



While corporate training continues to be of utmost importance to organisations, ensuring the coaching aligns with business objectives has become the new mantra. **HRM** finds out how firms can ensure their programmes are in sync with their company goals

Sham Majid
sham@hrmasia.com.sg



Loo Mei Yee, General Manager, Executive Coach International, draws upon a unique example when she is making a case for why Learning and Development (L&D) should be aligned with business strategy.

She says one of the great issues many companies are facing is that individual departments do not talk to each other or do not really collaborate with each other.

“If one department is only focused on its own learning needs, this might

not contribute to the organisation as a whole,” explains Loo.

She points to the massive passenger liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in 1912 as an example of what could unfold should a department only focus on its own learning needs.

“A caricature example of such a phenomenon could be what happened to the *Titanic*; it had a formidable orchestra that was very skilled, but its officers were obviously not trained enough in

avoiding natural obstacles, such as icebergs,” says Loo.

“Imagine if all the staff working on that ill-fated ship had benefited from L&D, and not just the music department?”

What is business-centric learning?

According to *The State of Learning & Development 2014: Coming of Age Executive Summary* by Brandon Hall Group, L&D organisations are becoming

more business-centric, with over half (55.3%) possessing a formal strategy, and learning strategies being highly aligned to business goals in 73.4% of organisations surveyed.

But what exactly constitutes “business-centric learning”?

Clara Chua, General Manager of Next U at the Institute of Business Excellence, says her organisation views business-centric learning as learning that is aligned with the strategic goals of the business.

“Learning needs to be tied to the knowledge and skills that the business needs, and it also needs to be delivered in time to be able to impact the business strategically, and in a manner that will support the business. It should take operational concerns and learning methodologies into consideration,” explains Chua.

Linda Lim, Manager of Singapore and Malaysia Vocational and Corporate Sales with Pearson, says business-centric learning must meet several important objectives.

These include the ability to identify the skill gaps of existing staff and being able to develop learning programmes that will help to narrow them; designing learning programmes that are able to support the expansion plans of the organisation as a whole; reviewing current training programmes and identifying areas for improvement; and fostering a learning environment that is deemed conducive for staff development.

Loo says that for a long time, the focus of training was on the learner only; they were simply to be provided with the skills that would enable them to hit their targets.

However, she says this approach has several shortcomings.

“Firstly, it only deals with the employee’s immediate learning needs and does not deal with the long-term ones. Secondly, though the training may be useful for the staff member at that point in time, no one has questioned whether it makes sense from an educational point of view for the

organisation as a whole,” explains Loo.

“What is the point of training a whole workforce if this does not enable a corporation to reach its targets?”

“Business leaders are now looking at how this money spent on learning translates into tangible results, such as increased profits. In a way, we are evolving from individual-focused learning to holistic organisational learning,” Loo says.

Aligning employees to business goals

While there is undoubtedly an increase in impetus in firms looking to align their L&D strategies to company objectives, Chua stresses it’s not just about plugging skill gaps.

“It’s showing both employees and business leaders alike how the training will enhance their individual and business performance; and ensuring that the training content meets the current and upcoming business requirements,” she says.

“It’s about making the connection between learning and the impact on business more explicit.”

Loo states that while everybody agrees that employees’ skills need to be constantly upgraded, the fundamental question is how this upgrade is going to benefit the organisation as a whole.

She uses the concept of mentoring as a concrete example.

“Mentoring does not necessarily come naturally to people,” she says.

“It is always striking that when you ask high performers how they manage to do so well, a majority of them are unable to explain it and thus struggle to transmit their skills to their aspiring successors.”

“Though you could train your senior management about leadership, how can you make sure it will benefit the organisation as a whole?”

Loo elaborates that if senior managers

L&D organisations are becoming more business-centric, with **Over half (55.3%)** possessing a formal strategy, and learning strategies being highly aligned to business goals
Spurce: The State of Learning & Development 2014: Coming of Age Executive Summary by Brandon Hall Group

are equipped with effective coaching and mentoring skills, which are in line with the organisation’s strategy of building a pool of potential high performers, evaluating the return on investment becomes much easier.

“You only need to look at the evolution of the performance of the people who have mentors,” she adds.

“As for being responsible to the shareholders, the senior management needs to show how the resources being spent on training contribute to the bottom line, hence a more business-aligned training approach is required.”

From Lim’s perspective, the Singapore Government has played a crucial role in encouraging local companies to send staff for training. It has provided various types of funding such as the Skills Development Fund, Absenteeism Payroll, and the Productivity Innovation Credit scheme to allow employers to tap onto training opportunities.

“Local companies have increasingly seen the value of training as a key motivation tool for retention of staff,” she says.

“They have also seen the value of lifelong learning and the importance of certification and accreditation.”

Where does HR stand?

So how does the HR department fit into the business-centric learning ecosystem?

Lim says HR is an important function which can help organisations with their human capital, talent acquisition and retention.

“One of the key things within HR is to ensure that staff have the required skills and knowledge to perform their roles,” she highlights.

“L&D must be aligned with the business strategy to support its execution.”

She discloses that more organisations are veering towards this direction.

“For example, the Millennium Copthorne group has its own training arm to provide the required L&D for staff in the hotels within the group,” says Lim.

“Jean Yip Group (a hair, beauty and slimming salon group) has its own academy set up to support business goals as well.”

According to Loo, firms in Singapore recognise that a lack of collaborative learning between different departments is an issue. They are addressing it by hiring outside specialists that offer a more holistic vision of training for the whole organisation.

“In fact, we have recently seen several engagements where companies realised that L&D programmes that were too focused on individual departments were in fact harming the overall business of the organisation,” she explains.

“Therefore, we were asked to devise a project that would align L&D better with company-wide issues, rather than individual departmental ones.”

“We are on the right way, but this is only the beginning of a trend that is bound to grow.”

Chua also says providing learning and development opportunities as an internal employee value proposition will be beneficial.

“It would also tie into career management and succession planning

– providing opportunities to employees and a platform for leaders to assess the leadership pipeline,” says Chua.

“Companies in Singapore know the value of this and are doing it to some extent. I believe regular reviews and better stakeholder engagement will help in bringing focus to the strategic alignment.”

Chua says the obvious benefit for HR is productivity gains.

“Indirectly, we would also see it as improving employee engagement, as employees see a direct link between the learning and how it is applied to the business and enhancing their individual performance,” she adds.

“Depending on the learning and development opportunities, it could also provide a more streamlined talent management and succession planning process.”

Loo elaborates that an HR professional’s role is to contribute to the overall business goals through an effective L&D strategy.

“The focus is not so much about how to make a senior manager a better leader, but more about ensuring that he or she can help the company reach its goals by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills,” she says.

“That is why coaching is so valuable in such circumstances: by being able to understand what really motivates a

person, what holds him or her back, then you can find the most suitable training for that person.”

She reaffirms that the most effective training is the one that answers both a staff member’s personal interest while making sure that the money spent will have a high return that can be measured, shown and explained to senior management.

“By making sure your promising stars are satisfied by their training; that they are fully engaged with the company’s overall strategy; and that this translates into the bottom line of the company, then you will also hit your own L&D targets,” explains Loo.

“That is why coaching is such a powerful, effective and successful tool for organisations, regardless of their size, industry or culture.”

Lim says business-centric learning can pave the way for companies to be more productive and can also lead to greater employee engagement.

In addition, she says it is constructive for talent acquisition and talent retention.

“Because of these business-centric learning programmes, the ability to attract better candidates increases, as do the rates of motivation and keeping talents already within the organisation,” adds Lim.

What coaching do you need?

For organisations finding it a challenge to craft effective business-centric programmes for staff, there is no reason to feel dispirited.

There are a plethora of training firms now specialising in customisable and comprehensive business-centric learning modules and courses.

For example, Loo says Executive Coach International has been asked by several organisations to help make sure that each individual in every department not only feels aligned with the overall company’s business goals, but is also not limiting themselves to only their own targets.

“The top management of one company realised they lost potential business opportunities as the different

departments did not seem to be helping each other,” she explains.

“For instance, as a project was drawing to a close, the client who was working with one of their divisions mentioned some needs that could have been met by another department belonging to the same company (which in turn could have increased sales revenues).”

“However, because each department was focused on meeting its own targets only and not thinking of the organisation as a whole, a lot of business opportunities were squandered.”

Loo reveals that each firm Executive Coach International works with is different; some are in the manufacturing sector, others might be *Global Fortune 500* members, while some could be local SMEs.

“Sometimes, 15 employees need to receive training, while at other times, there are 100 employees,” she says.

“Therefore, you have to make sure that each programme is tailored to its audience. Group dynamics, in particular, vary a lot from one organisation to another, and also have to be taken into account.”

Consequently, Loo adds that the school has created several programmes based on strategic vision and implementation, cross-communication and collaboration, and mentoring and coaching training.

“Whenever you deal with human beings, you need tailor-made solutions. One size definitely does not fit for all for us,” she says.

For Pearson, Lim explains it has its own Workforce Development Program.

Clients choose from a range of vocational qualifications endorsed by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI).

Another part consists of the Pearson Assured Service.

“If the organisation has their own training arm, we are able to ‘assure’ their programmes and work on issuing a Pearson certificate with the company’s logo on it,” explains Lim.

She also says Pearson carries a comprehensive range of talent

“Learning needs to be tied to the knowledge and skills that the business needs, and it also needs to be delivered in time to be able to impact the business strategically”

Clara Chua, General Manager of Next U at the Institute of Business Excellence

assessments which can be integrated into training programmes to support key learning functions.

Chua elaborates that as a Total Learning Solutions Provider, NTUC LearningHub has a process to understand its clients and their learning and development needs, and then recommend the right learning solutions (from training programmes to e-learning modules), that have been customised to the organisation’s needs.

“In terms of specific programmes, there are leadership programmes as well as team building and innovation programmes that can help companies to align their teams and goals,” she says.

Customising the curriculum

With training courses having been crafted in a structured and niche manner, it is not rocket science that these modules are highly customisable to suit the needs of every organisation.

While Loo says they are convinced that each individual is unique, there are some basic fundamentals when it comes to coaching that Executive Coach International needs to make sure its participants master.

“That is why we make sure that participants work on case studies based on real life examples,” she states.

“The coaching pillars are universal but their applications are deeply personal.”

Loo says her organisation trains clients so they might be able to deal with each situation that they are facing: whether it is attempting to double sales or resolving conflicts ; from mentoring a promising junior staff to supporting the CEO.

“That is why we offer four levels to our Professional Certified Coach Program,” she adds.

“The first two levels are compulsory for people to become an associate accredited coach. This certification is recognised worldwide.”

“However, for people who really want to extend their range and who are up for the challenge, we have created another two modules that can bring them up to the professional certified coach level.”

Chua also affirms that while the training curriculum needs to be flexible to cater to the business needs, it also needs to be robust enough to deliver the desired learning outcomes.

“It needs a good balance of the two,” she says.

Lim also concurs.

“Each organisation and its individual departmental goals are different and thus customisation in the training curriculum is extremely important,” she explains.

“There will be different training needs for different types of employees as well, such as the needs of new trainees versus the senior ones, with both being very different.”

Are you aligned with the business?

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development’s annual Learning and Development Survey:

- A quarter of firms report that Learning and Development (L&D) strategy is “extremely” aligned with the needs of their business; and a further two fifths say that they are “broadly aligned” with only some discrepancies.
- A small minority (6%) report that they are not at all aligned
- Alignment is also lower in organisations where L&D is part of generalist HR activities
- Two-fifths (41%) of firms say they have experienced barriers in achieving business alignment
- Lack of clarity regarding the business strategy is one of the most common barriers hindering business alignment

Source: *The Learning and Development Annual survey report 2015 by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development*