How to Dance with a Reluctant Partner

By Jack J. Phillips

Building effective partnerships appears consistently as a high profile topic in literature. We all know that building effective partnerships is essential. It's hard to be a contributing member of any organization without being perceived as a business partner. We've all been instructed on how to dance – taking dancing lessons, teaching the elephant to dance, and so forth. But, what if the partners don't want to dance? I see that – dancing with a reluctant partner – the big challenge for CLOs.

Most professional managers nowadays appreciate the importance of learning and development. While they see L&D as necessary, they don't get excited about it, viewing learning and development somewhat as they do budgeting. It's something they've got to do and so they go through the motions, but without enthusiasm. On the other hand, really terrific learning and development can be achieved when key managers get excited about it, see the value of it, and get involved in it. Igniting that spark of enthusiasm in a reluctant partner is an important competency for CLOs. Executives and managers report they're too busy to partner. "I support learning," they say and then ask, "Why should I worry about partnering?" Or they remark, "Consider me a partner. Now, go away." Or they grumble the dismissive comment, "We get the picture." The unspoken, "Whatever," echoes through the learning and development corridor.

Classify Your Managers

It can be helpful to categorize key managers in the organization into four categories: destructive, unresponsive, responsive, and supportive. Figure 1 shows the levels of management support with the definitions. As the categorizations illustrate, we need more supportive and responsive managers. The non-supportive are a definite problem and the destructive managers are a real menace. Fortunately, they are not usually a large part of the management team. To build support in one organization, the CLO and the key members of the L&D staff classified the middle and top executives into these four categories. The percent of managers in each category are indicated on the before column. Following this assessment was an eye-opening exercise as far too many managers were in the non-supportive and destructive areas. This group began a very formal process of developing effective partnerships with all of the key managers. A year later, the categorization changed dramatically as the non-supportive and destructive categories were reduced and the supportive and responsive categories increased. This categorization is often the first step in building the kind of

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partnerships needed for productive organizations. When this is done, you can begin to plot strategy to deal with each manager on a case-by-case basis.

Figure 1. Levels of Management Support

	Percentage of Managers	
	Before	**After**
Supportive	14%	19%
Strongly and actively supports all L&D efforts. Encourages participation.		
Responsive	42%	58%
Supports L&D programs, but not as strongly as the supportive manager. Sees L&D as a responsibility. Allows participation.		
Non-Supportive	32%	21%
Privately voices displeasure with L&D on a formal basis. Wishes it would go away. Discourages participation.		
Destructive	11%	2%
Very critical of L&D efforts. Believes all L&D should occur on the job. Works actively to prevent participation.		
	100%	100%

Reasons for Lack of Support

Before a partnership can be developed it is helpful to understand why executives and managers are reluctant to support learning and development. Some reasons are valid while others are based on misunderstandings about L&D and its impact in the organization. An analysis of the current level of

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support will usually reveal the most common problems. In the organization described above, the first step was to understand the reasons for lack of support. The following is a list of reasons obtained directly from the managers. The percentages represent data from an internal survey of managers. The total percentages are greater than 100% because some managers checked more than one reason for lack of support.

52% **No Results.** Managers are not convinced that L&D adds value in terms they understand and appreciate.

34% **No Input.** Managers do not support L&D if they are not offered an opportunity for input into the process. Without input, managers will not develop ownership and will continue to resist.

48% **Too Costly.** The direct cost for some programs is ultimately taken from operating profits. They also see programs, as taking employees away from their jobs, resulting in a loss of productivity.

23% **No Relevance.** Managers have little reason to believe that programs have relevance or will help their department or work unit. No relevance equals no need, which equals no priority and eventually leads to no support.

61% **No Time.** Managers are very busy with increasing demands on their time. Managers often perceive that requests for increased support will require additional time.

19% **Lack of Preparation.** Sometimes managers do not have the necessary skills. Specific skills are needed to provide effective reinforcement and support, just as specific skills are required for planning, budgeting, delegating, and negotiating.

32% **Lack of Knowledge about L&D.** Managers are not always aware of the nature and scope of L&D. It is difficult for mangers to support a process they do not fully understand.

Collectively, these reasons for non-support equate to challenges for organizations and represent opportunities for managers. If these issues are not addressed in an effective way, management support will not exist, implementation will be diminished, and – consequently – results will be severely limited or nonexistent.

Key Strategy: Developing Partnerships with Managers

Building a partnership with key managers is one of the most powerful ways to increase management involvement and support. A partnership relationship can take on several different formats and descriptions. With some CLO's, the relationship is informal, loosely defined, and ill-structured. With other CLO's, the process is formalized to the extent that specific activities are planned with targeted individuals, all for the purpose of improving relationships. The quality of the relationship is discussed and assessments are typically taken to gauge progress. Still, with a few CLO's, the process is very formal, where individuals are discretely identified for relationship improvement and a written plan is developed for each individual. Sometimes a contract is developed with a particular manager. Assessments are routinely taken, and progress is reported formally. Although these three levels of formality are distinct, an organization can move through all these different levels as the partnering process matures and achieves success.

For this process to be effective, the CLO must take the lead and involve others as appropriate and necessary. The direction must come from the top. Rarely will key managers approach the CLO to nurture these relationships. In some organizations, key managers do not want to develop relationships because of the concern about the time it may take to work through these issues. Although this responsibility cannot be delegated, it can involve many other L&D staff members, if not all. Several steps are suggested to develop an effective partnership:

1. **Assess the current status of partnership relationships.** The first course of action is to determine the current condition. A candid assessment of progress with the quantity and quality of relationships is important.
2. **Identify key individuals for a partnership relationship.** Building a partnership works best when it clearly focuses on a few individuals. Too many individual targets could dilute the effort.
3. **Learn the business.** An effective partnership relationship cannot be developed unless the member understands the operational and strategic issues of the organization. It is absolutely essential for this understanding to be developed!
4. **Consider a written plan.** The process is often more focused when it is written with specific details for each manager. A written plan enhances commitment.
5. **Offer assistance to solve problems.** The organization supports managers and provides assistance to solve, or prevent, problems. Managers are usually seeking help with problems.
6. **Show results of programs.** When results are achieved, quick communication with partners is important to demonstrate to them how a program achieved success. In addition, the results achieved from other programs, where partners may not be directly involved, should be communicated to these key managers.
7. **Publicize partners' accomplishments and successes.** At every opportunity, give proper credit to the accomplishments of the partner. The organization should not take credit for successes.
8. **Ask the partner to review the needs analysis.** Whenever a needs analysis is requested or undertaken as part of the development of a new program, the partner should review the information and confirm, or add to, the analysis. This, of course, assumes the partner is knowledgeable about the issues in the analysis.
9. **Have the partner serve on an advisory committee.** A helpful approach to provide guidance and direction to the organization or a particular program is to establish an advisory committee. If appropriate and feasible, the partner should be invited to serve on the committee.
10. **Shift responsibility to partner.** Although the success of programs rests with stakeholders who have major responsibilities, the primary responsibility must lie with the management group. When it is appropriate and feasible, some responsibility should be transferred to the partner, if the partner is prepared for the responsibility.
11. **Invite input from the partner about key plans and programs.** Routinely, partners should be asked to provide information on issues such as analysis, program design, use of new technology, program roll out, and follow-up evaluation.

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12. **Ask partner to review program objectives, content, and implementation.** As a routine activity, these managers should review objectives, content, and planned implementation for each new program or major redesign.
13. **Invite partner to coordinate a program or portion of a program.** If appropriate, the partner should be asked to help organize, coordinate, or implement a part of a program. It is important to do this without "dumping" work on the partner, being sensitive to other tasks and priorities.
14. **Review progress and re-plan strategy.** Periodically the partnership process should be reviewed to check progress, adjust, and re-plan the strategy. Continuous process improvement should be the focus.

When exploring the critical influence of the management group – and their role as a partner – it is easy to see that it is impossible for a CLO to be successful without the positive and supportive influence of the management group. Using critical strategies should have a very high payoff of increased commitment and support for those destructive and unsupportive partners or renewed commitment and support for those who are responsive and supportive and, thus, creating an environment to dance with any partner.

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