
Leadership Influence on Corporate Change Involving Distance Training

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Abstract

Corporate learning leaders require a unique set of skills to sustain learning programs within their organizations. Leaders must have well-planned strategies and clear direction for learning initiatives. They must understand their organization as well as their learners, and be able to skillfully deploy appropriate learning technologies. A network of relationships must be built and nurtured by corporate learning leaders to promote and sustain their programs. Leaders must adhere to well-defined procedural standards related to programs, budgets and change management. They must understand changing trends in leadership paradigms across organizational cultures. Effective corporate learning leaders must skillfully combine relationships, process, and support while continually transforming their organizations and expanding learning initiatives.

Leadership Influence on Corporate Change Involving Distance Training

The success and endurance of good corporate distance education programs is dependent on the strategies and strengths of good leaders. Capable leaders are necessary to all organizations. What traits and skills must good corporate learning leaders have in order to establish and sustain flourishing distance learning programs? Certainly these leaders require the skill sets of all good leaders - vision, purpose, the drive to succeed, the ability to motivate others, solutions-orientation, and risk-taking. Learning leaders in these organizations require additional characteristics and skills, which can be categorized in terms of vision, relationship-building, and operational discipline (see Table 1).

Table 1. Learning Leaders' Skill Domains

Vision	Relationship Building	Operational Practice
Where the business is going	Senior executive management	Program management discipline
Strategies to develop and expand employee learning	Own training department	Prioritization processes
Technology infrastructure support of learning plan	Internal business units	Technology standards for elearning
Budget	Information Technology	Vendor standards
Risk taking	Communications	Change management
Understanding adult learners	External Customers	
Developing a learning culture	Peer Network	

Vision

Successful leaders in corporate learning have a strong understanding of the company's business mission and how learning can create competitive advantage within its business framework. They are able to view more than the current business of the organization; they must envision the organization's direction and look for ways to enhance that future with learning. Beaudoin (2003) notes that leaders create conditions for innovative change enable individuals in an organization to share a vision and move in its direction, and contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas. Senior management must provide context for middle management and communicate strategic plans (Austin, 2004). Ulukan (2005) states that DE managers look to identify the dominant culture within their organization and manage it effectively and systemically, while keeping in line with organizational goals.

Strategy

Leaders define a strategy for how to develop, expand and grow employee learning into the future, through a perpetual plan for staff development. Distance education (DE) leaders in organizations have the capacity to take organizational development plans a step further by matching this development with technology to devise innovative learning solutions for staff. In order to

accomplish this, DE leaders are proficient in understanding how adult workers learn, and how their learning needs differ from institutional learning. They transform the organization into a “learning culture” (Conner & Clawson, 2005). DE leaders, according to Dede (1993), displace the traditional educational models by creating and conveying a powerful technological vision to the organization. To accomplish this, leaders must understand the “what’s-in-it-for-me” principles that motivate and engage their organization’s learners (Lynch, 2002). Leaders also package alternative assumptions and paradigms as part of a larger vision that inspires new roles for educational stakeholders. Leaders demonstrate strong ethics and serve as a role model for competence, connection and character (Muirhead, 2003).

Transformation

Leader roles encompass transformational, situational and systemic leadership. Transformational leaders help stakeholders to realize the benefits of DE (Marcus, 2004). “Transformational leaders are characterized by the ability to bring about change, innovation and entrepreneurship” (Ulukan, 2005). Situational leaders can develop an organizational diagnosis at any point in time and determine the readiness of stakeholders for change. Systemic leadership moves the progress of the organization step by step through change (Marcus, 2004). During organizational transformation, radical changes in members’ perception and behavior occur, as organizational assumptions about functions and environments relationships change. Leaders simultaneously transform, enhance corporate competitiveness and embrace online delivery, by developing more consultation, collaboration and openness. Leaders accommodate both new ideas and existing subcultures. They should employ seven principles of success, according to Morris (1994), including clear conception, strong confidence, focused concentration, stubborn consistency, emotional commitment, good character and capacity to enjoy their work. They must be a force for change without threat (Lynch, 2002). They also evaluate the feasibility for accomplishing change by evaluating the political processes, distribution of power and key constituents in effecting change (Ulukan, 2005).

Organizational Clarity

Leaders calibrate learning to where an organization is developmentally. Brown, Eager, and Lawrence (2005) discuss one example of this at BP Energy Corporation. BP had gone through a number of mergers and acquisitions, and had doubled in size in four years. BP had maintained 35 different leadership development programs globally, producing mixed results. BP chose to scrap all leadership programs and create a single, new leadership program for the entire organization, called First Level Leaders. In this example, leaders were looking to create learning consistency and major program improvements. They retained a research firm to conduct in-depth interviews to get feedback on needed improvements. This was highly successful because the research firm was external and feedback given was very honest. BP’s learning leaders left the job of organizing and summarizing these types of findings up to the research experts. The research process was ultimately viewed as a form of intervention in successfully turning the leadership program around. Besides merely implementing a new and improved program, leaders sought to continually nurture and assess the program. They did this by developing deep and ongoing measurements of the program’s success. They found Kirkpatrick’s evaluation model insufficient for program measurement and developed their own two-stage WIN model, which tied training to corporate bottom line performance. Additionally, they made the continual review of content and course requirements a mandatory part of program administration.

Leaders also take into account corporate size in their learning strategies. Private Health Care Systems of Waltham, Massachusetts is a large health care cost management company with over 380,000 providers within their network. The company itself, however, consists of just over 1000 employees. In a small corporation of this type, their chief learning officer has noted that it is much easier to get a read on the corporate culture and needs (Arnold, 2003). In this type of environment the DE leader will focus more attention toward sustaining learning for a massive external customer base, and maintaining solid course development practices.

Understanding Learners

In other corporate cultures, learning leaders must focus more closely on learner preferences. For example, learning leaders at Raytheon, a mid-sized defense and government solutions integrator, with approximately 76,000 employees, look carefully at *who* their learners are, and preferences that will affect learning. Raytheon recognizes that with many engineers in their workforce, their learners require learning to be presented as a non-linear reference tool, absent of embellishments, such as Flash animations (Arnold, 2003). These learners require an easy one-stop shop of learning solutions. By recognizing such preferences, and calibrating learning towards this audience, learning leaders at Raytheon also reduce bandwidth issues for training delivery. This type of assessment of the culture and creativity in decision-making must be an on-going process for the learning leader.

Technological Impact

In order for leaders to effectively deploy technologies for learning, they develop a strong infrastructure of technology support for their initiatives. DE leaders have keen insights into technology's impact (Marcus, 2004). An infrastructure build-out strategy must accompany their learning plan, to serve as the delivery vehicle for future DE offerings. Such an infrastructure requires support from multiple departments and specific skill sets, along with a budget plan for the infrastructure and learning initiatives. Mereba (2003) notes that DE leaders are able to properly align their technology initiatives with their strategic plans and mission. New technologies have the capacity to transform institutional culture by resisting compartmentalization. Information technology changes require planning beyond simply technical installation, to include systems issues (infrastructure), producer issues (content development) and user issues (access and connections) (Ulukan, 2005).

Relationship-Building

DE leaders are skilled at engaging a host of partners (see Figure 1), both internal and external to develop and sustain learning programs.

Organizational Partnerships

Wunsch (1992) notes that leaders cannot stand behind the scenes, they are always receiving attention, assessment, and critical opinion, and must focus on developing community rather than working autonomously to achieve credibility and recognition.

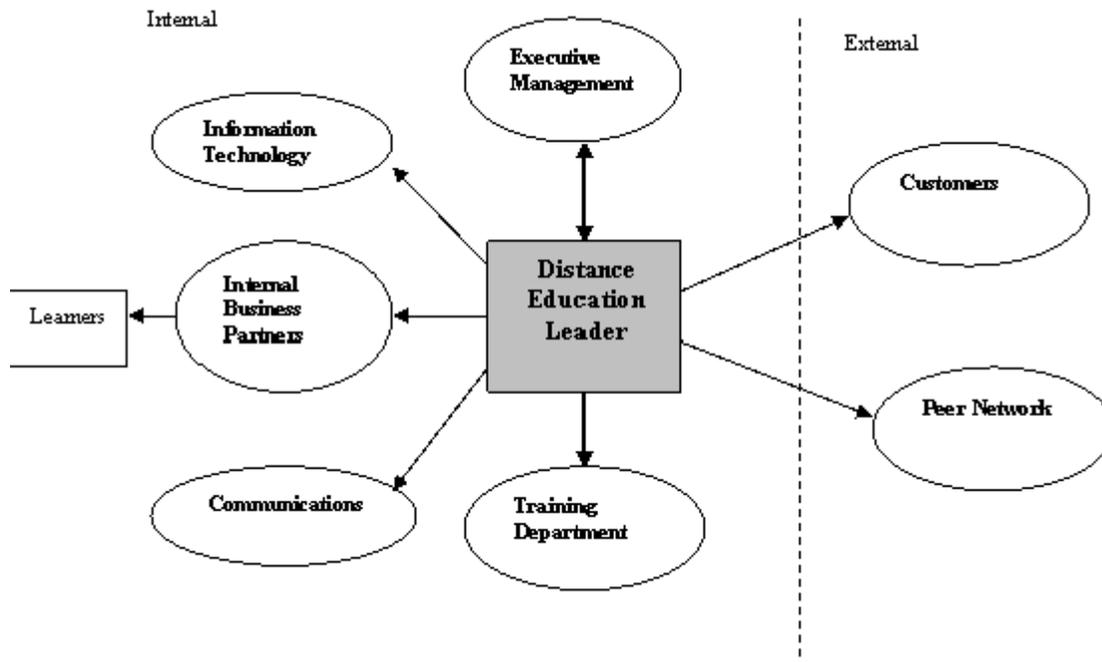


Figure 1. DE leader's internal and external relationships.

Executive Support

Most importantly, leaders develop and nurture executive management support for learning within the organization. Senior management sets the cultural tone for employee expectations regarding performance and development. The introduction of distance learning by an influential person prior to use is important for adoption and successful implementation (Lane, 2001). If an organization's executives do not support and promote learning, the first goal of the leader is to secure this level of support using a strategy of educating senior management on the long-term corporate value of learning and staff development. Leaders must transform senior management to view intellectual capital as a resource (Lynch, 2002).

Senior management speaks the language of finance, while learning leaders speak the language of performance (Seagraves, 2005). In order for DE leaders to effectively communicate learning's value to senior management, they learn to speak in terms of return on assets, cash flow and net profit and loss. Seagraves (2005) recommends that DE leaders develop a communications plan for senior management. This plan should be split into three parts – identifying to whom to communicate in terms of what is important to them; connecting the DE leaders work to the needs of their management audience; and, presenting what management needs *when* they need to hear it. Additionally, DE leaders should begin their communications with senior management by tying the financial value of their initiatives back to specifics that they have already accomplished, or are in the process of delivering.

Not all studies agree with the importance of leaders focusing solely on return-on-investment communications. Thomson NETg's recent white paper on corporate board involvement in learning initiatives implies that attempting to make spreadsheet justifications of learning initiatives is naïve and ineffective (Salopek, 2005). They encourage changing board views of learning by broadening our definition of learning and tying it to corporate strategic imperatives and competitive advantage. They suggest that organizational learning must evolve from formal

learning events into “embedded” learning that is woven into the fabric of daily interactions and the job.

Team Building

A learning leader's own department must be developed to function as a highly effective unit. Leaders must build on their training department's strengths, and supplement weaknesses. They must build a highly functional team, which can define and be responsive to business needs with appropriate learning solutions (Berge, 2001; Berge & Smith, 2000). This means that their department must be intimately familiar with both the business and the learners within an organization. Their department should have good standards for course design, development and rollout.

Business Partnerships

DE leaders need to build strong partnerships internally with the business units they support. This means always being close to the business in order to understand direction and needs. In contrast with traditional educational institutions, which offer courses directly for learner selection, within a corporation, it is this relationship with business units that drives the learning offerings.

Unum Provident Insurance formalizes internal relationships with the business through a Technology Advisory Board (Lynch, 2002). The board is comprised of internal partners and managers. It is the job of this board to review learning ideas before presentation to senior management. This approach has helped Unum Provident identify problems or politics around learning ideas early on.

At AmeriCredit Corp., the chief learning officer works from the sidelines in discussing the company road map with executives, managers and trainers, one-on-one (Lynch, 2002). This type of understated partnering approach provides candid insights for learning initiatives and develops partnerships informally.

Of all internal partnerships, a DE leader's relationships with the corporation's information technology (IT) and communications departments are most important. Both of these units serve as support mechanisms for the rollout of a DE leaders' strategies. The IT department not only provides technology infrastructure, but also technology development resources, advice, consultation, technology execution, and strategic future planning. The communications department is critical to the ability of a DE leader to deliver messages to the learners on learning direction and course offerings. These messages must be consistent with the corporation's communications standards, and look and feel.

Peer Networks

Peer relationships are equally important for DE leaders to maintain. A peer network permits the sharing of best practices (Lynch, 2002). Unum Provident Insurance's CLO developed such a network by assembling peers into what is today known as the Learning Resource Network (Lynch, 2002). This group started with executives from a group of companies getting together quarterly to discuss challenges. They leveraged each other's experiences and advice. The network

has continued to grow and share information.

Customer Relationships

External customers are essential to the company. DE leaders must seek avenues to develop strong relationships with them. Harley Davidson Motor Co. expanded their training efforts to their external dealer customers in 1991 (Oakes, 2005). They specifically addressed the retail and management training needs of the 1,300 dealerships with which they do business. By providing their customers what they needed to be successful from a learning perspective, they generated a high degree of customer loyalty in dealers.

Fidelity Investments generates customer loyalty by personalizing their customer benefits education programs (Oakes, 2005). After initially providing educational sessions for retirement plan discussion, they realized they could use elearning to reach a broader set of customers through blended learning approaches. At the same time, customers would identify themselves and learning could be personalized based on the customer's benefit package.

Symbol Technologies, a bar code scanner manufacturer, has found other ways to improve customer loyalty through learning. They have developed a customer certification program for customers, offering a set of blended courses through which customers can become certified in their scanning technology (Oakes, 2005). Once certified, customers receive more incentives and discounts on Symbol products.

Symantec, a global information security company, has tied customer regulatory needs to their learning initiatives (Oakes, 2005). Understanding that their customers are repeatedly faced with cumbersome and complex regulatory rules around technology security, Symantec developed the Symantec Security Awareness Program for customers, a set of tools and communications about security regulation that educates customers in keeping up with this industry.

Operational Discipline

Strong operational discipline is necessary to sustain and track quality learning initiatives. Leaders need to establish and maintain strong process management practices around learning, including processes for documentation and testing. Business-driven learning objectives need to be identified and prioritized using these processes (Arnold, 2003).

Development Standards

Leaders need to establish good discipline around learning development practices within their unit. The definition of a set of corporate standards around elearning screen design and development, and learner interactivity elements is needed (Arnold, 2003). Instructional design (ISD) within the organization must adhere to an established development process. ISD outlines and storyboards, team development and testing approaches for learning need corporate standardization.

Processes of compliance with industry standards, such as SCORM, must also be addressed by the learning organization.

Vendor Interaction

Leaders need to establish processes for external vendor interaction as well. These include vendor relationship management, contract interactions, proposal processes and requests for vendor information. Leaders must develop standards and coach their teams on best practices and legal aspects of developing these interactions.

Program Standards

Leaders must establish processes around how learning programs will be managed. Rollout strategies, the regularity of internal communications on programs, compliance communications and other aspects of learning programs require a disciplined management approach. Procedures for testing and ensuring learning programs are ready for delivery must be included in such processes.

Financial Discipline

Budget management is critical to learning programs. The DE leader must “exercise financial due diligence” (Lynch, 2002) and be creative with funding resources. Toyota North America battles their budget constraints by making their programs a profit center (Lynch, 2002). Since they provide training to Lexus and Toyota franchise dealers, they recover funding through their marketing training initiatives with these entities.

Companies such as Unum Provident have moved their outsourced classroom training offerings to insourced online courses (Lynch, 2002). By making some of these courses required, Unum Provident's workers are becoming more comfortable with online courses, while budget for learning is reduced.

Change Management

As organizational structures change and learner enthusiasm wanes, DE leaders must also have discipline around change management processes. This includes strategies for stimulating engagement in learning, and learning support for organizational changes that may require re-educating staff for certain jobs, or disseminating information on internal changes, or downsizing.

Leadership Paradigm Changes

Traditional views of organizational leaders are also changing. As new business complexities emerge, and the need for business transparency grows, leadership styles need to change in order to be functional and effective (Cairo, Dotlich & Rhinesmith, 2005). Heroic, firm leadership styles are giving way to styles that may appear unnatural in leadership. This includes exposing vulnerabilities, developing trust, coaching vs. inspiring, and leveraging creative conflict (Cairo, Dotlich & Rhinesmith, 2005). Leaders must practice self-awareness and repeated self-assessment to determine whether their leadership style is appropriate to their organizational environment. This type of analysis can help accomplish a transition of leadership style as the organization changes.

Other new leadership models are emerging. Wilson Learning has published a white paper on a new leadership model based on a combination of character, competencies and actions (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2005). This new, integrated leadership model proposes that leadership character is composed of personal, social and organizational components, and must be steadfast, decisive, compassionate, and place organizational needs above one's own. Leader competencies, according to this model, change as leader roles change. Competencies are grouped into four categories – visionary, facilitative, contributory and tactical. These characteristics are always present in leaders to varying degrees dependent on their role. How leaders integrate these has an effect on their worker's and peers.

Conclusion

Learning leaders face large internal and external challenges in sustaining DE and innovative learning solutions within a corporate environment. They work to develop their leadership traits that enhance self-awareness and positively impact the organization's learning framework. Leaders must keep up with continual change and remain effective to the business. Their leadership skills need continual review with measures on how successful their strategies are within their organization. Their primary focus centers on the needs of the business and learners they support.

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