from making it
STICK
to making it
LAST

Copyright ATD 2016

Seven practices for sustaining a resilient learning organization.

BY HOLLY BURKETT

Building a high-performing, value-adding learning organization—with all the necessary foundations, infrastructures, and leadership support—is never easy. Sustaining one is even harder, even under the best of circumstances.

Consider this example: When Sharon started as director of her organization's learning and development department, she reported to one senior vice president. With a staff of four, her main responsibilities were to build a performance-based learning organization in support of strategic goals and talent development. Within a year, partnerships and service agreements were initiated with key business units. Measures of learning's contribution to job and business results were being identified for select programs. Executive dashboard reports were on the drawing board. Then, the company went through reorganization and started a series of downsizing.

Within nine months, Sharon's job changed three times and the senior vice president changed twice. Sharon and her team were being aligned constantly with different lines of business, each with different objectives. "It was like management by chaos," she says. "We could never get any traction for learning since leaders and their priorities were constantly shifting."

Gaining traction is a unique challenge in a learning landscape characterized by a new normal of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times. How often have you witnessed revolving chairs with CEOs that come or go, or moving targets that shift with the latest urgent decree or flavor of the month? All of this makes sustainability more difficult. Yet sustainability is needed for the longevity of the learning function.

Organizations that continually learn better and faster can adapt more quickly to opportunities or threats and are better able to meet increased demands for capable talent in a technologically advanced, global economy. To leverage its full potential for adding strategic value, the learning function needs to remain stable, flexible, relevant, and resilient in the face of up and down cycles of budget cuts and reorganizations.

When it comes to adding sustainable value, the most resilient learning organizations are ones where learning leaders function as strategic business partners and where the learning organization not only supports the business, but is run like a business. Some learning leaders have described this as a "business-first, function-second approach." Talent development professionals who have successfully built and sustained their credibility as strategic business leaders, not just learning leaders, emphasize that it is not a single accomplishment, but rather an ongoing effort that requires flexibility, resilience, and a dedicated conviction to make a difference through process excellence.

Process excellence occurs through a future-focused mindset and the consistent use of fully integrated, disciplined practices that then develop into patterns of behavior. These behaviors ultimately become the

capabilities representing what the learning organization is known for—what it's good at, and how it prioritizes its activities and services to deliver value. Let's look more closely at seven key practices that can strengthen the resilience and core capabilities of your learning organization to add sustainable business value.

Practice 1: Lead with culture

Learning organizations with a mature learning culture have been shown to consistently produce long-term results in terms of attraction, retention, engagement, innovation, and revenue growth. A learning culture is basically a set of organizational values, processes, and practices that encourage employees, and the organization as a whole, to continually learn and add new skills. Here, learning is not a static business objective or a singular event, but rather a perpetual process of building organizational capability.

In these cultures, learning is embedded as a way of life in everyday activities, and L&D practitioners are viewed as consultants rather than gatekeepers of employee development. In fact, making learning available to all employees during the workday has been described as a top strategy to support a learning culture.

A mature, sustainable L&D organization is needed to catalyze a learning culture, yet 2016 research findings from the Association for Talent Development's *Building a Culture of Learning* suggest that only 31 percent of organizations have well-developed learning cultures. Since culture change is an area in which learning leaders and executives are likely to partner, ensuring tight alignment between learning strategies and business strategies is a good place to focus.

While participating in strategy development at the executive level is not always possible, organizations such as Booz Allen Hamilton use a governance body and a global managing board as a way for learning leaders to integrate learning with business strategies. Learning leaders must consistently ask themselves how to create—and sustain—an environment that enables accessible, integrated, continuous, and compelling learning.

Practice 2: Develop and distribute leadership

The fastest way for a learning organization to evolve into one that consistently enables high performance and engagement is through the visible commitment and active embodiment of learning by its leaders. For example, senior leaders at AT&T are intimately involved with the L&D function and regularly communicate the fundamental role learning plays in the company's success.

To engage senior managers as learning champions, address the issues that keep them up at night. According to a 2015 Global Human Capital Trends report, these issues include challenges around the following.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the senior management team. CEOs report an urgent need to build skills and capabilities related to executing business strategies. Many believe that their learning organizations are not doing enough to accelerate the skill development of senior leaders.

Improving leadership development programs. A major problem with leadership development today is that there is too much focus on the individual versus the collective. Companies such as Google and 3M have found that coordinated, dispersed leadership adds more sustainable value than isolated development actions focused solely on C-suite executives or a select few high potentials.

Improving effectiveness of frontline supervisors and managers. Many learning organizations fail to provide enough leadership development to this important group. Companies cannot retain highly engaged, high-performing employees without effective managers who can manage, coach, develop, and inspire multigenerational, globally dispersed teams.

Improving performance management. A learning organization can add sustainable value by helping leaders solve performance management issues. For example, NY Life Insurance created "Real Talk" learning forums as a way for managers and employees to engage meaningfully about performance management.

Practice 3: Execute well

In many learning organizations, translating strategy into execution is an exercise characterized by stalled initiatives, politically charged turf battles, lost opportunities, and important work that remains undone. Sustainable learning organizations close the gap between strategy and execution by making exceptional execution part of everyday work. Although there are many approaches for improving strategy execution, best practices include a consistency of purpose, disciplined action, and regular reflection and review.

Benefits of a Sustainable Learning Organization

Financial
- Increased revenue growth
- Increased shareholder value
- Improved market performance
- Dedicated budgets sufficient to meet learning needs

Customer
- Enhanced reputation/employer brand
- Improved customer satisfaction
- Increased innovation in products and services

Operational
- Improved productivity
- Higher performance levels
- Increased efficiencies
- Increased effectiveness
- Reduced scrap learning
- Improved use of resources

Organizational
- Increased engagement
- Increased ability to attract and retain talent
- Increased capabilities
- Enhanced knowledge-sharing
- Greater change adaptability

Consider TELUS, a Canadian telecommunications firm. Much of the company's success is attributed to traditional "good management" practices that focus on people, talent, and goal execution. Consistency is important because frequent changes in strategy and direction are common complaints among managers and employees who have trouble prioritizing tasks with continually moving targets.

In general, successful execution, in both the short and long term, relies on consistent, disciplined, data-driven processes. Learning organizations with formal project or business management processes (such as Six Sigma) typically outperform those with no systems. Determine which processes work best for you and your organization and routinely apply them in a purposeful way.

Practice 4: Drive for results, continuously improve

Sustainable, high-performing learning organizations like those at Merck or Marriott have a defined measurement strategy and regularly measure learning's impact on business results. Impact measures tend to be highly correlated to the effectiveness and durability of a learning organization, the presence of a learning culture, and market performance. Most learning leaders support the use of strong measurement practices, but many fail to maintain relevance and establish sustainability because they focus more on learning than on the performance that results from learning.

Building a Culture of Learning shows as little as one in four organizations measure learning's effect on job behavior or business performance. Confounding the issue is the world of big data, where questions about what to measure and what to do with the results can be overwhelming. Higher expectations for the use of analytics to guide strategic, human capital decisions has

only heightened the dissatisfaction with current measurement practices by both learning leaders and their CEOs.

Learning leaders can add sustainable value here by adopting more consistent, credible measures of learning effectiveness and by upskilling their teams in the proper use of analytics. After all, it's tough to drive a sustainable learning culture without key performance indicators of its progress or success.

Practice 5: Build and bend change capabilities

Today's turbulent business landscape, combined with the amount of knowledge needed to sustain high performance amid growing complexity, requires sophisticated learning capabilities and evolving change capacity from organizations, leaders, and talent management professionals. Lack of agility is a major obstacle to effective strategy execution because conditions are changing faster than strategies can be devised.

Learning organizations can build change readiness by integrating change capabilities with leadership development and management training, by applying disciplined change management processes to change efforts, and by leveraging employee networks to promote change capability throughout all organizational levels.

Although learning leaders can enable change-readiness conditions, they cannot inspire confidence and commitment in uncertain times without embodying and modeling personal characteristics of change adaptability and resilience. In this regard, learning leaders need to monitor their own beliefs and aversion to change and routinely examine learning models, processes, and practices for their flexibility and relevance to shifting needs.

Practice 6: Foster collaboration, connections, and community

Providing meaningful connections through the progressive use of communities, social networks, and technology-based, collaborative learning tools drives innovation and engagement and boosts the value of the learning

organization. This is especially true because learning today is less about taking in new information than it is about connecting with people who can help put new information into context and suggest new ways of understanding it. Yet as employees become more scattered, budgets shrink, and workloads expand, collaboration and connection remain a challenge.

To address this, companies such as Radio Flyer grow collaboration, connection, and community through intensive onboarding processes in which new employees meet with their team, CEOs, and various internal groups. Learning leaders can add sustainable value here by:

- helping to break down silos
- creating mechanisms for moving ideas across boundaries
- teaching collaborative behaviors
- modeling collaborative behaviors from one leader, one layer, and one division to another.

Practice 7: Embrace the art of innovation

What sets a sustainable learning organization apart is its ability to innovate, renew, or even reinvent itself in significant ways as needs arise. In a world of constant churn, traditional learning approaches and structures are not enough to meet the demands of the modern workplace and the modern learner—who requires learning "just in time, just for me, and just in the right amount."

Innovative learning organizations at companies like Samsung embrace forms of learning technology (such as social media tools or mobile platforms) where workers are empowered with tools and resources to manage their own learning. Others use such methods as microlearning, gamification, or massive open online courses (MOOCs) to provide flexible, progressive learning options.

However, many learning organizations are not up to speed with new technologies or methods and are not preparing to be more innovative. In addition, a 2011 Global Leadership Forecast report suggests that only one in three organizations leverages leadership development to grow leaders' innovation skills,

although innovation is identified as a critical capability gap. In short, it's difficult for learning leaders to drive innovation and add sustainable value if the business of learning is stagnant and out of touch with modern needs.

Learning luminary Clark Quinn says that relevant, resilient learning strategies must balance operational excellence with innovation. Learning leaders must continually innovate their processes and practices to increase participation, engagement, impact, and value. Cultivating an innovative mindset also is critical because innovation is about more than adopting shiny new toys or flashy objects. This means being in a constant state of learning, being open and receptive to change, and absorbing emerging trends and their immediate and long-term possibilities. It also means actively demonstrating how everyday innovation generates value for the business.

It's a marathon, not a sprint

Sustainable value implies the capacity to remain credible, flexible, and responsive to continuously changing business needs, and the changing needs of multiple users, over time. The "business" and "over time" perspectives are where most learning organizations get stuck. Experts say that a sustainable, hardwired learning enterprise—one that is fully embedded in organizational culture—may take several years to achieve. To that end, sustainability represents a perpetually evolving transformation toward consistently higher levels of process excellence.

Consistent, disciplined use of these seven practices can help learning organizations gain traction as a business-centric, future-focused pocket of process excellence. While each has stand-alone merit, it's the integrated, "inside-out" application of these practices that provide the essential building blocks for adding and creating lasting value for the long run.

■ **Holly Burkett** is principal of Evaluation Works, a performance consultancy in California. She also is author of the forthcoming *Learning for the Long Run: 7 Practices for Sustaining a Resilient Learning Organization* (ATD Press); burketth@earthlink.net.

td
talent development

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!