Elements of Next Generation LEARNING STRATEGIES
YOU NEED A LEARNING STRATEGY

If we just put a great employee training program together, the employees will love it!

Many organizations approach their employee training exactly this way. They find great learning content, load it or offer it through an LMS, send a message – usually an e-mail or some sort of newsletter – to employees and expect employees to flock to the training program and absorb the great content. And then . . . nothing happens. The content sits there waiting to be utilized. And at budget time, somebody in the C-suite asks, “How did we get any value from this program if so few employees used it?”

There are two foundational questions to address. What went wrong? What can we do about it? And what’s really interesting is that the core answer to both questions starts at the same place. You need a learning strategy.

Generally, best practices learning strategies will include the following elements in some mix appropriate to the specific needs of the organization, employees and clients or customers.

1. Alignment with organizational goals.
2. Awareness of organization’s current learning culture.
4. Content strategy.
5. Evaluation and success criteria.
6. Marketing and communication strategy.

In this e-book, we will go into some detail on each of the Seven Elements of Next Generation Learning Strategies – one at a time.
Alignment with organizational goals is the single most fundamental element of every learning strategy. Many organizations fail to achieve true alignment. What’s needed today is a sharper focus and clarity of thinking on the specific way our employee learning efforts align with and support organizational goals.

One of the primary problems with alignment is the way many organizations think about the term. A common definition of “alignment” from the online Business Dictionary reads:

Linking of organizational goals with the employees’ personal goals. Requires common understanding of purposes and goals of the organization, and consistency between every objective and plan right down to the incentive offers.

Like so many business terms, “alignment” is reaching the level of jargon. The concept is a noble one, but through overuse and hype, it’s really lost any substantive meaning and purpose. So what’s missing in this definition?

Let’s compare this “jargon” based definition to a simpler, common definition of the term. The Free Online Dictionary provides a great definition:

The process of adjusting parts so that they are in proper relative position.
Why is this common usage definition so much better? Why is it so much more useful for learning and development and organizations?

It’s the idea of alignment being a process of **continuing adjustment so parts are in their “proper relative position.”**

Think about focusing a pair of binoculars. You can set them once, and then move them to look at a different object. Do they remain focused or “aligned?” No. You have to adjust them.

Organizations have to do the same thing. Make continuous adjustments to keep their learning programs aligned with organizational goals as conditions change – especially in this rapidly changing and evolving marketplace. Otherwise, our training programs will remain fixed on an objective that – just like the out-of-focus binoculars – looked clear once, but doesn’t help us achieve our goals as conditions evolve.
2. AWARENESS OF LEARNING CULTURE

Each organization’s current learning culture is crucial. Is **learning embedded into workflows?** Are employees **committed to continuous improvement?** Is the organization **receptive to performance change and improvement?** Is the organization **ready for a technology-based learning solution?** These are just four questions to ask, and there are many more. Cultural awareness is critical to the successful implementation of any learning solution. Understanding your culture will help to achieve the desired behavior and performance changes sought through the learning program.

Senior leadership, front-line managers and supervisors are the most critical elements of your organization that must be engaged in learning before a true learning culture can evolve. Senior leaders need to see direct, bottom-line benefits to the business of employee learning.

Recent market research proves organizations that embrace employee learning enjoy significant competitive advantages. We also know that when our front-line managers and supervisors are engaged in employee training, the effectiveness of our efforts goes up significantly. Finding ways to hold these managers accountable will be crucial to the success of your programs, and will fuel the growth of your learning culture.

**INVESTMENTS IN TRAINING IMPROVE YOUR BOTTOM LINE**

According to Bersin by Deloitte, **organizations with strong learning cultures outperform their peers...**

- **Innovation**
  - 46%
  - More likely to be first to market

- **Productivity**
  - 37%
  - Greater employee productivity

- **Time to Market**
  - 34%
  - Better response to customer needs

- **Quality**
  - 26%
  - Greater ability to deliver “quality products”

- **Skills for the future**
  - 58%
  - More prepared to meet future demand

- **Profitability**
  - 17%
  - More likely to be market share leaders
3. NEEDS ANALYSIS

The needs analysis helps you focus on the business challenges that can be met through a learning program. Not all business problems require or need learning solutions. Your efforts and limited resources should be focused on where you can see results that will yield business benefits.

During the process you should involve both employees, front-line managers and supervisors to help them identify the critical competencies employees need to perform successfully.

By engaging all of the stakeholders early in the process, it becomes easier to keep both employees and managers engaged in the learning program. They now have a voice in defining what needs to be improved, how much improvement is needed and who will be the audience for the training program.

At the conclusion of the needs analysis, you should be able to identify:

- The desired state of performance.
- The current state of performance.
- The skill, knowledge and/or competency gaps your training program will be built to fill.
A content strategy is next and builds upon the previous elements – most specifically the needs analysis. After you’ve understood exactly what challenges you are addressing and who needs help, you can begin looking at content that can help your employees.

Another key element of your content strategy has to come from your understanding of your current and desired learning culture. When and where do your employees need content? At the moment they need to apply learning? Are employees working in remote locations?

Answers to all of these questions will help you determine if you are ready to move beyond the classroom and towards video, social and mobile learning.

The content choices you make will be critical to the success of your employee learning program. We see vendor after vendor touting the features of learning systems and technology, and we know technology matters. But having a wonderful technology platform that delivers no content is the classic “beautiful house, but nobody’s home” punch line. Ultimately, content must be central to your employee learning strategy. After all, how do you plan to fill the knowledge, skill and competency gaps you’ve identified in the needs analysis without great content?

“LEARNING MUST BE JUST IN TIME AND JUST FOR ME”

Michael Rochelle, Chief Strategy Officer, Brandon Hall Group

1. Select content that your employees can directly relate to improved performance on their jobs.

2. Link the content to the knowledge, skill and competency gaps you’ve discovered.

3. Ensure the content can be delivered to your employees in multiple ways and on multiple platforms and devices, like smart phones and tablets.

In other words, make sure you have a content strategy that meets the needs, behaviors, expectations and technology availability of your entire workforce – including your Millennials.

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How will you know you’ve been successful? The criteria you will use to measure the impact of your program must be determined before you begin. Just ask yourself two questions.

**What will success look like? How will we know?**

When you’ve answered those questions, you can quickly identify the data you need to gather.

One of the major problems with measuring the impact of learning in organizations is many organizations make measurement too complex. Keep it simple, and stay relentlessly focused on the two questions above – what will success look like, and how will we know?

Go back to the needs analysis phase for a brief moment. One of the critical aspects of that element is to determine the difference between the current state of performance and the desired state of performance. At the current state of performance, look for the key performance indicators that TELL you how you are doing. Will success improve performance and, thereby improve those same indicators? If so, you have measureable success criteria and you’re ready to move to the next element. If not, keep asking the two key questions until you find those indicators.

Generally, your criteria will fall into two main areas of focus, Program and Learner. Each item includes a measurement component. Following the list, we’ve included a sample of how your final criteria might look.

**Program Focus**

Program focused criteria should take a broad view of the program design and objectives.

- Percentage of employees take at least one course within the first year of program.
- Replace percentage of instructor-led-training (ILT) with eLearning.
- Employees use eLearning to meet an average percentage of their annual training requirement.
- Employees use eLearning courses to meet specific skill gaps in their Personal Development Plans and demonstrate a test score or percentage improvement.

**Learner Focus**

Learner-focused criteria ought to be much more specific, and sometimes these measures can be based upon learner feedback, impressions and ideas.

- Positive feedback on content with a percentage approval rating.
- Positive feedback on usability with a percentage approval rating.
- Positive feedback on how participants will apply what they learned to their job.
- Positive results on effectiveness of instruction comparing pre-test and test scores.
6. MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION

A marketing and communication strategy is crucial to any successful learning program. You have to inform your employees about the program, motivate them to participate, explain how the program will help them, and then keep the momentum of the program going.

Too many organizations stop marketing the value of learning programs after programs start. A true marketing program is an ongoing program where success stories are shared and highlighted, and employees begin to see learning as a part of the everyday flow of their work.

Learning professionals have never been told they are really marketing professionals, but at a basic level, we are. We have to establish the value and craft a message that speaks to each person, and we have to deliver content to each person so they will take action. The difference is they aren’t buying something, they are accessing training content. But the basic challenges are nearly the same. So – build a marketing and communication strategy that helps employees see the ongoing value of learning by finding success stories, highlighting new content or running contests. You are only limited by your own imagination and the limitations of your organization’s culture.

**MARKETING STRATEGY**

**Plan**
Design your strategy and remember to reflect the culture of your organization. Consider your business. Address cultural variables within launch, initial activities, and ongoing efforts.

**Build**
Incorporate a variety of communication and marketing tools to get your message out. Make sure your plan includes room for repeated messages, frequent contacts and feedback from employees.

**Act**
Tell your story, send your message and set the foundation for ongoing success. Work from the top down. High-level communication is important, because it sets the example for the ranks. Identify available corporate resources. Communicate who, what, when, where, and why.

**Review**
Evaluate your efforts to understand the changing work environment, share information, keep users energized, and determine if you met your objectives. Then make adjustments and work through the process again.
Last – and certainly not least – is to understand and measure the actual business impact of learning. Sometimes this is not easy to do, but this is a critical piece of your strategic mission. The conversations in the C-suite are all about business benefits, so be prepared and able to make the connections between employee learning and business benefits. This is easier when the objectives of the learning program are tightly aligned with organizational goals right from the start.

A crucial element of measuring the business impact is the vocabulary we use. This isn’t about looking at cost comparisons, and it’s not about ROI. We really need to look carefully at the core business functions we expect to improve through improved employee performance. Once we understand what will improve, we go back to our two fundamental questions – what will success look like, and how will we know it? The “look” of success must be apparent at the business bottom line in terms of increased productivity, profitability, speed to market, etc. It’s in these spaces that executives think and look for BUSINESS BENEFITS, and it’s in these spaces that employee learning has an impact. We’ve just never really looked for it the way we should before.
THE 7 KEY ELEMENTS

1. Alignment with organizational goals.
2. Awareness of organization’s current learning culture.
4. Content strategy.
5. Evaluation and success criteria.
6. Marketing and communication strategy.

We need to make sure we have learning strategies that set the stage for employee success. It’s not enough to have a great technology platform. It’s not enough to have great content. It’s not enough to have great ideas or a well thought out organizational strategy. We need a learning strategy that effectively links these elements together.

As we witness the huge influence of technology, demographic and behavioral changes and pressures on every aspect of our organization, effective strategies for success must move to the forefront for organizations determined to either remain or become market leaders. And the best strategies will be flexible and agile. But these same strategies will not be accidents, nor will these strategies emerge from an ad hoc approach to strategy.

Learning strategies must be developed carefully. Best-in-class learning strategies involve all important stakeholders and are flexible and continuously improving. Beginning with the concept of alignment as a process of adjustments, the entire strategic planning process for learning needs to be viewed similarly – as a process.

When we embrace the idea that the next generation of learning strategies keep our learning programs relevant to the challenges facing our organizations and relevant to the way our employees behave and react with technology, we are on a path towards true learning success.
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