

Approach Change With Leverage

Doing so can lead L&D on a path to becoming indispensable to the organization's future.

BY JAKE JACOBS

Peter Diamandis, a noted futurologist and entrepreneur, argues that there will be more change in the coming 10 years than in the previous 100. It seems that every decade another futurist says the same thing. Change—the amount, complexity, and pace of it—is not going away.

Most people get anxious when hearing such predictions because in many people's minds more change equals more challenges, which then translate to more problems. As humans, we're only wired to handle a certain amount of change. Go past that threshold and there's a price to pay: exhaustion, loss of focus, and overall immunity. It's just too much.

What can the L&D team contribute to the ever-rising tide of doing business in accelerated ways? How do L&D professionals avoid being overwhelmed with this rate of change and instead become a resource for others to deal with it more effectively?

The answer is to make the L&D function indispensable to creating the future of the organization. It can do so in two important ways:

- Expand people's competencies so they succeed in the new organization.
- Educate the entire company on how to create faster, easier, better results.

You may be concerned that you need to add those tasks to L&D's already too-long to-do list. But by applying the power of leverage, the L&D function can get more done with less, all while becoming an essential part of the organization's strategic future.

The concept of leverage was best described by Archimedes, a third-century BC Greek mathematician noted for saying, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world." The L&D team can move its work and that of the organization in the arena of change by using leverage.

The first way to get more done with less is to apply leverage to your work: Expand people's competencies so they succeed in the new organization. Companies often spend a great deal of time, money, and energy getting people on board so they support needed business changes. They do that by making the case for change, lighting burning platforms to compel people to act, and having leaders extol the benefits of an exciting future.

Leaders name project management teams, which then create Gantt charts, launch plans, and begin implementing. Yet they devote much less energy, if any, to ensuring that people are capable of doing business in the new ways called for by organizational changes. Leaders, middle managers, and frontline workers need new competencies to ensure sustained success in a changed company.

Organizational Benefits

Invest the time and energy savings in improving the quality, cost, or timing of the company's core products and services.

L&D Gains

Because L&D is focusing on the company vision and strategy, it will be considered central to moving the organization forward, faster.

Employee Win

The L&D team is focusing on what matters to the company, cutting out less-relevant courses. That means less time for employees to spend on what doesn't matter and more time on what does.

A great point of leverage for L&D departments is to refocus their efforts on those programs that most directly support developing the new knowledge, skills, and experiences employees need. That means investing more in new competencies and no longer offering outdated courses that won't serve the new organization. For example, L&D could develop a new customer experience program and eliminate an introductory communications course.

Overall, that should result in less work instead of more. Without a future-oriented view, L&D's work largely doesn't change—and the impact on the enterprise remains limited. If the L&D team isn't creating and offering innovative programs that reinforce new processes and practices, it's missing opportunities to become key to the company's future. Add offerings to match the new organization's needs and eliminate or reduce the effort L&D devotes to less critical programs.

The sooner your company is doing business in the new ways it aims for, the sooner you'll make the envisioned gains. In turn, the business will experience financial, quality, customer satisfaction, and other positives sooner—and will be able to reinvest them, further stoking the engine of change efforts.

SOLUTION

Use leverage to achieve faster, easier, better results with your organization's change work.

One strategy the L&D function can use is introducing an approach that I call "Leverage Change," which addresses common change problems through eight strategies, or levers, such as paying attention to continuity, creating a common database, and creating opportunities for people to make a meaningful difference. Employees and leaders alike can apply this fresh perspective to make any change in any part of the organization, by anyone.

Let's look at one of the smart, strategic actions from the approach. L&D can reduce the time it takes to change a company by embracing the lever "thinking and acting as if the future were now." Instead of seeing the future as something that will occur later, choose to live it today. When L&D and the entire organization make that shift, change occurs rapidly, even instantaneously in some cases.

For example, don't buy the old paradigm that transforming culture takes years. A company's new culture will take years to create if leaders believe it will. If a business wants a more participative culture, leaders must think and act as if the close collaboration already exists. In this new reality, L&D should ask new questions and get new answers. For example:

- Who can L&D invite to its next meeting beyond the usual suspects? Where in the company are there new perspectives that could lead to innovative solutions?
- What criteria should L&D be using to make decisions based on the vision it has of the future, not the standards the function has used in the past?
- How much influence should different stakeholders have over the focus of L&D's work, assuming everyone is part of a more participative organization?

If you're serious about creating a new participative culture, prove it to yourself and others. Review your schedule for this afternoon. Are there decisions you used to make on your own that you can include your team in making now? What about inviting some customers (internal or external) into the next project update? No rules say that your new inclusive way of working must stop at the organization's boundary. Ask peers for advice on how the L&D function can perform better. Engage them in creating solutions instead of restricting their input to identifying problems they're experiencing with the team.

Focus L&D's work on expanding people's competencies so they excel in the new organization they're creating. The L&D function will be seen as an essential player in transforming the future from vision to reality. It will likewise gain the ear of senior executives seeking counsel on how to manage the anxiety that people are bound to experience around any substantive change. With L&D's future-focused mindset, the department will satisfy customer needs, in many cases, before they even realize they have them.

Help create a company that subscribes to this new paradigm of accelerated change. Colleagues previously reticent to jump aboard the change train see and hear new ways of working occurring all around them. Their belief that this time it's for real increases significantly. As some begin thinking and acting as if the future were now, others' faith in the future being real creates a virtuous cycle of ongoing change.

There are stories of Archimedes competing to move boulders

RESULTS

The company will experience fewer hassles, headaches, and problems and reduced time, money, and energy.

against the strongest men in the land. He would sit on the sidelines, waiting until the most powerful were unable to budge the large rock. Only then would he apply his lever and easily move the boulder. The L&D function can win in the game of change by applying leverage to get more done with less.

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