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Learning Community

The First 100 Days: Getting Started as a New Learning Leader

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With another presidential inauguration upon us, we in the United States are once again reminded of new beginnings as Barack Obama steps into his new role as president and commander-in-chief. Obama's every move in the early going will be closely scrutinized, will lay the foundation for what his presidency achieves and will determine how he is judged longer-term.

With that high-profile transition taking place, this is an opportune moment for examining the outset of a new undertaking. Whether you're leading an entire nation or taking over the helm of a corporate university, the first 100 days are crucial. We used an expression in the launch of new airplane programs at Boeing, "beginnings determine endings."



We operated with a core assumption that getting a program off to a good start would affect the health of the program throughout its life. A good start encompassed knowing your customer, setting in place a clear vision and mission for the effort, and then translating these into specific operational goals. In addition, it meant establishing a team capable of working together, driving with resilience to desired outcomes, and creating the operating mechanisms to facilitate mid-course corrections, continuous feedback and the deep engagement of all of the relevant stakeholders throughout the journey. Getting off to a good start is just as relevant for a new learning and development executive.

With this thought in mind, we would like to outline some lessons from our own combined 50 years of experience. Our objective is to help you make a mark quickly, build credibility and set yourself up for long-term success as you take over the lead role for people development within your organization. The first 100 days are a time to set the tone, pattern and expectations for what you will deliver during your tenure. This period is foundational to your collaboratively building a relevant and aligned enterprise learning strategy, architecture and implementation plan that reflects the needs of the business.

In this article, we'll outline some basic strategies you can employ in your first 100 days in any position, in any industry. By following these processes, you'll soon have your learners hailing to the chief.

Observe and Listen

Even before your first day of work, make it your business to learn anything you can about the organization, its customers, competitors and the industry or environment within which it operates. Once you arrive, your first and most important task is to be a student. Not only are we responsible for facilitating the learning and development of others, we are obligated to serve as role models for active learning and full engagement ourselves. Our success is predicated upon doing this well. If a byproduct is that others come to observe our actions and apply our methods to their situations, so much the better.



The observation and listening phases of the transition is a very active process. As the founder of Randstad NV, the \$20 billion international staffing company is very fond of saying, you have two ears and one mouth for a reason: listen twice as much as you talk. Be visible; get out of your office and connect face to face with the real people who make the organization work. Get some early guidance from your boss and others who know the organization well, about who should be on your target list of early interviewees. You want to get out to meet at least one to two dozen influential leaders and specialists across the enterprise. The key criterion for selecting the sample is that they be community influentials, that is, people whose opinions count more than average, who know the system and have the respect of others, and who have the intelligence and the independence of mind to give direct and candid observations.

Ask lots of question of these individuals such as:

- What is the health of the business?
- What differentiates winners from losers in the space in which your organization is competing?
- What are the obstacles you face in maximizing the performance of your business and people?
- How well is the learning function serving your needs? What can you do for them?
- What questions should you be asking?

Document these findings back to them in the form of a “what I hear email.” This will serve two purposes, both demonstrating that you listened and serving as a data archive to support subsequent planning.

Your objective is to learn as much as you can about the business and the specific learning opportunities for the different components and functions. And just as important, you are there to let people know who you are and to begin to create a relationship. The latter happens most effectively when you take the time and show passion that conveys genuine interest in what the selected individuals have to say. Listen also for who may have the energy, the conviction, and the organizational clout to serve as part of your learning governance process. It will be through the ongoing engagement of committed and credible leaders that you will gain the support necessary to sustain a systemic and high impact learning function.

Give Customers Options

You were hired for your experience and credentials and for what you can bring to this enterprise. This does not mean that you should enter with all of the answers. Rather, enter with questions and let your inquiry and intuitive capabilities guide you to the territory for high impact development. Start with the principle of *customer choice* as a foundation. You were hired to provide options, not absolutes. Your task is to ferret out the most important roles and topics for development and then let your executive council and/or governing board help you establish the right sequence of priorities.



The organization will want to be involved in helping you set your direction. By placing choice in the hands of your key customers (and through the creative learning architectures you will create, in the hands of all of your customers), you will build

ownership and allies for what you are there to do. This involvement will set the stage for you to have some early quick wins and make a real difference. These early wins will help you build momentum for the larger tasks that lie ahead.

Use what you learned in your data gathering and observations to begin to build a vision for what the learning function can be and needs to be in this setting. But as you set about to create this picture of the future, again engage the organization, create a design team from across functions and levels, and make those on your learning team part of the process. In everything you do, promote engagement and make sure that the agenda you are serving belongs to the constituents themselves.

Engage the Leadership

The new learning leader will be gaining a deeper perspective on performance improvement opportunities as they engage with employees from all levels across the organization. Take advantage of any data sources you can lay hands on, such as business unit performance metrics, analyst reports, annual reports, marketing plans, strategy documents, employee engagement surveys, or talent review data. You will begin to form your own point of view about what matters and where the opportunities lie.

From this analysis, you will face a significant two-fold challenge--what should you work on first and for whom? There will be great temptation and perhaps even pressure to quickly move toward action. While there may be some obvious low hanging fruit that can be harvested with relatively minimal effort, the savvy learning executive will make these choices only with the



thoughtful inclusion of key decision makers.

This is the time to set the stage for creating a learning governance structure. You will want to build on your early data gathering and assessment of stakeholders to identify a legitimate governing board. Such a body can serve as a control gate and give you the backing to say “no” to choices that fail to meet essential criteria of strategic relevance and affordability. Sometimes such governance is a natural product of the corporate budget process where decisions are brought to the highest leadership of the enterprise for review, discussion, modification and approval. In other cases, you will need to form your own critical constituency of key decision makers who can help you set priorities and defend your decisions. As you form or engage with such a governing body, work to be broadly inclusive of not only the learning curriculum but of such topics as business strategy alignment, performance management, succession planning and organizational development. You will want to draw a circle large enough to assure that you are connected to the full scope of people and organization development activity critical to the organization’s success.

The first 100 days will be a time to begin to establish the governing structure although it is unlikely, unless such a structure already exists, that you will have completed the structuring and staffing of such a body within these first three months. Nonetheless, in this early period be sure to use whatever structure you can as an interim solution to help you set and defend your initial priorities. This will pay great dividends in the months and years ahead. A more formal and permanent structure for such decision-making can be established in the next phase.

Know Your Baseline

A key element of the new learning executive’s success is having the ability to execute. Success in this regard depends on your credibility, financial resources and having a team that the organization sees as capable, visible, and relevant to the needs of the business. In the early going of your tenure you will want to take stock of both the products contained in your existing curricula as well as the people making up your team. A good way to begin to get a feel for where you are starting is engaging both your team and some of the executives you will be meeting in your early rounds of data gathering to review what exists and how both your products and members of your team are perceived.

Create a document with the help of your team that outlines all of the products and services currently being offered. Items identified can include your specific products or services by name, along with such details as executive sponsorship, business

initiative alignment, development and delivery costs, delivery methodology, offering frequency, delivery resources required, revision cycle, target audience and size, and evaluation metrics. This document will be shared internally within the learning team and with organization leaders as you seek feedback on learning function relevance and strategic alignment.



Often, this will be the first time that the executive leadership team will have seen a comprehensive review of what the learning organization has been doing, and how it aligns with what they are strategically seeking to accomplish. Engaging them in a discussion of the relevancy and focus of the existing portfolio is an important step in making them partners in learning governance, gaining senior sponsorship of learning initiatives and achieving an alignment of the learning portfolio to true business needs. This approach can provide an early win for the new learning leader by demonstrating a bias for listening and engagement, and a commitment to serving the highest priorities of the organization and its leaders in a way that will create real business results. You will also begin to identify opportunities to repurpose resources to their best and highest use.

The process will also enable you to begin to take stock of the members of your team as you engage with them on this activity and gain specific feedback from leaders across the enterprise. You will want to come to understand the role played by each of the members of your team, how they are allocating their time and how their key constituents view their contributions. Take the time also to understand your teams' development needs and career aspirations. Find out how the team works together and what systemic, structural or cultural factors affect their ability to create results. You will need to prepare yourself for developing and/or acquiring the talent you will need to deliver what the organization will expect of a high performing learning function.

Do No Harm

Inevitably there are processes and curricula already in place, at least some of which are necessary for both day-to-day operational execution if not specific statutory compliance. Make sure that you quickly learn what you have within your basket of responsibilities. Find out who counts on you for what, and what you will need to do to keep the wheels on and rolling with regard to critical deliverables. Improvement can happen later. For the present, keep these mission critical functions operating up to the level of necessary excellence. Don't let a misstep in one of these domains tarnish your early campaign for relevance and impact on the most strategic items. And don't underestimate how important fundamental tactical or compliance content may itself be in the long run. There are constituencies for these offerings as well and you will want to assure them that you



have their interests at heart along with a broader range of commitments.

Build Upon the Foundation

If the above is done well, you will be well on the way to; role modeling the behavior of a leader; better understanding the organization and its challenges; gaining visibility and credibility; developing relationships and gaining key allies; knowing your team and its capabilities; gaining some quick wins; and, consistent with the primary premise of the Six Sigma methodology, you will better be able to be fact-based and data-driven. These behaviors do not stop at the end of the first 100 days, but are foundational to you and your organization's success.

With this process, by time you get to the 100-day mark, you'll be breathing a sigh of relief. While the sigh may be merited, you are most definitely not finished. You still have to collaboratively develop a strategy, get the strategy supported, create the execution plan to implement the strategy, gain the necessary resources and ready the organization. In a former job, a line executive was fond of saying that "vision without execution is just a hallucination." The key to a long and healthy tenure is the ability to execute, but in a way that truly fits the needs and style of the organization.

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