



Learning to Change: Capitalizing on a Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be [your organization's] only sustainable competitive advantage.

- Arie de Geus

How's Your Learning Culture?

Conduct your own learning culture audit to begin the process of creating a learning culture and to enroll others in the effort. A simple diagnostic can help you assess your organization and your management team's orientation to learning... and may help you assess how you are doing as the leader of a learning culture.

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Marcia L. Conner's
Learning Culture Self-Audit.

Employee engagement is a commonly cited measure of an organization's success. The Fortune/Hay Group's 13th annual *World's Most Admired Companies* survey regularly reports that employee engagement drives loyalty and business performance. This year, 94% of WMAC respondents believe employee engagement has created a competitive advantage in the market place, compared to 82 percent at peer companies. WMAC respondents consistently rank learning and a learning culture as key to that engagement. Hay Group states, "[The] ability to predict changes in the marketplace, adapt to them, and capitalize on them more quickly than the competition is what keeps a company on the list during difficult times."

According to Marcia L. Conner in [Transforming Culture: An Executive Briefing on the Power of Learning](#), organizations must identify and respond to emerging opportunities and ever changing conditions with increasing ingenuity, faster than their competition. "If organizations are to adapt quickly and intelligently, they must make learning a central part of their strategy for survival and growth." She continues, "The learning capability is in itself a competitive advantage: it brings superior value, it's hard to imitate, and it has built-in flexibility. In fact, Arie de Geus argues that learning is the only source of sustainable competitive advantage."

As Josh Bersin blogged in *The Business of Talent (08.03.08)*, "If you accept the fact that change is one of the biggest issues a business faces, then the ability to continuously adapt to change is one of the most important parts of a long term business strategy. Unfortunately, many organizations don't internalize this."

Learning is key to an organization's success.

Learning to Change

In his post, *The Role of a Corporate Learning Culture (01.29.08)*, Bersin defines "an organization's 'learning culture' as its ability and willingness to embrace individual and organizational learning as a strategic part of its business strategy...the strategy that the organization itself is an organism of people who must continuously develop, grow, and adapt to meet changing market conditions."

The organization that embraces learning is in touch with itself; it has a realistic view of what it is – and what it isn't. Its leadership develops short and long term goals to address both in the order it intends, and remains flexible enough to make adjustments as the market and economic times

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require. Continually learning and evolving, that organization seeks to read and understand a total picture of the market and its role in it in order to change, adapt and lead rather than simply react.

Learning to Grow

A learning culture values change, not for the sake of change but for the sake of growth. Organizations focused on learning invest in people and programs from the top down to ensure individual growth in personal development and professional skills. Since, as Marcia Conner says, “the transfer of learning in organizations is largely a function of the quality and strength of personal relationships,” it is the opportunity to create an environment of high trust and instill the corporate DNA throughout.

In a learning culture, executive leadership is dedicated to ongoing improvement and excellence, and all employees participate in the process. As individuals grow in maturity, confidence and awareness, productivity, the ability to overcome obstacles and the overall manner in which they live and work, the organization realizes success through innovation, cooperation, increased communication, rapid adaptability and growth.

Learning to Learn

Marcia Conner describes an organization’s overall culture as “the sum of the distinctive behaviors, intentions, and values that people develop *over time* to make sense of the world.” An organization’s learning culture proliferates its leadership’s behaviors, intentions and values, and time is again a critical component. Corporate learning takes a huge investment of time, extensive planning, program and system development,

and regular, ongoing implementation – over years – to truly make an impact. It also requires the significant resource commitment of dollars and people. Is it worth it?

In extended studies like Good to Great and Best Companies to Work For, organizations that value and invest in their employees’ development consistently outperform comparison companies more than 2:1. But it can be difficult to assess the immediate return on such a commitment. Results can be found across time through the use of employee surveys, individual performance assessments, feedback from clients, improved organizational performance and the ongoing growth of individuals and the organization. Frank Waltmann of Novartis emphasizes the importance of such analysis in *Workforce Management (03.09)*. He says, “Assess learning results and align with the business... The key is to use some formal assessment tools, as well as informal discussion with participants and initial follow-up with participants after the program. Obtain their input; listen, learn and continuously improve your programs.”

The decision to establish and grow a corporate learning culture cannot be taken lightly. If an organization does not have the resources inside, it should find an experienced strategic partner that aligns with its purpose and goals. But whether in-house or outsourced, a learning culture begins when executive management makes the commitment to growth. Marcia Conner calls those decision makers “enlightened leadership,” and believes that with such leadership, “every organization has the potential to develop a learning culture.”

