Leadership in Learning and Development

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Learning and Development, also referred to as the Training Department, has been a part of work life since the beginning of time. Throughout history, there have been documented cases of successful teacher-apprentice relationships. Arguably, the most famous historically may have been Jesus Christ and his disciples.

These training programs were much less formal than the technologically advanced departments that we see in the corporate environment today, but their purpose remained the same: to develop, maintain, and expand the skills of the organization’s workers.

Traditionally, leadership and development specialists and trainers had not been considered leaders in the workplace. In many organizations, leadership represented an elevated position within a company (e.g. CEO, manager, supervisor, and to a lesser degree, some team leaders).

With recent changes in the economy, realistic business needs have moved corporate trainers to the forefront of the leadership platform. They are charged with educating, motivating, and communicating with employees. In many instances, trainers are also responsible for developing future leaders.

The objective of Learning and Development has not changed, but the way organizations leverage training personnel has. No longer is it the expendable department in times of severe budget cuts. Instead, companies have realized that Learning and Development can be utilized to successfully lead them through restructuring, expansions, downsizing, and rebuilding.
An organization’s health depends a great deal on the continued commitment of its employees. Leadership and development professionals play a vital role in the human resources framework. Bolman and Deal (as cited in Clark, 1997) aptly stated that the human resources leader believes in people and communicates that belief effectively. He is able to be seen and is accessible. He empowers, increases participation, supports, shares information, and moves decision-making down into the organization.

Having worked in the Learning and Development field for 12 years, the writer has been able to be a part of this major paradigm shift; one where Learning and Development, by virtue of its function, uses the factors and principles of leadership to move employees and organizations forward.

Factors of Leadership in Learning and Development

**Follower**

Clark (1997) stated that each person is different, and that they each require a different style of leadership. It is necessary to have a good understanding of the needs, emotions, and motivations of each individual. The writer believes that trainers require the same understanding of the employees in their classes.

The more the learners’ (followers’) needs and expectations are met by how and what they learn, the greater the chance that they will be motivated to learn. As an instructor, the writer strives to maintain a realistic understanding of the learners’ needs and expectations using surveys from previous classes and interviewing each learner at initial sessions. This is effective in developing and improving course objectives.

It is not a leader’s intention to have his followers fail. In much the same way,
Wlodkowski (1993) stated, “instructors want to give learners things to do that are within their reach” (p. 26). The writer adapts instruction to learners’ needs in order to allow them to learn in an appropriately challenging manner. This prevents learners from becoming overwhelmed or bored. The goal is to build confidence by building competence.

Good leaders care about their followers. Good instructors continuously consider learners’ perspectives. Wlodkowski (1993) stated that we should want to be in a constant state of awareness of what our learners are experiencing when they are with us, and the manner that they are experiencing it.

Leader

Clark (1997) asserted that as a leader, you must be honest about who you are, what you know, and what you can do for your followers. Followers appreciate leaders who are confident and knowledgeable. Hesselbein and Cohen (1999) stated, “to succeed as a leader you must be able to articulate a defining position. . . . You must be able to talk clearly and convincingly about who you are, why you exist, and how you operate” (p. 257).

The writer’s experience has been that learners expect the following: the instructor to know something that is beneficial to them, that he knows the subject thoroughly, and that he is prepared and organized. Wlodkowski (1993) asserted, “There has to be a union of sorts between the instructor and the learners so that both parties feel part of a single process” (p. 21).
Communication

Leaders use two-way communication with their followers. Some of this communication is nonverbal. Followers look at their leaders as closely as they listen to them. The example a leader sets can either build or harm the relationship between the leader and their follower (Clark, 1997). Sokolove and Field (2003) asserted, “If leaders do not listen to people, they will fail. The impact is indifference, hostility and miscommunication” (p. 74).

Kreps (1990) stated, “Every time you communicate with another person, you are affecting the relationship you have with that person in some way. . . . When people fail to meet the expectations that relational others set for their behavior, they disappoint those persons and jeopardize the relationships” (p. 151).

Instructors have to be careful not to embellish. If the information is found to be untrue, the learner mistrusts the instructor’s intentions. Although learners view Learning and Development professionals as the experts, they are also seen as human. Trainers should admit when they do not know the response to a question, promise to find the correct answer, and then do so. It has been the writer’s experience that trainees respect when the person is honest. The teacher-student relationship is then left in tact. Ford-Walston (2003) declared, “Realize that no one expects you to be perfect, only do your best” (p. 58).

The writer believes that trainers are salespeople. The subject matter is the product. Wlodkowski (1993) stated, “We are advocates. We say, ‘Learn this, it’s good for you’…. ‘Learn this. It’s worth it’” (p. 30).
Like any avid shopper being sold something, the learner questions the value of the product; whether it is worth the time, money or effort. If instructors (salespeople) cannot, by their own presence, vigor, and conviction in the topic, show that the subject matter is a positive thing, the learner begins to question the validity of the sales pitch. Trainers must appear as competent as they are enthusiastic. Only then will the learner buy what they are selling with the confidence that the product will do as promised.

Situation

You could use a hammer to cut a piece of plywood, but it would leave rough edges. Instead, one should use a saw. There is an appropriate tool for every job (Hersey, 1997). In the same manner, leadership style must be changed to match different leadership situations.

The role of the Learning and Development professional in the corporate classroom is not very different in this manner. Instructors often have situations where the learner may not be dramatically helped by training.

In cases where the trainee has a poor attitude and high knowledge of the subject matter, training is unlikely to help if the person is uninterested. If the trainee has a poor viewpoint and high job knowledge, training will not reduce the problem because it is attitudinal (Zaccarelli, 1988). Zaccarelli continued, “Training works when the employee wants to learn (has a positive attitude) but does not know how to do the required work” (p. 9).

Principles of Leadership in Learning and Development

Clark (1997) emphasized that leaders have to know their capabilities, be technically proficient, and continuously seek self-improvement through reading, self-
Leadership in Learning

leadership, and classes. Followers do not respect leaders who do not seem confident, or do not have a grasp on their particular area of expertise. Kantor (as cited in Bell & Bell, 2003) said it best when she said, “Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn that which they teach” (p. 52).

From the outset, the writer sets the tone for the new employees’ learning experience. Learning begins during orientation. During the orientation process, Learning and Development professionals are responsible for imparting the norms, values, and culture of the organization to the new associates. Learners are not able to effectively communicate these aspects unless they understand and have lived them. There is no substitute for thoroughly knowing your subject. Pike (1994) believed the following:

The teacher must know what is to be taught. You can’t teach what you haven’t learned. And you must teach from a prepared life, as well as from a prepared lesson. The most effective instructors on any topic generally are those who have experienced what they are teaching. (p.167)

It is necessary for instructors to remain in a constant state of learning: honing their skills, and increasing their understanding. Bell and Bell (2003) declared, “Great training leaders learn for learning’s sake. . . . They’re restless, hungry souls never satisfied with what they know because they appreciate the fact that antiquated is just around the corner and obsolete is just down the hall” (p. 53).

It is the writer’s intent to integrate this perpetual learner philosophy within her organization, and make the company one where the culture values curiosity and incorporates new means of discovery. To this end, the writer is currently pursuing
doctoral studies in instructional technology and distance education, and attends at least one industry conference annually. Tobin (as cited in Caudron, 2000) stated:

A lot of training organizations are sitting in the corner of the HR group offering individual skills courses out of a catalog and never getting involved with the company’s core mission. . . . If you don’t understand what the company is doing, how can you support it? (p. 35)

The writer supports Tobin’s belief as spends a great deal of time interfacing with the business leaders in the organization to learn issues of strategic importance so that Learning and Development remains in alignment with the business vision.

As a passionate advocate for development within the Learning & Development department, the writer encourages the staff to pursue external learning opportunities. Learning and Development associates are required to review course content annually update content, improve quality, and set new benchmarks. This requirement allows them to practice what they have learned, encourages them to question the status quo, and subsequently increases their knowledge.

Leaders know the importance of the people for whom they are responsible. They genuinely care for their workers. The most effective leaders understand human nature (Clark, 1997).

Learning and development professionals must not be mechanical in their training approach. To make a difference in the classroom, you must have the self-confidence to be vulnerable to your learner; and share your mistakes and doubts, as well as your triumphs (Hesselbein & Cohen, 1999). Hesselbein and Cohen believed that leaders develop a teaching point of view by articulating their ideas and values, and by developing stories
that bring their views to life. They go on to say that leaders need to invest themselves personally to ensure prolonged success of their companies. It is equally important that learner experiences are incorporated in training, and learners are allowed to be involved in their own learning to ensure that effective learning takes place.

A trainer’s challenge is to ensure that learners are engaged; that they process information and gain understanding by drawing relevant and creative conclusions (Caudron, 2000).

An instructor of adults does not enjoy the same advantages as those of a primary or middle school teacher. Because the learner is also an adult, the instructor is not able to depend on factors like age, experience, and size for control or added influence (Wlodkowski, 1993). Wlodkowski went on to assert the following:

Many adults will have had experiences that far surpass the background of their particular instructor. As a group, they have out-traveled, out-parented, out-worked, out-worked, and out-lived any of us as individual instructors. Collectively, they’ve had more lovers, changed more jobs, survived more accidents, moved more households, faced more debts, achieved more successes, and overcome more failures. It is highly unlikely that we can simply impress with our title, whether it be trainer or professor (p.18).

The writer finds that learner experience is extremely valuable, and encourages the sharing of relevant student examples, which emphasize the purpose of a particular topic.

Corporations invest much of their development monies in their C-Level employees (CFO, CEO, COO), but it is in the SEE-level employee that the organization
should invest most of their development resources (Wellins & Weaver, 2003). A company should focus its development efforts on the SEE-level employees, the front line supervisors and managers, the people that are most visible to the front line employee and the customer.

It has been said that the best workers make the best leaders. This long held belief is a myth that can erode any organization. Good workers are not naturally good leaders. The writer pays special attention to newly promoted individuals in her organization, immediately placing them on a leadership track to develop their leadership skills. She also encourages mid-level leaders to enroll their frontline workers that have leadership potential into a succession plan, in preparation for promotion.

Bennis et al. (2003) asserted that a successful organization places value on the development of the leader and a culture that fosters inclusion, creativity, productivity, and fully integrated lives.

In a largely high tech world, no tech still matters. The art of communication is the foundation of any successful training unit. From the marketing of its offerings to the presentation of the material, Learning and Development focuses on how to best get the message across so that it is received in the manner intended.

Clark (1997) believed that leaders should know how to communicate with people at all levels of the organization. As a leader, the training department “beats the drum” for the organization, by communicating its vision, and imparting the business strategy to the employees. It sends up “smoke signals” in an effort to problem-solve, develop personnel, and increase awareness within the business.
Communication is a key component in building trust with an individual. Workers observe, as well as, listen to what the instructor says. If the leader’s actions differ from what they say, the learner will try to find a way to reconcile the two. Usually, he does so by assuming what was said was untrue, and the leader’s credibility is threatened. He no longer believes what is said and no more learning takes place.

Communication is about verbal and nonverbal dialogue. Learning and Development departments are committed to engaging their students in strategic discussions that promote learning. The best corporate communicators understand the importance of open lines of communication with the workforce. The writer agreed with Cherenson, Yates, Etling, Doke and Yannoupolous (2002) when they stated that employees are looking for honest communications and a better understanding of their role in solving company problems.

For the writer’s training department, effective communication is not an afterthought. Dissemination of information is not its sole function. The department continuously shares information that is acquired in training sessions to ensure nonstop learning company-wide. When successful innovations occur on the frontline, the opportunity arises to incorporate the newfound best practice into training material. Leaders listen because “business operates with the permission of their employees” (Cherenson et al. 2002, p. 3). Effective communication is a win-win situation.

Phillips and Phillips (2002) asserted the following:

All stakeholders need feedback. Employees require feedback on their progress, developers and designers need feedback on program design, facilitators need feedback to see if adjustments should be made to delivery, and clients need
feedback on a program’s success. Without such feedback, a program may not need expectations (p. 83).

Clark (1997) believed that by extension, if team spirit is developed, a leader will be able to employ the organization and all its parts to its fullest capabilities. Leadership and Development departments play a large role in building and maintaining team spirit. As such, they are the corporate cheerleaders.

In situations where the company has downsized or restructured, organizations must find ways to capitalize on the talent that remains. The writer’s training department addresses and motivates individuals who have been adversely affected by any of these unfavorable circumstances. Kaye (1998) suggested that this is done by encouraging employees to put real and psychic energy into the possibility of future gains, through continued learning, development, retraining, and networking.

Spirit is the hallmark of Learning and Development. Learners need to be able to put what they learned into practice, enjoy what they’re doing, and enjoy with whom they’re doing it. Without behavior change, training fails to generate business results (Phillips & Phillips, 2002). Learning and Development encourages employees to be each other’s sounding boards when applying what is learned and encourages management to reinforce and support new skills and knowledge.

Summary

The mission of Learning and Development is not that of the training department of old. The organization depends on this unit for much more and asks them to be the leaders in developing human capital.
Learning and Development does not operate in a vacuum. Commitment is necessary from all levels of the organization in order for Learning and Development’s goals to be realized. Without involvement and support from top executives, training will be ineffective and major programs will fall short.

Learning and development is the writer's passion. The training and design forum allows her to be a leader, in all related roles: designer, developer, evaluator, coach, mentor, and cheerleader. Development is much more than designing a training class or screens of Web content. For the writer, it includes all of the actions taken to increase an employee’s capability to perform his or her job.
References


