

Four Experts Speak Out

By Rex Davenport

Top learning executives offer advice on how to get to the boardroom and then get a seat at the table.

Get a hundred or so people in a room in Las Vegas and the first thing that comes to mind is not workplace learning. Slots? Maybe. Measuring the effectiveness of a new learning approach? Probably not.

But several hundred workplace learning and performance practitioners were on hand for *Sharing@LearnShare* in March, and at one session they were given a chance to hear from four senior-level learning executives from high-performing organizations.

Offering insights and advice were Martha Soehren, chief learning officer and senior vice president for Comcast University at Comcast Cable Communications; Jeff Oberlin, chief learning officer at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago; Susan Shinn, human resource developer for Kerry Americas, a food technology and ingredients company; and Glenn E. Phillips, general manager of global workforce development for Chevron Corporation.

Phillips challenged the audience with several probing questions: "How many of you believe your organization has

reached its maximum potential? How many of you believe every team and every department in your organization has reached its maximum capability to contribute? How many of you think your organization has optimized its performance at the individual, team, and group level?"

Phillips continued: "How many of you believe that there is a desire on the part of your CEO to enhance organizational capability in a way that improves the bottom line?"

Getting a seat at the table is not a new concept, the Chevron learning executive told the audience. He, in fact, took part in efforts more than a decade ago to examine how HR practitioners could increase their impact on the organization. "And here we are, more than a decade later, and the learning and development function is still asking questions about when we get a seat at the table, what will we do, and what mistakes will we make."

Paradigm busters

The boardroom is no place for the shy, the panelists said. And, even if the invita-

tion to the table has been lost in the inter-office mail, learning professionals have to act as if they have been sitting there all along. "I would urge you all to understand that if there is anyone at the table that needs to be paradigm busters, we are the ones who need to be doing it," Phillips noted. "My advice to you is to either take a seat at the table or assume a seat at the table."

Phillips suggested that learning professionals should not wait for a literal seat to be offered. "We have this notion that there is a physical seat at the boardroom table or at the leadership level and that (we must occupy) the seat to contribute," he explained. "That is a mistake I have seen in organizations all over the world, where there is no CLO. But the people in those organizations who do that work are valued. They are looked on to deliver."

A critical measurement of success for the learning executive is if he has been asked to facilitate a major business change, suggested Oberlin. "If you haven't, then you are not part of the solu-

tion for the organization," he said. A key indicator of the learning organization's value "is nothing more than the C-level coming to you and saying 'we want you to help implement X.' Whatever that change may be.

"And that they have trust and full faith in your organization's ability to (implement the change). If you don't get that kind of request, you need to ask yourself if you are properly positioned (in the company) and have shown results. Is there a belief in the organization that training does make a difference?"

Get the seat, hold the seat

Given the growing importance of the learning function to drive bottom-line results, it really isn't that remarkable that the concept of a chief learning officer has come into existence. But getting a seat at the table and holding on to it are two different things.

"One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to go to the table without an understanding of the business," Phillips told the audience. "The biggest mistake you can make is to not be able to compete and contribute intellectually on the broader business issues. You had better know the business. Know the business. Know the business."

The mistakes made by the learning executive, sitting among company leadership for the first time, usually are related to delivering results. "I see them all the time," Phillips noted. "We find that individuals get a seat at the table and they are incapable of delivering. Given the risk to organizations, both tangible and intangible, when you get a seat at the table and there is an organizational need that is not being met by (your) function, organizations will find a way to meet those needs. They will not go unsatisfied."

The panelists agreed that this is doubly damaging. When the learning executive blows it, the organization begins to believe it has wasted its investment in him. And, secondly, the organization has lost an opportunity to achieve one of its objectives.

The panelists generally agreed that the greatest danger to the success of

the enterprise is in the human capital or capability risk. "We are almost always able to place the root cause for any organizational failure on the capabilities (of the workforce)," Phillips said. "It is all about performance, but it is always about people."

"I am so glad that some of us get asked to take a seat at the table," added Oberlin. "At the start of my career, my biggest thrill was that someone would actually pay me to design courses. Twenty years ago, everyone could predict how technology would change (the development and delivery of) learning. But no one, no one, would have predicted the (emergence and creation of the) CLO title and function. There was no such word, and there was no such concept.

"I am very proud of what we have done in the profession to be in the position to be asked (to play a C-level role). When you get there you had better make sure you can deliver. That is so important." **TD**

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