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Developing a Competitive Advantage in Human Capital

How to turn training and development into business results

by Tom Moore

The *Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning* reminds its readers of the age-old management dilemma: “What if we train our employees and they leave?” To which noted leadership consultant and author Mark Sanborn replies, “What if we don’t and they stay?”

Learning agility (the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn rapidly) has become one of the most critical survival skills for both individuals and companies. Yet all too often, companies pay lip service to training. Proclaiming “employees are our most important asset,” these firms trot out misguided programs that fall into one of the following traps:

- **Poor planning.** Too often programs are assembled and rushed to the market to satisfy the whims of top management.

- **Poor intent.** Learning programs are often positioned on the moral high ground.

- **Poor measurement.** Too many corporate learning and development departments still report the number of people taught, the hours of instruction and the number of courses offered as though these were results.

- **Poor design.** Too often programs lack relevance. They are assembled entirely within the human resources or training departments and are implemented with little or no input from the line leaders that will be trained.

- **Poor accountability.** Too many training and development departments focus on the learning experience itself. Rarely are there the necessary follow-up systems to ensure the learning is put to constructive use on the job.

Shining the Accountability Spotlight

The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning sets out to avoid these pitfalls by holding the training and development function accountable for the transfer and application of corporate learning. It’s a guide about bridging the “learning-doing” gap and keeping score; in fact, adopting these disciplines provides a road map to link training to business goals.

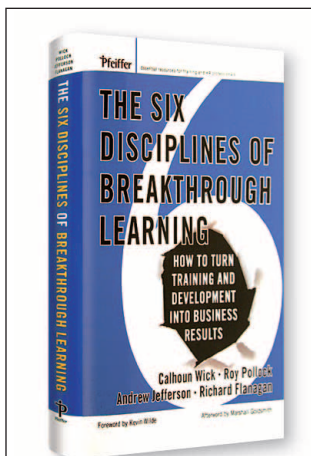
The authors comprise the leadership team of Fort Hill, a company that provides training tools and resources. They have condensed years of experience into six disciplines; these strategies constitute a breakthrough in training that converts a much higher proportion of learning into personal and professional transformation and leads to demonstrable business results.

Learning enterprises are willing to invest in programs provided they see results in measurable outcomes, such as greater effectiveness, improved productivity, enhanced customer satisfaction and other objectives. But the authors warn that “the reality of corporate life is that there are always more good ideas for investments — in research, training, marketing, sales or manufacturing — than even the most affluent company can afford.” That stark admonishment

provides further impetus to get training right from the start.

Keeping Score

While it would be easy to take issue with the number of disciplines embodied in the book, one cannot



THE SIX DISCIPLINES OF BREAKTHROUGH LEARNING

by Calhoun Wick,
Roy Pollock,
Andrew Jefferson and
Richard Flanagan
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“No corporate education should be conducted without first understanding the nature and drivers of the business, the business needs and the environment in which it operates.”

deny the defining message: Breakthrough programs are the result of a disciplined and systematic approach to learning and development, executed with passion and excellence and held accountable for accomplishing specific business objectives.

Not surprisingly, the book reads more like a textbook than a novel, engaging the reader on multiple detours for reflection and planning. Following the formulaic approach of telling the audience what you’re going to tell them, telling them and then telling them what you told them, the authors march through each of the six disciplines in a provocative fashion that compels our attention and consideration of change.

Each chapter begins with a broad philosophical overview, followed by a more granular treatment of each of the disciplines before ending with a bulleted summary — a practical implementation guide for learning leaders.

The authors take pains to include graphics, scorecards and templates divined from their practice and research that not only aid in digesting the material but also provide valuable take-aways for any organization.

In addition, the authors intersperse their treatment of the disciplines with relevant case studies from thought leaders such as Honeywell, AstraZeneca, the British Broadcasting Company and the University of Notre Dame, among others, providing a glimpse of what success looks like.

Sony’s Talent Management Councils

One such case study details the investments that Sony, a global leader in electronic components and entertainment, makes in its workforce of more than 150,000 employees. Sony understands that in order to survive and thrive in the highly competitive and rapidly changing

market in which it operates, it must continue to enhance its talent pool, introduce new leadership skills and increase its bench strength. The company has created “talent management councils” to ensure that training and development programs are transferred to the business.

“At the start of each cycle, we talk to the talent management council and we review the current business objectives and the direction in which we are trying to take the company,” the authors quote Debby Swanson from

Sony, national director, talent and organizational development.

The councils not only ensure linkage between business objectives and learning, but also serve as the faculty — creating a learning, teaching, and ultimately, profitable enterprise. Council members also review results reported by participants three months after the residential portion of the program.

The Sony example distills the essence of *The Six Disciplines*: While training initiatives traditionally have focused on what takes place in the classroom, what goes on before and after the actual training itself can be equally — if not more — important.

Begin With the End in Mind

No corporate education should be conducted without first understanding the nature and drivers of the business, the business needs and the environment in which it operates. This knowledge ensures complete congruence between the desired business outcomes and the planned learning experiences.

The essential goal should always emphasize improved performance. Ultimately, every program must produce a positive financial return, directly or indirectly.

According to the authors, training is essential in the areas of diversity, ethics and leadership; however, this training must also “pay dividends” when it



comes to decreasing operating costs, increasing productivity, improving consumer confidence and enhancing innovation. They write, “Programs that help participants improve their personal performance pay dividends in greater job satisfaction, motivation and retention.”

In the initial stages of program design, learning leaders should also direct their efforts toward getting the right people in the room; they should gear the training around the attendees, their prior level of knowledge, belief structures, natural learning styles and emotional states.

“What participants take away from a learning and development program, what they are able to transfer and, therefore, ultimately the results they are able to achieve, are influenced by what happens during the preparatory period, long before the formal coursework begins,” the authors say.

The way learning enterprises strengthen this initial phase is to ensure high expectations by creating programs perceived as integral to the business and essential to the participant’s career. Strong management support also greatly increases the probability of success.

In the Classroom

During the traditional instructional phase of the program, the authors challenge the traditional “sausage stuffer” approach — transmitting as much information as possible and filling every waking moment of a program with activity and instruction. This “compromises the quality of learning and its transferability,” they write. The organization as a whole will benefit more if its employees exit the program doing several things *well* instead of a number of things *poorly*.

They encourage instructors to ensure that learners know how to apply the new information and skills to their work roles. Learning activities must stimulate the kind of thinking and actions that will be required on the job. Thus, if the objective is to improve the ability of the participants to analyze business or personnel situations, they must be given the opportunity to practice their analytical skills. It is not sufficient for the instructor to simply talk about it.

They embrace action learning — a powerful learning component, provided it is planned with the same level of attention to detail as other forms of instruction. To make connections between actions and learning, the authors suggest allowing participants time to practice their new knowledge, reflect on lessons learned, and write down how they intend to apply their new knowledge.

“New insights and skills must be recalled before they can be adapted and applied,” the authors explain. “We are able to remember new information when it is associated with or linked to existing ideas, patterns and knowledge already stored in long-term memory. To forge these links, participants must be given sufficient guidance and enough time to reflect on what they have learned.”

Beyond the Classroom

The real work begins when the course ends. Learning creates value only when it is transferred and applied to the participant’s work environment. Education is a process, not an event like a performance or a concert. Unfortunately, in most conventional corporate education initiatives, little or no attention has been paid to what happened after the instruction was completed.

Understanding that corporate learning and development is now being judged by the business results it generates, the authors develop a new definition of the “finish line” from the last day of instruction to the documented delivery of business results. One golden nugget the authors convey is that the last item on most agendas reads “Program Ends” or “Adjourn.” A better ending would be: “Begin Transfer and Application.”

“Learning creates value only when it is transferred and applied to the participant’s work environment. Education is a process ...”



Indeed, the post-instructional transfer and application period is a particularly rich opportunity for a breakthrough that will ultimately benefit the organization.

Managers can support programs by encouraging their direct reports to apply what they have learned in the classroom in their day-to-day jobs.

In the nation's leading learning enterprises, the training and development department supplies information about course content and objectives and how managers can contribute to the process through coaching. In addition, senior management should create support for learning transfer as a part of every manager's job — one that is monitored, recognized and rewarded.

The authors' experience suggests that breakthrough learning and development programs that provide ongoing support for learners — especially during the first few crucial weeks of the transfer phase — “enjoy a greater return on their educational investments.” The idea is that trainers should redefine their role from “strictly trainers/presenters to facilitators of behavioral change on the job.”

You Can't Manage What You Don't Measure

All the work by designers, facilitators, participants, coaches and managers is for naught unless it manifests as demonstrable results of importance to the business. Credible, reliable measures are needed to determine whether the training investment is paying dividends and what refinements are needed to further improve the program's effectiveness.

According to the authors, “The only way to prove that the resources have been well used is to document relevant results.” The other reason to assess outcomes is to drive continual improvement in learning and development. Effectiveness and efficiency are increased by rigorously assessing the quality of the current output, implementing ideas for improvement, measuring the impact and repeating the procedure.

The authors: Calhoun W. Wick is the founder and CEO of Fort Hill Company. He is a nationally recognized consultant, educator and researcher.

Roy V. H. Pollock serves as chief learning officer for Fort Hill. He has extensive experience in both line management and strategy development.

From the outset of training through its delivery and, ultimately, utilization on the job, there must be clear agreement on what is expected and how success will be measured. Anything less puts the learning enterprise at risk, because the criteria for success or failure becomes a matter of opinion.

Producing a Rich Harvest

The value delivered by a corporate educational program is proportional to the extent to which new knowledge and skills are applied to the work of the organization. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The job of corporate learning and development is not merely to impart knowledge, but to be sure that it is put to work so that its benefits can be harvested.

Creating a fertile and receptive environment begins at the top. Senior executives can set the tone that learning and development is a strategic priority. Senior management support must be manifested in deed as well as in word. It needs to be backed up by systems of accountability to ensure that managers embrace the importance of their role in learning transfer, since a person's immediate supervisor has profound influence on whether learning is transferred and applied or abandoned.

The inherent beauty of the book is that the six disciplines provide an effective road map not just for training and development, but for any department within the organization — marketing, distribution, information technology — to follow to ensure transparency and alignment between the goals, objectives and needs of the business.

Fred Harburg, senior vice president of leadership and management development at Fidelity Investments, puts it this way: “We are not in the business of providing classes, learning tools or even learning itself. We are in the business of facilitating improved business results.” ■

Tom Moore is a freelance writer from Ridgfield, Conn. He can be reached at Thomas.l.moore@att.net.

Andrew McK. Jefferson is president and chief operating officer for Fort Hill. He is an accomplished executive in both operational and legal roles.

Richard D. Flanagan serves as senior vice president for Fort Hill. He is a licensed psychologist.

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