



By Tony Bingham and Tony Jeary

COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF

**Learning professionals
should facilitate
more purposeful
communication
with leaders.**

LEARNING

Decision makers need to see a meaningful relationship between learning initiatives and results, which, because of the interdependent nature of learning, can be difficult to provide.

Many learning professionals expend a tremendous amount of energy trying to generate concrete return-on-investment numbers, without recognizing that it's equally important to make a persuasive case for learning's overall strategic impact on an organization. Communication is the means by which learning spreads throughout an organization, so one of the best ways learning can align itself is by heightening awareness of the strategic importance of communication and facilitating more precise and purposeful communication throughout the organization. The great side benefit of this approach: Learning's contribution and value will be difficult, if not impossible, to dispute.

Alignment = value + communication

What decision makers really want to see is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between learning initiatives and results. But, as every learning professional knows, such relationships are often difficult to establish because there are so many extraneous and intangible factors involved. It is also difficult to isolate a specific learning solution as the cause for a particular success. But, business-minded people hate guessing. They want proof.

Alignment is the word most often used to describe the existence of direct causal links between an organization's objectives, the actions it takes to achieve those objectives, and the process by which the results of those actions are measured. It may sound simple in concept, but achieving alignment can be quite challenging and complicated in practice. Part of the problem lies in the areas of presentation and communication, which are our focus here.

One person's communication is another person's...

Unfortunately, many official statements of mission and strategy sound like empty business jargon. What does it really mean when a company's mission is to "develop task-specific, scalable enterprise solutions that leverage optimal operational synergies and facilitate transparent workplace modalities to effectively meet or exceed stakeholder expectations?"

And, how on earth would one link a strategy to such a mission statement?

Communicating strategies and objectives in a way that everyone can understand is a challenge for many organizations. A CEO may issue a demand for "organic growth," or "more efficient deployment of resources," which might sound good and leader-like on paper, but to rank-and-file employees, it may mean nothing more than just another call to do more with less. If strategic objectives are communicated in vague, hollow language, even if the script has been approved by the organization's leaders, it can take some work to sift through the verbal fog to locate a true strategy and the consequences that arise from it.

Bland or imprecise language does not render a statement unimportant. A strategy might sound as innocuous as "Star Corporation will explore new international market opportunities," but it makes an enormous amount of difference whether that international strategy is being undertaken because the company has exhausted its growth

potential in the United States or if it is being implemented because international appetites for the company's products are so voracious that the company has to expand to keep up with demand. Those are two entirely different business scenarios. Because the context is different in each, execution of that strategy will require entirely different responses from the people inside those respective organizations. In fact, depending on the company, that same dull but important sentence could apply to hundreds of different business plans. It is the responsibility of the learning professional to understand the reasons behind the mission statement.

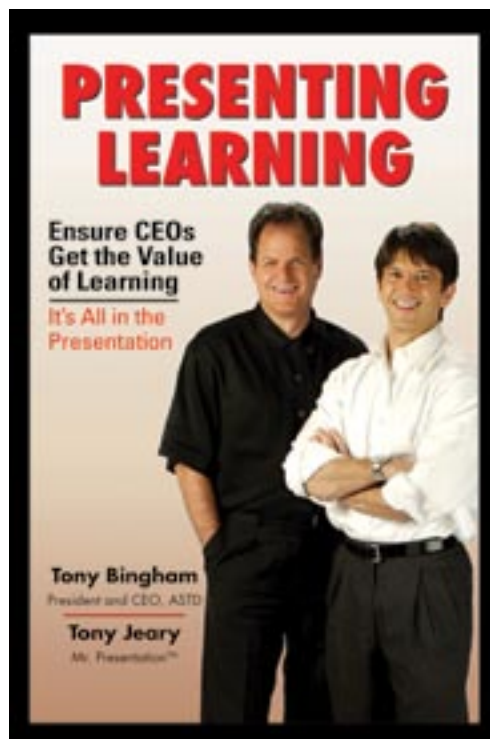
To complicate matters, most organizations pursue multiple strategies simultaneously, so it's important to know how the pieces fit together. At Caterpillar, for instance, executives and managers are required to memorize the company's core values and strategies. At such high-performing organizations, alignment between learning and corporate strategy is a high priority and, at companies such as IBM, is even a stated strategy itself. IBM's ability to stay competitive is linked directly to its ability to learn and translate this knowledge into business results. The company's learning paradigm—stated in a 2005 IBM Global Services document—can be summed up quite succinctly: "The perception of the learning function is shifting from being an operating cost to becoming a strategic lever that can add value at multiple levels of the organization. Learning's focus is moving from training, and certification to all facets of learning, including collaboration, knowledge management, analytics, and performance improvement. Once

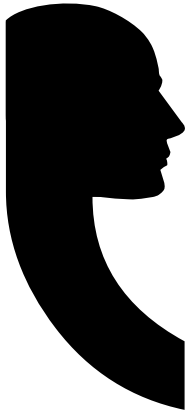
pushed at workers in their silos, learning now pulls in everyone in the firm's value chain."

Why communication is a strategic asset

Now, if you ask someone whether good communication is an important part of the strategic value chain, the response probably will be "Yes" because that's what everyone thinks. The irony is that often communication isn't something people think about much at all. Relatively few people understand how truly important effective communication is for organizational health, and fewer still treat communication skills as a strategic asset.

In a sense, communication is the glue that holds an enterprise's value chain together. Within organizations, presentations are the primary form of communication for





FINDING AND IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

So, once you've identified your organization's core strategies and objectives, here are a few of the questions you should ask yourself, if not senior management directly, about any given strategy:

- What needs to happen to make the strategy a reality?
- What are the barriers to carrying out the strategy?
- How can the learning function help overcome the barriers?
- What are key measures or deliverables for this strategy?
- Who in the company is responsible for executing the strategy?
- Does the organization have the right skills or capabilities to deliver?
- Will there be any leadership transitions involved?
- Are the right people in the right places and do they have the right skill sets?
- Will processes need to be changed or overhauled?
- Is new technology involved? If so, will it require training?
- What are the organization's strengths and weaknesses?
- Are there ways to leverage the strengths to improve learning?
- Are there ways to shore up the weaknesses through learning?
- Looking ahead, do any what-if scenarios come to mind?
- What would happen if the workplace learning function did nothing?

Based on the answers to those questions, you may find strategic opportunities for workplace learning in the following areas:

- skills gaps
- leadership and management training
- speed-to-market issues
- other gaps related to limited organizational flexibility or agility
- mentoring and succession
- global expansion
- mergers and acquisitions
- underperforming departments or people
- entrenched, inefficient processes or operations
- new department and business initiatives
- business transformation
- goal acceleration initiatives
- risk and reward situations
- innovations or new product development.

delivering and executing strategic objectives. But, presentations across an organization are not confined to formal, stand-and-deliver presentations in a conference room. In reality, presentations occur all the time, in both informal and formal settings, and enormous amounts of information are exchanged.

If you added up the number of presentations your organization engages in on any given day, how many would it be in a day? In a week? In a month? It's quite possible to have hundreds or even thousands of presentations going on in an organization daily. Each of these interactions involves an information exchange of some sort, and each of these exchanges has some relevance to the overall business of the organization.

Once you appreciate the volume of communications occurring in any given organization, it's easier to understand how various inaccuracies, misunderstandings, and points of confusion can multiply into larger problems. This multiplier effect is the great communication killer in many large organizations.

Unfortunately, most organizations plagued by this problem aren't even aware of it. They just take it for granted that good ideas don't necessarily go anywhere; that action items aren't necessarily carried out; that a certain level of confusion or noise in communication channels is normal; that redundant messages are unavoidable; and that conflicting messages from the top are bound to happen. None of these things is inevitable, though. They are only certain to happen if the organization doesn't do anything to prevent them.

In most organizations, learning professionals are not responsible for shaping core messages; that responsibility typically falls to the CEO and the senior management team, along with such departments as communications, marketing, public relations, and HR. Learning professionals at any level can ensure that the messages they receive and pass along are clear and consistent with the strategy with which they are associated.

They can also encourage colleagues to reframe their thinking about the presentation or communication component of management by, for example, showing what happens when communications are muddled and unfocused. In the world of workplace learning, this often happens when a program is mandated, but employees see little or no connection between the content of the program and their jobs, much less a connection between the program and an organization's larger strategic objectives. Such disconnects can breed low morale, cynicism, and sometimes contempt for management.

The meeting diet

Time is another factor that few people consider in the overall communications puzzle. Consider meetings. How often do you find yourself in meetings that run long or in meetings that should have ended but drag on because the room is reserved for another 20 minutes? This loose attitude about people's time wastes countless hours of productivity every year.

Simply instituting a set of procedures for meetings that everyone is required to adhere to can save an enormous amount of time; it can also benefit an organization by boosting morale and energizing the troops. The ground rules can be as simple as deciding when to end a meeting and sticking to it (See sidebar on page 84).

The difference between an average organization and one that is operating as if communications are an important strategic imperative is that people actually do the things most others only talk about. They link strategies and programs; they make sure their communications are consistent; they set goals and achieve them; they manage their time with discipline and respect for others; they have a purpose and a plan for everything, and they do not deviate from it.

What happens in such organizations is that taking care of all of those little details ends up paying huge dividends over time. In terms of messaging and communication, information flows through the pipe cleanly when confusion is minimal and people don't have to double-check information, or worse, act on incorrect information, discover their mistakes, backtrack, and start over. Messages that cascade seamlessly through an organization make everyone's job easier and end up giving people more time and energy to devote to more important things—such as running the business.

Similar time-saving, alignment-focused procedures can be instituted for other types of interaction as well. The average worker spends more than 90 minutes a day answering email. Think of the productivity gains if, through a few simple procedures, that average could be cut to a mere 60 minutes a day. In a company of 1,000 people, that's 500 hours saved every day or more than 125,000 hours of productivity every year!

A learning professional with a strategic mindset would hear that and think, "What if I could put together a one-hour seminar on email management, one that taught people a few simple, time-saving procedures?" Such a program would likely pay for itself in a single day and reap dividends far into the future. Again, it's a simple idea—one many people might think of—but one that few organizations embrace with any sort of strategic urgency.

Managing the flow of information

Effective communication is a core element of organizational success in the 21st century, and training plays a large part in the overall communications practice of any organization. If you think about it, learning professionals deal primarily with the flow of information through people, through technology, and through the organization. The information they manage affects the capabilities and competitiveness of the organization, as well as the quality of the leadership, the strength of the culture, and the ultimate sustainability of the enterprise. Nothing could be more central, which is why many high-performing organizations choose to consolidate their training, HR, and communications functions into a single department or sometimes in one individual.

Typical types of presentations

Presentation type	Role of workplace learning function
Meetings	Leadership, time management, presentation skills
Sales calls	Sales training, product knowledge
Training sessions	Program/content development and delivery
Facilitated events	Programming/delivery
Speeches	Executive coaching, general presentation skills
Seminars	Content development/delivery
One-on-one sessions	Management skills, leadership development, coaching
Electronic presentations (e.g., videoconferences, web conferences, online collaborations, email)	Technical competence, online presentation skills
Telephone and audioconferences	Presentation skills, advance materials production, technical competence
Print (newsletters, memos, handouts, annual reports, and so forth)	Materials production, message consistency
Branding, advertising, and merchandising	Message consistency
Marketing and public relations	Message consistency, general management skills
Customer interactions (for example, support services)	Call-center training, technical support training, customer service training
Media opportunities (radio, television, journalist interviews, webinars, and so on)	Media literacy, presentation skills, executive coaching

Ways to add value

For learning professionals to deliver the sort of value forward-thinking organizations are seeking, they must commit to a deep, organic understanding of their employer or client. Having worked hard to gain that deep understanding through independent study of publicly available material, conversations with co-workers and colleagues, purposeful interviews, and day-to-day experience, it should come as a relief to know this knowledge has a tremendous amount of practical value.

It's particularly helpful to understand an organization's business strategies and how the energy flows through the enterprise via its core drivers. A careful analysis of how certain information travels through the value chain can open up all kinds of opportunities for learning to make a contribution. Such an analysis can also help cement learning's strategic role in an organization, particularly in places where it hasn't been regarded that way in the past.

Finding opportunities for you or your department to support or enhance an organizational strategy isn't always easy, and implementing them isn't always a cakewalk, either. New ideas are often met with resistance, so a certain amount of persuasion may be required to sell solutions of even the most obvious sort. It's worth the effort, however.

Essentially, what you're looking for when analyzing organizational strategy is ways to help the CEO and the rest of the management team achieve their goals, ways learning can be used to leverage the strengths and shore up the weaknesses of the organization, and ways learning can add value to the overall enterprise. Adding value is the key to maintaining a focused business mindset. In essence, your one true responsibility to the organization for which you work, or with which you are consulting, is to make sure that the people and processes you manage are aligned with, and supportive of, the organization's strategies and objectives. Everything else is secondary.

Unfortunately, the training profession has been accused on more than one occasion of introducing far too much fluff into organizations. Regrettably, this may be true in some cases, but we're willing to bet that much of the time when programs are perceived as useless or irrelevant, it's not because the program itself is bad; it's because the learning practitioner responsible for the program failed to convince both superiors and learners of the program's practical value in terms of its contribution to the organization's stated mission, strategies, and objectives. In other words, the program failed because it wasn't presented correctly.

In many cases, it's not even the programs themselves that need to change, it's the thought processes behind them.

As always, the objective is to identify ways in which the learning function can support the organization's strategic vision and perform successfully to its key measures.

There are many opportunities for learning to contribute to the success of an organization. Identify those that provide the most impact and are highly important to the senior

HOW TO CONDUCT A SUCCESSFUL MEETING



At the deeper levels of presentation mastery, meeting ground rules involve

- setting a clear agenda
- assigning homework, or prework, to be completed ahead of time
- making sure the right people are present at any given meeting, including the decision makers, to ensure that things move along
- only meeting for as long as is necessary to accomplish specific goals
- keeping digressions and meandering to a minimum
- assigning a timekeeper or moderator to keep things on track
- closing the meeting with clear summaries and action plans
- implementing a consistent set of follow-up procedures to make sure good ideas and necessary action items don't dissolve into the mist
- standardizing meeting procedures across the organization
- adhering strictly to meeting times
- creating an enterprise-wide set of meeting rules and procedures
- making sure everyone in the organization understands the strategic importance of adhering to the rules
- ensuring that a skilled facilitator is either managing or assisting the meeting.

leadership and are vital for organizational success. Aligning with those initiatives is what business partners are expected and required to do.

Be sure to be an active participant in this partnership, and learning will be seen as the strategic function that it is. **T+D**

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