

LEARNING: THE NEW BUSINESS STRATEGY

Learning and development should be a journey but it should also be part of the company culture and business strategy, says Gary Killington, director of PI Partnership

Remember when pharma first realised it was in the middle of a perfect storm: patent cliff on one side, penny-pinching healthcare systems on the other? Besides a cull of pharma's salesforces, training departments also felt the impact. In hindsight that wasn't a great move, says Gary Killington, director of PI Partnership. Who was going to train people for all the new job roles that popped up – the KAMs and associated titles, healthcare liaison officers, market access managers and the growing population of medical science liaisons?

"When there's a squeeze, learning and development is often the first to be cut – especially if the business doesn't recognise the value of training," says Killington. "It sounds so clichéd but learning and development has to be integrated into the business strategy. It should be part of the business solution rather than a stand-alone department."

He gives what he calls a "very simple example". "Say you're a marketer and you're developing a sales aid. Imagine if you don't have a training department: you're just handing the sales aid to the fieldforce and saying 'here you go'. If you have no-one to train, how the hell do you get the message across?" he asks. "Marketers are marketers, not skills trainers."

In the old days, training (or L&D as it's called in HR circles) was often seen as the poor cousin, the less sexy career development route. And even today the reality is a lot of pharma companies still have learning and development departments that work in isolation, with people who aren't consulted until the end of the process. Killington believes this view needs to be given a complete overhaul. "When we talk about business strategy, learning and development should be part of the decision-making process to maximise strategy implementation."



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A simple concept

It's a relatively simple concept when you think about it, Killington explains. A company review of its business strategy and objectives will often involve internal change – whether that's creating job roles, new technology or different processes. "Whatever the outcome, you're effectively asking people to do things differently," says Killington. "That means there's a learning need."

Take the example of KAMs. Upskilling key account managers to meet business needs is a key area for learning and development, Killington says. "If KAM is as important for the business strategy as companies say it is, they need to train their people and help develop the skill sets required to do the job."

If L&D is brought in at the early stages of strategy development the company can see where the skills gaps might be and what L&D might be needed, instead of it being an afterthought. In effect, L&D can help inform the business strategy. "A lot of pharma teams already work in a cross-functional way, why shouldn't learning and development do the same?" Killington asks.

Trainer or change agent?

This way of working, he adds, is the difference between being a trainer and what PI Partnership dubs a change agent. A learning culture is about being proactive, not reactive (think KAM again) and about having a long-term view. These individuals understand what the business strategy requires, and what the key skills are for a company to become successful.

This isn't about product or therapy area know-how, it's about understanding the environment and advising on the best course of skills-based action for the most successful outcome, says Killington. "As a manager it's easy to focus on the business and forget that it only succeeds through its people – the company needs to provide an environment for success and that involves coaching and learning."

But Killington is quick to point out that a day's training does not mean job done. Far from it. Just 10% of effective learning and development comes from classroom study and 20% comes from coaching and mentoring, he says. PI Partnership follows the 70:20:10 model, developed by the Centre for Creative Leadership, where the bulk of effective behaviour change – 70% – comes from on-the-job learning and embedding the new skills into daily work life.

But equally, a learning culture means L&D needs to be incorporated into every stage of the employee lifecycle – from induction to retirement – not just in relation to promotion or performance assessment. A large part should be driven by the business strategy and the changing business environment.

This is an area where managers are key – as they have to embed a learning culture in their company by providing the appropriate coaching and the time for their team or teams to learn. Often the missing link in business success results from a lack of L&D to equip managers with the right skills to help this process. Indeed, as few as 17% of organisations give managers the means to support L&D, according to stats from benchmarking firm Towards Maturity.

Says Killington: "Managers are key in ensuring learning becomes a centrepiece of the company's strategy and culture – we need to make sure these people can make an impact on the business and become real business partners."

In today's changing pharma world there is even more of a need for L&D knowledge to come back to the industry and really bed into a learning culture. The implementation of KAM was a hiccup along pharma's road to success – let's learn from our mistakes. ■

How to create a learning culture

- Create a clear integration between learning and business strategy whereby learning becomes a key component of the business strategy and not something tacked onto the end as an afterthought
- Create time for learning
- Be able to share good practice throughout the business
- Feature learning throughout an employee's lifecycle, driven by business strategy and not just promotion or performance assessment
- Coaching is key – make sure managers are involved in L&D and are part of the learning culture.

For more information about PI Partnership and its range of Sales Force Excellence programmes and other L&D initiatives, call +44 (0)1628 810028 or email garykillington@pi-partnership.com