To Successfully Implement E-learning, Forget What You Know About Change

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Implementing e-learning means a lot of change. The good news for trainers is that we are involved in it. The bad news is that much of what we know about change is wrong.

We believe in getting management support, large-scale implementations, long-term efforts, roll-outs, kick-offs, being change agents, overcoming resistance, accountability, and the four levels of evaluation.

These beliefs are part of our training culture. They are mostly wrong. We need to forget them and adopt new ideas about change and implementation.

E-learning is a chance to reinvent the role of training in the organization. Training can be at the big table now — nowadays e-learning is discussed in the same breath with e-business and e-commerce. We've always wanted to be strategic partners — this is our chance. But we won't be with our traditional mindsets about change.

We should approach e-learning implementations from a stronger position. Instead of being staff people looking for vision, hoping for support, and working to please, we need to be business people — forming our own visions, initiating new conversations, and focusing on results.

To have your plan for e-learning accepted across the enterprise, here are nine ideas about change to consider.

#1. Forget about seeking management support!
— *Instead, build the business case.*

Joel P. Henning, in *The Future of Staff Groups,* indicts the subservient thinking of traditional staff people: "The only important question at the end of the day is 'How did it go?' It is code for 'Did we please them?'" Henning notes that traditional staff groups spend most of their time soothing, selling, and seeking sponsorship instead of focusing on what they offer the business.

His solutions? Stop trying to please in exchange for approval. Be a business rather than a function. Don't look at senior management as the customer; the operating units should be your customer. Think of senior management as your banker. Don't look for support, look for capital, like everyone else in the organization. Discover your clients' business problems. Request capital from senior management to solve those business problems and be prepared to show a return on that capital. Don't expect a place at the table unless you can make a positive impact.

Make the business case for e-learning. What can e-learning do for the business? Where is the most likely business impact, the best relevance and fit? Have a vision. Develop a point of view. Write a position paper. Don't ask your clients for a business case. Don't instruct them to "Link e-learning to the business." Link it to the business yourself. Understand their needs well enough that you can build the case for e-learning.

Learn the facts. How much is spent on training in your organization? What are the best measures of success for training?? How many people take which courses? How do managers see that training has helped their business?

Explore some hypotheticals. What if travel for training were cut in half? What if training was accomplished in one-half the time? What if salespeople were to make their first big sale of a new product 20% faster? What if the workforce learned your new software and were productive 15% faster? You may not know if e-learning can deliver these results, but these are right kinds of questions.

Actions:

- Look at the numbers for traditional training in your organization and develop a snapshot of what's working and not working.
- Study benchmark information to identify how other organizations are focusing on business results, developing business cases, and calculating returns.
- Develop a point of view about how and where e-learning could help the business and write a white paper.
- Resolve to approach senior management with "why we need to" propositions, not "do they want to" questions.

#2. Forget about reaction and learning! — *Instead, focus on business results.*

Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation (reaction, learning, behavior, results) are engrained in the training culture. Forget about them for a while. Assume that there is <u>one</u> level of evaluation: business results. How might e-learning help your clients' business? How could e-learning be a success factor?

Managers of a business care about results of the business: money, time, and impact. (They don't care about our course evaluations!) They want to do things better, faster, cheaper, easier. Which of e-learning's potential strengths could help your clients' business? Is it global consistency of content? Is it learners being able to learn at the most convenient time and place? Is it learners being able to learn just the chunks they need? Is it easier identification of who has what competency? Is it the opportunity to test and require mastery? Is it the use of simulation? Is it having access to a wide range of outside content? Is it some other capability or feature of e-learning?

Don't let measuring business results become a paralyzing activity. You don't have to build a balanced scorecard or measure fuzzy intangibles. Just ask your client what's important. The client's answer will probably point to people creating a business result faster or better, or obtaining the same learning faster, more cheaply, or conveniently.

Surprise your clients by not playing into the stereotypes about trainers. Don't act like your biggest concern is whether people like e-learning. Don't act like e-learning would be a staff project that they should support. Propose e-learning as a business strategy, not a training project.

Actions:

- Only start e-learning where a business result is clearly targeted.
- Focus on business results (Level 4) evaluation.
  Only look at behavior, learning, and reaction in the context of ensuring business results.

#3. Forget about roll-outs!
— Instead, create "pull."

The 1980s and 1990s were the golden age of organizational improvement roll-outs. (Insert your list of rolled-out initiatives here!) In a roll-out, we typically form a plan for broad (simultaneous or staggered) implementation, make or buy content, set goals and timelines, conduct training and other events, track progress, and have follow-up reviews.

The roll-outs of the 1980s and 1990s sometimes produced benefits (you be the judge), but they also produced resistance and "program fatigue." "Flavor of the month" became a universal expression. Cynicism was raised to an art form (I still smart from a Dilbert cartoon about "qualicide").

Roll-outs are based on two highly questionable mindsets: rationality and directiveness. The rational mindset assumes that if we can just define the right steps clearly and persuasively enough, people will do them. The rational mindset misses soft, squishy things like fear, loss, and uncertainty — the emotions that fuel resistance.

The directive mindset assumes that we can actually roll things onto people. In the directive mode, we decide what should happen to other people and how to do it to them. The directive mindset misses the precariousness of line-management accountability (see number 4 below).

Instead of rolling e-learning onto people, think about pulling them in. Nancy J. Lewis and Peter Orton have written about the power of Everett Rogers' research on the diffusion of innovation (*Training and Development,* June 2000). Everett Rogers spent decades studying the adoption of innovations, from hybrid corn in Iowa to modern math in Pittsburgh and snowmobiles among the Lapps in Finland. Rogers identified five factors that pull adopters toward innovations:

1. *Advantage.*
   The new thing has to be better than other alternatives.
2. *Compatibility.*
   The new thing has to feel familiar and fit my beliefs.
3. *Simplicity.*
   The new thing has to be simple to use.
4. *Trialability.*
   The new thing has to be easy to try.
5. *Observability.*
   I have to be able to see other people's positive results from it.

Lewis and Orton describe how IBM has applied Rogers' concepts to its Management Development e-learning effort. Notice how the effort differs from a traditional roll-out:

- *Advantage.*
  IBM Management Development offers Quick-Views — instant on-line briefings on 40-plus leadership and people-management topics. They are easy-to-access, available as needed, and allow classroom sessions to focus on discussion rather than presenting information.
- *Compatibility.*
  IBM Management Development sites replicate the look and feel of Lotus Notes, the standard IBM interface.
- *Simplicity.*
  IBM Management Development sites require no plug-ins. Ease of use is the top priority in design.
- *Trialability.*
  IBM Management Development allows free access to all sites without passwords or personal tracking so that learners feel safe and comfortable.
- *Observability.*
  IBM Management Development implemented Quick-Views first so that learners would experience immediate solutions to practical problems.

Instead of pushing e-learning onto people in a roll-out, consider how to "pull" them to it by making e-learning easy to adopt.

Action:

- Apply Rogers' model to your e-learning initiative.
  How could you "pull" adopters?

#4. Forget about accountability!
— Instead, focus on engagement.

Line-management accountability has always been the Holy Grail for trainers. We want senior managers to make training matter through a combination of direction, reward, and pressure.

Relying on line accountability as a way to drive change is iffy. We fantasize that senior managers can "make" people embrace new approaches to learning. But it's a shaky approach. First, it's unlikely that senior managers will wield significant consequences on behalf of our latest initiative. There are so many other meat-and-potatoes issues that they need to use their influence on. Second, people know so well how to resist accountability — articulate excuses, vicious compliance, "checking off the boxes," criticism of the initiative, and cries that "we're different," to name a few. Third, accountability mechanisms paper over what really needs to happen — people have to decide they are going to make real changes.

We need dialogue more than consequences. Don't try to *make* people embrace e-learning. Talk about reality — the situation, gaps, opportunities, and possible solutions.

Engagement means real conversations. Peter Block in his recently updated classic *Flawless Consulting* states that engagement means high-intensity participation, not just briefing people on what they're supposed to do. Engagement means:

- Focusing on the problem more than the prescription.
- Allowing real choice instead of "slam-dunking" an initiative on people.
- Admitting doubt about the potential solution rather than promising perfection.
- Structuring ways for people to have conversations, not just hear speeches.

Action:

- Have real dialogues with your clients about the business and how e-learning might help.

#5. Forget about large scale!
—Instead, implement where the need is greatest.

When we think about change, we tend to think about broad, universal application — let's start at the top, cascade this out, get everyone walking the talk, and make this a way of life. We want to do something big. We imagine sweep, momentum, and ubiquity. We're afraid that small efforts will be piece-meal and disjointed.

The problem with big scope is that we're not conscious enough of risk. We're too ready to spend other people's time, money, and effort when need and readiness may not be there. We're not afraid enough of failure and not concerned enough about true fit.

Cultures don't change when everyone is forced to do something at the same time. Cultures change when pockets of people find success and the word spreads.

We should look for where the need for e-learning is greatest. Who has a capability problem that traditional training has trouble addressing? Look for the fit. Where are measurable business results most likely to come? Where is skill development most related to business success? Where is traditional training most inconvenient, most expensive, and least effective? Where are resources available? Who's ready?

Action:

- Identify where the need is greatest for new ways of learning.

#6. Forget about being a change agent!
— Instead, build a change agency.

Organizational development is heavily influenced by counseling theory. So we tend to envision the lone change agent gradually persuading the client organization. One-on-one skills are important, but don't think of yourself as a priest or therapist. Don't be a loner; be in cahoots with others. Build a coalition. Set up a network. Form alliances. Be the underground railroad! Don't look upward to senior management. Look sideways for the oddballs, the experimenters, and the discontented. Think insurgency, syndicate, and community! Break down silos and build bridges to other groups. Be an ambassador, dealmaker, and networker.

Who's got a business problem that e-learning could help? Who can benefit from your skills? Whom do you need? Who has parallel interests? Who has passion for change, for learning, for technology? Who is working on knowledge management, quality, teamwork, speed, service, or global consistency? What enterprise-wide projects are underway? Who's tired of traditional training? Who would fund an experiment? Who wants to be a pioneer? Who might be better off with imperfect e-learning instead of "perfect" traditional training?

Actions:

- Contact interested clients and colleagues and stay connected electronically and in-person.
- Initiate conversations with your IT department and form a partnership.
- Connect with e-learning people in other organizations as well.

#7. Forget about kick-offs!
— Instead, communicate with frequent, specific messages.

Was there a kick-off for fax machines? For using cell phones? For using palm computers? Who knows and who cares? It wasn't the kick-off that mattered.

Kick-offs meet the emotional needs of the kickers (to feel special), not the needs of the receivers. People don't get excited at initial events. People get excited when they sense a movement in progress. Kick-offs just give people a reason to say, "That doesn't apply to me," "That won't work," or "This looks like another flavor of the month."

Skip the kick-off. People don't need excitement; they need to be educated. Just start telling people what's available in e-learning. Show people a demo. Tell people what successes others have had, including competitors. Explain how e-learning can solve a problem for them. Send frequent, targeted messages to specific groups about specific e-learning solutions.

Action:

- Send regular, specific communications about e-learning.

#8. Forget about taking years to change!
— Instead, focus on speed and quick wins.

We know the phrases — it takes a long time to change a culture, we have to be in it for the long term, it's a journey. While those ideas may be true, but they're not very helpful.

In the 1980s it was common for people (including me) to say that it takes years to change a culture. It was meant to be comforting. Traditional organizations seemed so intractable and opposed to new ideas, it seemed necessary to say, "There's no magic bullet; change takes a long time."

The problem with the slow-change concept is that removes our sense of urgency. We end up working slowly and our audience doesn't see anything happening.

Cycle time has to matter to us just like it does to our constituents. We have to live on Internet time too. There was a time when we took a year to plan a new course, get it approved, build it or buy it, pilot it, revise it, certify the trainers, announce it, and implement it. Trainers lived on organizational time, not business time. That has changed. We have to think about "time-to-market" just like everyone else. Speed counts. Change needs momentum. Figure out how to win early and win often, even if it means winning small, with e-learning.

Actions:

- Plan for quick wins with e-learning.
- Slash cycle time in the development of e-learning courses.

#9. Forget about overcoming resistance!
— Incorporate resistance.

What if we encounter resistance to e-learning? What if enrollment rates or completion rates are low? What if people are put off by e-learning technology? What if people miss the classroom?

We will instinctively want to overcome the resistance. "Overcoming resistance" is usually code for one of two things: selling the idea harder or telling senior management. In the face of resistance, we're tempted to pitch the concept better or put down the rebellion. Overcoming resistance usually really means silencing the resistance.

But we can't just ignore or put down resistance. As Peter Block has famously said, "Resistance means something important is going on." We need to note the resistance, talk about it out loud, and listen to what the resisters are saying.

People usually resist if their senses of competence, control, credit, or comfort are being "pinched." Be conscious of how e-learning might offend someone's sense of competence. How might it take away their sense of control? How might it make them feel robbed of credit? How might it make them uncomfortable?

Empathize by realizing your own resistance. Remember that feeling when you refused to use a new piece of software because you didn't want to have to learn it. Remember the feeling when you first thought your job as a trainer might go away. Remember when you thought no one realized how hard training really is. Remember that feeling when someone tried to tell you how you should run your training class.

Incorporating resistance into the dialogue means talking out loud about objections, feelings, and opinions. It also means remembering to give credit, share information, and involve others in planning and implementation.

Actions:

- Use resistance as something important to talk about, not something to be overcome.
- Expect resistance when e-learning pinches people's senses of competence, control, credit, or comfort.

Summary

We need to forget those old ideas about change that never worked that well anyway, such as:

- seeing senior management as the customer and seeking management support as the driver for initiatives.
- treating the four levels of evaluation as being of equal importance.
- using roll-outs as the vehicle for implementation.
- relying on accountability to motivate people to accept change.
- planning large-scale, blanket change efforts.
- thinking of change agents as lone individuals.
- using kick-offs as a way to create excitement.
- taking years to implement change.
- letting "overcoming" be our natural response to resistance.

Instead, we need to:

- build the business case for e-learning.
- document business results (Level 4) as the way to evaluate e-learning.
- create "pull" by making e-learning easy to adopt.
- have real dialogue with people about their business and learning needs.
- build a change agency by building a coalition among likely clients and colleagues.
- communicate frequently and specifically to inform and educate about e-learning.
- move fast and get quick wins with e-learning.
- talk openly about resistance, and the reasons behind it, instead of trying to conquer it.

Let's use e-learning to change training's typical role, image, and modus operandi. Let's change ourselves and the traditional culture. Let's stay at the big table by focusing on the business.

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