

There is a philosophical and structural shift occurring behind the doors of American corporations today that may impact how human capital development advances and performs. This change is happening in training and development departments, and it is altering the definition of training as we know it today.

Traditionally, training has been a top-down function initiated by training departments who would identify, construct, and disseminate training to the employees to influence performance. By definition, training implies coaching, teaching, or imparting knowledge. But in a fast-paced digital world, where access to information and knowledge is plentiful, corporations are transforming their training models into becoming learning organizations. While it may appear as though these two are inextricably linked, there is a difference in methodology. Learning, again by definition, is the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skill. An organization focused on learning takes a different approach—in an ongoing process where ownership resides within the individual.

Research and observation have led us to explore the belief that training has a tendency to be prescriptive—prescriptive to present or anticipated needs as identified by the company. Learning on the other hand builds an individual's capabilities for the future. Organizational learning involves individual learning, and those who make the shift from traditional thinking to learning nurture the ability to think critically and creatively.

In many ways, the shift from being a training organization to a learning organization has been nurtured by changes occurring in training and development overall. The traditional classroom model may consist of such blended resources as online and experiential learning. These tools are tempered with other factors—not the least of which is financial. But the emergence of the learning organization runs deeper than this. It is an outgrowth of the need to create self-reliant, individually motivated and confident employees that can truly support an organization's vision and goals. The question

becomes, what makes an employee motivated and confident? Part of the answer must include knowing their job and feeling knowledgeable about what they've learned.

I recently had the opportunity to discuss this topic with Mike Gragg, Director of Workforce Development for Dow Chemical. We agreed that among the many reasons that this shift is taking place has to do with really aligning the content of a learning program with the organization's business principles. Training has traditionally been an expense that has been hard to track. In addition, new methods were critical for future growth.

"In my world, there has been an incredible shift in the culture and the focus and the view of learning as a competitive advantage as compared with training. The traditional view of training, oversimplified, has been that of a dark hole that you throw money into and you're not sure what you get back out of it," Gragg said.

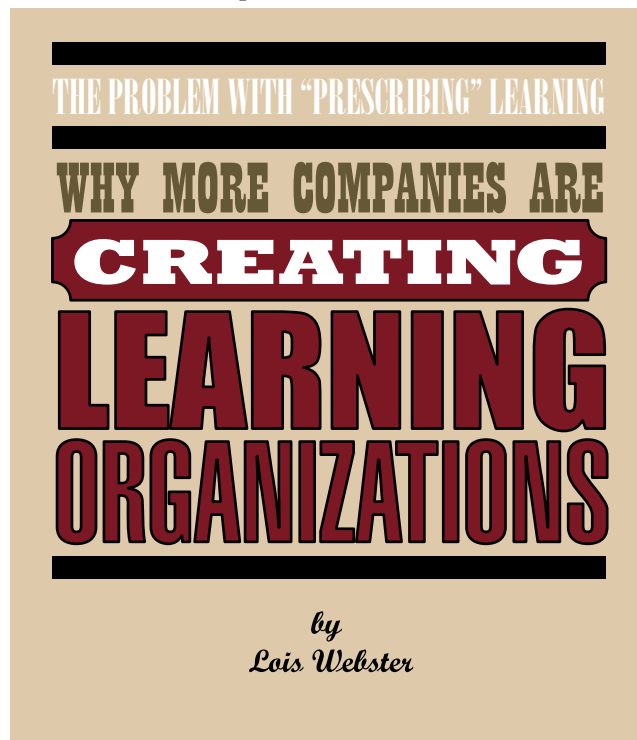
Gragg and his organization went through self evaluation, looking at return on investment by using a variety of applicable theories. They basically found that moving from training to learning brings "value to the individual, improves their capability, improves their competence, and in turn

provides value for the organization." To do this, Gragg's organization provides an intervention that starts with two questions: What is the purpose of my position? And what is it that I am trying to accomplish?

They took a business question, "How do you improve asset utilization?" with the asset, in their case, being chemical plants. The company already goes out of its way to make sure that the facilities are safe and environmentally sensitive. Given those parameters, they went on to assess how to improve the utilization of that asset so that it provides value and quality for a greater presence in the marketplace and fulfillment of customers' needs.

So from an employer's perspective, they asked themselves what level of skill improves asset utilization. By asking this, the

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THE PROBLEM WITH "PRESCRIBING" LEARNING

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value of improving skill level became obvious. The value to the learner became obvious too, because these are the individuals who often struggled with employee development planning as having little relevance to their work. Employee development plans sometimes follow the traditional training track with a menu of training opposed to an analysis of what an employee does, the path where they perform, the necessary knowledge and skills, and the level of competence needed. A good learning intervention then should close the gap once it's identified.

Gragg redefined the difference between training and a learning intervention. "A learning intervention may be an on-the-job experience. A learning intervention may be something in which you're coaching someone who is new and, by doing that, you're working on a procedural implementation yourself," said Gragg. "A learning experience can take on many forms."

In this approach, Dow Chemical defines the opportunity gap and exactly what it takes to move an individual from one level to another, allowing the learner to play an active role. In doing so, the company allows itself to develop an employee and add more value to the company. At the end, they come

back and reassess individuals with a standardized assessment to see if the interventions that the employee had a hand in choosing prove to be more effective.

Gragg's very specific example exemplifies the cultural change in thinking that must be taking place within the

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organization. It isn't just looking at objectives, building a training program around them and declaring success after everyone was trained. Instead, finding where individuals should be, giving individuals tools to close gaps, and coming back and making sure the gaps were closed.

Training traditionally had start and end dates, hours to complete, and sign-off sheets. But within the learning model, the sheet should never be signed. The learner should continue the journey of exploration within the

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context of the organization. Tools are implemented along the way to measure success, whether assessments, internal interviews, or another approach. This will help make sure the program is staying on track with business objectives and look at ROI.

But fostering this environment is not necessarily easy—it can actually be more difficult. It takes dedication from the teachers and the learners. It's looking at the coursework that comes out for each new class of new employees and asking meaningful questions. But it's well worth it.

As organizations consider the transition to a learning organization, there are questions to consider:

- Are we enabling the employees to learn in their own way?
- Are managers involved in the learning process?
- Are we using traditional teaching methods that haven't been re-evaluated in years?
- Are we supporting and accelerating learning?
- Do we provide coaches?
- Is the material used appropriate for the learner, the organization's needs and the context?

- Are the employees engaged enough to proactively continue learning after the training program is complete?

- Is my organization willing to change its paradigm?

One blue-chip company did an excellent job at creating a competency-based framework where employees are encouraged to take responsibility for developing and meeting competencies and objectives. Self-assessment and remediation take place as well. The Internet holds information, including courses, references, and suggested activities, and a manager plays a role in the process, but it is very self-directed. Another company was very focused on peer networks and cross-divisional training that involved consistent education across the organization.

Trainers are generally not the issue. They work hard to educate, be creative, and keep new employees interested. Empowering self-directed learners will only enhance the Training and Development departments of organizations.

A variety of ways to foster self-directed learning environments include:

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- Peer networks
- Project coaching from executives
- Open, clear channels of communication
- Online resources for additional learning/easily accessible information
- Cross-divisional training
- Awareness among employees of their expected performance
- Available opportunities for self-assessment for analysis of what knowledge is lacking
- Manager-employee activities focused on skill development.

Learning and development organizations are progressively moving to learning models. It does not necessarily displace training, but it places the ownership on the learner. This shift from training to learning will be an important factor in determining a company's future profitability. It requires a change in the delivery of services, and the future role and status of people management and development professionals. Training has been described as an instructor-

led, content-based intervention, leading to desired changes in behavior. Learning is described as a self-directed, work-based process, leading to increased adaptive capacity. Knowing the difference is critical.

Lois Webster is CEO and General Manager of LearnShare. Since 2001, Lois has been responsible for the direction and growth of the company. She has extended the mission of the original founding members of LearnShare to develop products and services that today help more than 35 member Fortune 1000 companies serve the training and development needs of nearly 3 million employees worldwide. She has continued to position LearnShare as a catalyst for shared ideas and best practices by introducing and expanding digital and live opportunities for training and development executives. For more information, visit <www.learnshare.com>.



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