating how particular approaches represent better value for money will chime with a more commercially-focused audience.

The concept of RoI and cost/benefit analysis can be actively used in a way that is similar to mainstream business decision making, for example how investment in L&D this week may have an impact next month, or – more likely – years down the line, and what this would look like. This more accurately represents the impact learning has on business outcomes.

Locally, L&D practitioners' progress can be achieved through proactively advising, and working with, line management on ways that learning can add value to their usual business practices. They also have a key role in sharing and disseminating best practice throughout the organisation.

Examples of the kinds of activity that will be perceived to contribute more directly to business improvement include:

- Supporting initiatives in changing core work processes and procedures, and working closely with other central/local management. To ensure sustainability and organisation-wide learning, this can be followed up with local sessions reviewing learning and sharing best practice
- Facilitating short, experiential 'shadowing' expeditions to other areas of the business
- Using team coaching and an action learning approach to support business improvement projects
- Providing coaching, mentoring and consulting services to local line managers
- Identifying and developing local line manager 'champions' who can role model and provide coaching and mentoring support within the business, better enabling the development of a coaching culture
- Providing expertise and facilitation skills to better enable the changes in ways of working required locally to meet challenging business objectives.

In all of this, L&D is focused on increasing transfer of capabilities to the business, working in close partnership with line management.

Supporting the changing role of line managers

Research shows that line managers are the biggest influence, positive and negative, on people's performance and development³. This is demonstrated by an increasing number of organisations aiming to develop coaching as their predominant management style.

In the current environment, managers are often required to formally coach their staff. L&D can support this by ensuring they are equipped with the skills and support they require to be effective. This can be a big mind-shift for managers from taking responsibility for the solutions to enabling people to find their own way to those solutions.

Senior-level support for L&D activities is essential as L&D will always fall back down the order of priorities for line managers, with short-term business demands and pressures taking priority.

In summary, the role of L&D professionals is rapidly moving on from the provision of the 'set piece' training event to a facilitative consulting approach, working closely with both senior and local line managers. More attention may need to be given to equipping L&D staff with the internal consulting skills for the more proactive, business-aware 'change agents' role that will truly leverage the learning that leads to delivery of improved performance. **TJ**

References

- 1 CIPD *Annual Survey Report 2010 – Learning and Talent Development*
- 2 Lombardo M M, Eichinger R W "High Potentials as High Learners" *Human Resource Management* Winter 2000, vol 39, no 4
- 3 CIPD *Change Agenda: Learning and the Line - the role of line managers* McLeod D, Clarke N *Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance through Employee Engagement*

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