

40

Learning and Development Strategy

Key concepts and terms

- Learning culture
- Learning organization
- Learning and development strategy
- Strategic human resource development

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- The features of a learning and development strategy
- The contents of a learning and development strategy
- The concept of the learning organization and its relevance
- Learning and development philosophy
- The nature of a learning culture
- How learning and development activities contribute to firm performance

Introduction

Learning and development strategy represents the approach an organization adopts to ensure that now and in the future, learning and development activities support the achievement of its goals by developing the skills and capacities of individuals and teams. It can be described similarly as strategic human resource development, defined as follows.

SOURCE REVIEW

Strategic human resource development defined, Walton (1999)

Strategic human resource development involves introducing, eliminating, modifying, directing and guiding processes in such a way that all individuals and teams are equipped with the skills, knowledge and competences they require to undertake current and future tasks required by the organization.

In this chapter the term ‘learning and development strategy’ is used as it represents more accurately current thinking on this subject. The chapter covers the features and basis of such a strategy and the concepts of a learning culture and the learning organization that are associated with the strategy. It is completed with a discussion of the impact learning and development activities make on organizational performance.

Features of a learning and development strategy

A learning and development strategy should be business-led in the sense that it is designed to support the achievement of business goals by promoting human capital advantage. But it should also be people-led, which means taking into account the needs and aspiration of people to grow and develop. Achieving the latter aim, of course, supports the achievement of the former.

Learning and development strategy is underpinned by a philosophy and its purpose is to operationalize that philosophy. It is fundamentally concerned with creating a learning culture that will encourage learning and will provide the basis for planning and implementing learning activities and programmes. This concept of a learning culture is associated with that of the learning organization.

Learning and development philosophy

A learning and development philosophy expresses the beliefs of an organization on the role of learning and development, its importance and how it should take place. It can be expressed in the following terms:

- Learning and development activities make a major contribution to the successful attainment of the organization's objectives, and investment in them benefits all the stakeholders of the organization.
- Learning and development plans and programmes should be integrated with and support the achievement of business and human resource strategies.
- Learning and development should be performance-related – designed to achieve specified improvements in corporate, functional, team and individual performance, and make a major contribution to bottom-line results.
- Everyone in the organization should be encouraged and given the opportunity to learn – to develop their skills and knowledge to the maximum of their capacity.
- Personal development processes provide the framework for individual and self-directed learning.
- While the need to invest in learning and development is recognized, the prime responsibility for development rests with individual employees, who will be given the guidance and support of their manager and, as necessary, members of the HR department.

Contents of the learning and development strategy

The learning and development strategy should incorporate the elements set out below.

Elements of the learning and development strategy

- The learning and development philosophy of the organization.
- The aims of the learning and development strategy.
- The priorities for learning and development.
- How, broadly, it is intended these aims will be achieved through the creation of a learning culture, formal learning and development programmes, coaching, personal development planning, and self-directed learning.
- The responsibilities for learning and development as shared between top management, line management, individual employees, and members of the HR or learning and development function.

- The resources required for learning and development – financial budgets, training facilities, external help.
- The success criteria for learning and development.
- How the effectiveness of learning and development in meeting these criteria will be measured and evaluated.

Learning culture

A learning culture is one that promotes learning because it is recognized by top management, line managers and employees generally as an essential organizational process to which they are committed and in which they engage continuously.

Reynolds (2004) describes a learning culture as a ‘growth medium’, which will ‘encourage employees to commit to a range of positive discretionary behaviours, including learning’ and which has the following characteristics: empowerment not supervision, self-managed learning not instruction, long-term capacity building not short-term fixes. He suggests that to create a learning culture it is necessary to develop organizational practices that raise commitment amongst employees and ‘give employees a sense of purpose in the workplace, grant employees opportunities to act upon their commitment, and offer practical support to learning’.

SOURCE REVIEW

Developing a learning culture, Reynolds (2004)

1. Develop and share the vision – belief in a desired and emerging future.
2. Empower employees – provide ‘supported autonomy’; freedom for employees to manage their work within certain boundaries (policies and expected behaviours) but with support available as required.
3. Adopt a facilitative style of management in which responsibility for decision making is ceded as far as possible to employees.
4. Provide employees with a supportive learning environment where learning capabilities can be discovered and applied, eg peer networks, supportive policies and systems, protected time for learning.
5. Use coaching techniques to draw out the talents of others by encouraging employees to identify options and seek their own solutions to problems.
6. Guide employees through their work challenges and provide them with time, resources and, crucially, feedback.

7. Recognize the importance of managers acting as role models: ‘The new way of thinking and behaving may be so different that you must see what it looks like before you can imagine yourself doing it. You must see the new behaviour and attitudes in others with whom you can identify’ (Schein, 1990).
8. Encourage networks – communities of practice.
9. Align systems to vision – get rid of bureaucratic systems that produce problems rather than facilitate work.

The learning organization

The concept of the learning organization has caught the imagination of many people since it was first popularized by Senge (1990) who described it as follows.

SOURCE REVIEW

The learning organization, as defined by Senge (1990)

The learning organization is one ‘where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together’.

Pedler *et al* (1991) state that a learning organization is one ‘which facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself’. Wick and Leon (1995) refer to a learning organization as one that ‘continually improves by rapidly creating and refining the capabilities required for future success’.

As Harrison (2000) comments, the notion of the learning organization remains persuasive because of its ‘rationality, human attractiveness and presumed potential to aid organizational effectiveness and advancement’. However, Scarborough *et al* (1999) argue that ‘the dominant perspective [of the learning organization concept] is that of organization systems and design’.

Little attention seems to be paid to what individuals want to learn or how they learn. The idea that individuals should be enabled to invest in their own development seems to have escaped learning organization theorists who are more inclined to focus on the imposition of learning by the organization, rather than creating a climate conducive to learning. This is a learning culture, a concept that has much more to offer than that of the learning organization.

Viewing organizations as learning systems is a limited notion. Argyris and Schon (1996) contend that organizations are products of visions, ideas, norms and beliefs so that their shape is much more fragile than the organization's material structure. People act as learning agents for the organization in ways that cannot easily be systematized. They are not only individual learners but also have the capacity to learn collaboratively. Organization learning theory, as described in Chapter 44, analyses how this happens and leads to the belief that it is the culture and environment that are important, not the systems approach implied by the concept of the learning organization.

The notion of a learning organization is somewhat nebulous. It incorporates miscellaneous ideas about human resource development, systematic training, action learning, organizational development and knowledge management, with an infusion of the precepts of total quality management. But they do not add up to a convincing whole. Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that attempts to create a single best practice framework for understanding the learning organization are fundamentally flawed. There are other problems with the concept: it is idealistic, knowledge management models are beginning to supersede it, few organizations can meet the criteria and there is little evidence of successful learning organizations. Prescriptions from training specialists and management consultants abound but, as Sloman (1999) asserts, they often fail to recognize that learning is a continuous process, not a set of discrete training activities.

Burgoyne (1999), one of the earlier exponents of the learning organization notion, has admitted that there has been some confusion about it and that there have been substantial naiveties in most of the early thinking. He believes that the concept should be integrated with knowledge management initiatives so that different forms of knowledge can be linked, fed by organizational learning and used in adding value.

The contribution of learning and development to organizational performance

Studies on the relationship between learning and development activities and organizational performance have included those by Benabou (1996) and Clarke (2004). The research by Benabou examined the impact of various training programmes on the business and financial results at 50 Canadian organizations. The conclusion reached was that in most cases a well-designed training programme can be linked to improvements in business results and that

return on investment in training programmes is very high. But Benabou referred to the following limitations.

SOURCE REVIEW

Limitations of research into the link between learning and development and performance, Benabou (1996)

Regardless of the approach taken, the effects of an HRD program cannot be pinpointed with complete accuracy. The findings provide evidence that positive results stemmed from training programs, but not the clear proof that only a control group would have provided. Considering the methodology used (multiple raters and instruments, experts, warnings to subtract effects of other factors that influence overall results), the researchers are confident, however, that assessors provided reliable estimates. The objective of measuring business results and the costs and benefits of training is to get people in the HRD field to think rigorously about the costs and effects of what they are doing. This level of training evaluation provides a fair and objective approach to making decisions about people and programs, even with conservative data and known limitations. But trainers must be humble when presenting documented benefits. Organizational results are rarely achieved solely through training. The findings here support the view that for training to have positive effects, supporting structures must be in place throughout the organization. The study also found that business results are easier to evaluate when organizations conduct a thorough needs assessment before developing and delivering training.

A national survey of training evaluation in specialized healthcare organizations (hospices) conducted by Clarke (2004) showed that while there appeared to be some links between training and performance it was not possible to reach firm conclusions about causality. However, the study reached the important finding that where organizations undertake assessment of their training and development (both formal and informal learning) then there is a greater belief in the positive impact training and development has in the organization.

While it is possible and highly desirable to evaluate learning, as described in Chapter 42, establishing a link between learning and organizational performance is problematic. It may be difficult to distinguish between cause and effect. Hendry and Pettigrew (1986) warn that it is risky to adopt simplistic views that training leads to improved business performance because it is more likely that successful companies will under certain conditions increase their training budget. A further complication was identified by Tsang (1997), who made the following comment.

Conditions required for learning and development to improve performance, Tsang (1997)

Setting aside the complexities of putting the lessons learnt into practice (ie the problem of implementation), learning will automatically lead to better performance only when the knowledge obtained is accurate. If the problem of implementation is taken into consideration as well, even accurate learning is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for improving performance.

Harrison (2005) posed the question on what the learning and development implications of such research are and answered it as follows.

The implications of learning and development research, Harrison (2005)

It has not yet yielded enough clear evidence of a direct link between individual learning and improvements in organizational performance (however that is defined). However L&D activity does consistently emerge as a crucial intervening factor. In the Bath studies two HR practices were identified as being particularly powerful in influencing employee attitudes and creating positive discretionary behaviour: careers (in the sense of a 'developing future') and training. In other words, the L&D processes that help to activate the people-performance link are those that 'hold the promise of learning to do things better, or doing new things. It is the sense of progression and purpose that is important, especially in linking to organizational commitment' (Purcell *et al* 2003, p 73).

Learning and development strategy – key learning points**The features of a learning and development strategy**

A learning and development strategy should be business-led in the sense that it is

designed to support the achievement of business goals by promoting human capital advantage. But it should also be people-led, which means taking into account the needs

Learning and development strategy – key learning points (continued)

and aspirations of people to grow and develop.

Learning and development philosophy

A learning and development philosophy expresses the beliefs of an organization on the role of learning and development, its importance and how it should take place.

The contents of a learning and development strategy

The aims and priorities of the strategy, how it is to be achieved, responsibilities and resources and success criteria.

The nature of a learning culture

A learning culture is one that promotes learning because it is recognized by top management, line managers and employees generally as an essential organizational

process to which they are committed and in which they engage continuously.

The concept of the learning organization and its relevance

A learning organization is one ‘which facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself’ (Pedler *et al*, 1991). However, the notion of a learning organization is somewhat nebulous.

How learning and development activities contribute to firm performance

While it is possible and highly desirable to evaluate learning, establishing a link between learning and organizational performance is problematic, although research has shown that learning and development can be a crucial intervening factor.

Questions

1. You have been asked to deliver a session at a students’ evening in your CIPD branch on the gap between learning and development strategy and practice and what can be done about it. It has been suggested that it would be helpful to those attending if you referred to the lessons learnt from research. Prepare the session outline.
2. From your chief executive to the head of learning and development: ‘We need to be certain that our learning and development strategy supports the achievement of the business strategy. In what ways can it do this?’
3. From a friend studying human resource management: ‘I note that everyone is now talking about “learning and development”. I gather that they used to talk about “human

Questions (continued)

resource development” (many still do) and training (also still common). Has there been some sort of progression from training via human resource development to learning and development? If so, what are the differences? Reply.

References

- Argyris, C and Schon, D A (1996) *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA
- Benabou, C (1996) Assessing the impact of training programs on the bottom line, *National Productivity Review*, **15** (3), pp 91–9
- Burgoyne, J (1999) Design of the times, *People Management*, 3 June, pp 39–44
- Clarke, N (2004) HRD and the challenges of assessing learning in the workplace, *International Journal of Training and Development*, **8** (2), pp 140–56
- Easterby-Smith, M (1997) Disciplines of organizational learning: contributions and critiques, *Human Relations*, **50** (9), pp 1085–113
- Harrison, R (2000) *Employee Development*, 2nd edn, IPM, London
- Harrison, R (2005) *Learning and Development*, 4th edn, CIPD, London
- Hendry, C and Pettigrew, A (1986) The practice of strategic human resource management, *Personnel Review*, **15**, pp 2–8
- Pedler, M, Burgoyne, J and Boydell, T (1991) *The Learning Company: A strategy for sustainable development*, McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead
- Purcell, J, Kinnie, K, Hutchinson, S, Rayton, B and Swart, J (2003) *People and Performance: How people management impacts on organisational performance*, CIPD, London
- Reynolds, J (2004) *Helping People Learn*, CIPD, London
- Scarborough, H, Swan, J and Preston, J (1999) *Knowledge Management: A literature review*, Institute of Personnel and Development, London
- Schein, E H (1990) Organizational culture, *American Psychologist*, **45**, pp 109–19
- Senge, P (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, Doubleday, London
- Sloman, M (1999) Seize the day, *People Management*, 20 May, p 31
- Tsang, E W (1997) Organizational learning and the learning organization: a dichotomy between descriptive and prescriptive research, *Human Relations*, **50** (1), pp 73–89
- Walton, J (1999) *Strategic Human Resource Development*, Financial Times/Prentice Hall, Harlow
- Wick, C W and Leon, L S (1995) Creating a learning organisation: from ideas to action, *Human Resource Management*, Summer, pp 299–311