

Agenda: What's innovation got to do with training?

In the days of recession, creativity and the ability to come up with new ideas are set to be more important than ever for organisations to survive the downturn. What has this got to do with L&D? Well, just about everything says Nigel Paine.



Innovation and creativity are going to be at the heart of many learning and development conversations over the next year. I can almost guarantee it. The current financial crisis has prompted organisations in the public, private and non-governmental sectors to be thinking hard about how they can manage their way through crisis, and deal effectively with the, as yet, unknown. As large, hitherto successful, corporations bite the dust, many are questioning how they could avoid that fate, whatever kind of internal or external event generates the crisis.

So I have been reading a timely book. Harvard Business Press has just published: *Innovation to the Core* by Peter Skarzynski and Rowan Gibson. I think you should read it.

It is very [Gary Hamel](#) centric and quotes him often, and well, so you can expect a bit of the same philosophical approach as *The Future of Management* Hamel's new book. And you won't be disappointed. This is a book that gives case study after case study of organisations thriving through better investment in people, and through building an effective environment where ideas flourish and diverse communities feel empowered and motivated. And the message is really simple: you can innovate your way out of almost any crisis. And you can innovate your way to game changing successes. And the places that innovate, are the organisations of the future, because they can cope with uncertainty, ambiguity and volatility better than the average operator. And increasingly we live in uncertain times.



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Innovative organisations include Mexican building materials manufacturer CEMEX, white goods manufacturer, Whirlpool, massive conglomerates like GE, as well as companies that we more commonly associate with innovation, like Google or W L Gore. And the book takes apart the processes required to embed innovation.

The book defines three separate kinds of innovation. The first allows you to exploit an entirely new opportunities, the second, to revalue the unappreciated and the third to leverage the under-leveraged. You do this by questioning deeply held dogmas inside organisations about what drives success, and spotting unnoticed patterns or trends that could point the way to new opportunities or even threaten the status quo. It means thinking of a company as 'a portfolio of skills and assets rather than as a provider of products and services for specific markets' and learning to get inside the mind of customers so you can articulate unmet and unvoiced need. Skarzynski and Gibson call this: "Challenging orthodoxies, harnessing discontinuities, leveraging competencies and strategic assets and understanding unarticulated need."

So what has this got to do with the learning professional? The answer is everything! Innovation will not happen because the CEO thinks it is a good idea. Just like quality systems before it: the hard process work, the training programmes and the cultural change initiatives led to a dramatic upsurge of quality products and services. The learning and development community drove this in partnership with the management and quality community.

Building innovative organisations will require an equal commitment and a long-term investment. Innovation requires an environment that values ideas, as well the skills, systems and processes to manage and exploit those ideas. Innovation requires a cadre of experts and implementers from across the whole organisation. All of this implies a whole swathe of training and development initiatives both broad to drive cultural change and deep to embed the requisite skills. It simply can't happen without the engagement of the learning teams and the driving commitment from the top. The authors list three pre-conditions for generating these breakthroughs. The first is space for reflection and experimentation. The second is building a diverse community to create divergent thinking, and the third: fostering what they call: 'connection and conversation' which is the breeding ground for ideas.

Each of those three will require some L&D input and support, plus IT plus HR and OD. No one part of the organisation can be totally responsible.

Organisations that innovate ask themselves some pretty fundamental questions on regular basis about whom they serve? What they provide? How they provide it? How they make money? And how they differentiate their products and services? You need to do this in order to question the fundamentals, and gain new insights. None of that is worth anything, unless action and change occurs. And this is where you need to build an innovation architecture in your company.

To get at the truly great ideas, you need to generate, manage and evaluate lots and lots of ideas that may not go very far. As well as define the 'vectors of innovation' so you have some focus for your aspirations. The vectors can include customer types; customer benefits, product/service offerings, geography, core competence or new economic model.

This is all about learning: learning to learn and learning to adapt, in order to cope with the increasing pace of the world outside. The authors put it this way: "The faster you can go through the experiment, assess, adapt cycle... the faster a company can resolve the uncertainty that inevitably surrounds a new and unconventional business concept, and the faster it can get to a viable, cash-generating business model."

This requires skill development, organisational development, a coaching and mentoring culture, reward for ideas; a celebration of team work and boundary spanning as well as clear evaluation of impact and contribution. If you are a learning professional this is not a bad agenda for the future.

Nigel Paine is a former head of training and development at the BBC and now runs his own company, Nigel Paine.Com which focuses on people, learning and technology. For more information visit his website at www.nigelpaine.com

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