Strategic Developments International

Developing a Learning Strategy

There is an old story told of the man who was seen plummeting past the 30th floor of the Empire State Building flapping his arms and shouting: 'So far, so good!' Unfortunately the ground came up and halted his 'flight'. I fear that some training departments are in a similar situation.

I had a graphic example of this some years ago. I had just finished a conference presentation on Self Managed Learning when a training manager came up to me and said: 'I agree with all you've said about the value of Self Managed Learning. But I have dozens of instructors working for me who could be put out of work if we went down that path. So I won't be making any changes to how we work.' Some time later I heard that his training department had been the subject of major cutbacks. Most of the instructors were fired because their work was seen as a low priority to the business. And they are not the only organisation that has done this. A major blue-chip company has just closed its management training department because it was not seen as adding value to the business.

The error that I'm concerned about is to see training as the focus and not learning. This is not a trivial distinction. Training can become a solution looking for a problem and such a one-dimensional focus can undermine the creation of coherent learning strategies. Training has a role to play but only as part of a wider learning strategy. For instance we know, from much serious research, that most of what makes people effective in their work does not come from training or education. For most jobs there is an 80:20 rule – 80% of the learning that is of value is from a whole range of activities that the education and training establishment choose to belittle by labelling them 'informal' (for example learning from colleagues, from the work itself, from being coached or mentored, from projects, etc.).

In order to make progress one of the things that is needed is to remove some unhelpful practices. For instance 'training needs analysis' has to go. We need 'learning needs analysis' that focuses strategically on business-related learning needs not an erroneous assumption that learning needs are always best met through training courses. We also need to expunge the 'training needs' section from any old-fashioned appraisal forms that still lurk in organisations. This allows managers to escape from their developmental responsibilities by off-loading learning onto the training department. Even where there are arrangements for personal development plans these are too often tactical and short term. What is needed instead are strategic learning contracts that provide longer-term, wide-angle plans for learning.

Other features of a good learning strategy include the following:

1. Change strategies need to include reference to learning needs that will be part of the change. There can be no change without learning so a learning strategy has to be part of a change process.

2. Learning has to be seen as an organisation-wide commitment, managed from the top and highly visible. Everyone is a learner and organisations need to provide support for learning at all levels. Restricting major investment to the chosen few so-called 'talented' individuals is short-sighted and makes poor business sense.

3. Much learning cannot be achieved through quick-fix modes. If developers are asked to train up leaders in a two-day workshop they should have the courage and the strategic awareness to refuse. Instead they need to insist on a coherent long-term development <u>process</u>. (Note – not a <u>programme</u> with a fixed boundary but an open-ended learning process.)

4. Other people management practices need to tie in with a learning strategy. For instance the ability to learn needs to be a core criterion in any selection or promotion decision. Also pay increases should be tied to learning. If people learn new business-valued capabilities they should be rewarded appropriately.

5. Sharing learning needs encouraging. The creation of cross-functional learning groups that promote shared learning is one valuable method here. Such groups need to exist for a length of time and be given sufficient work time within which to meet (we typically find that groups need to exist for at least nine months and meet for up to a day at a time every five or six weeks). This level of investment of time can seem inordinate to many organisations but the evidence of business benefit has been proved in our research studies.

This kind of process is part of the development of social capital. The social capital of the organisation resides in the relationships between people, whereas the human capital resides only in individuals. Here I'm quoting from a new book by the chief executive of a client of ours, namely Rolf Hüppi of Zurich Financial Services. And if a hard-nosed Swiss financier can see that social capital is at the core of their business transformation strategy then this notion can't be dismissed as some New Age gimmick.

By Professor Ian Cunningham