

# Seven Disasters That Happen When Learning and Development Does Not Focus on Results

By Jack J. Phillips, Ph.D. and Patti P. Phillips, Ph.D.

Everyone can agree that learning is crucial to the success of any organization. Yet learning and talent development professionals often fail show that their efforts are directly improving the organization's performance. The result? CEOs and other key decision makers don't see the value of learning programs and they may end up on the chopping block-along with the budget.

## The Shift

More and more, CEOs are asking CLOs to prove how a program will impact the organization. To achieve this requires programs to demonstrate value at every phase of the learning system. This is most likely to require a change in how learning is initiated, designed, delivered, and evaluated.

Executive demands are the result of paradigm shift that is reshaping many different aspects of learning and development. Figure 1 shows the shift along eleven issues. Measures have shifted from input focus (counting people) to outcome (business results). Executives need to perceive learning as an investment and not a cost. Evaluation has shifted from reaction and learning to impact and ROI.

**Figure 1. Changing Paradigms for Learning**

| <b>Traditional</b>     | <b>Emerging</b>        |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| Job Training           | Talent Development     |
| Scale and Scope        | Speed and Adaptability |
| Input Focus            | Outcome Focus          |
| Cost                   | Investment             |
| Necessity              | Value Driver           |
| Standardization        | Customization          |
| Fixed Setting and Time | Agile and Flexible     |
| Science of Learning    | Learning Analytics     |
| Command and Control    | Empowerment            |
| Needs Assessment       | Performance Consulting |
| Reaction and Learning  | Impact and ROI         |

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## Enter Design Thinking

Learning professionals must keep specific, measurable business outcomes firmly in mind at every step of the learning and development process, taking a cue from innovation using design thinking principles. Specifically, they need to design for success, with that success defined as credible data connecting the learning programs to the business. This can be accomplished with eight steps using design thinking principles.<sup>1</sup>

## Consequences of Status Quo

When learning and development do not focus on business results, damaging repercussions can occur. For example:

1. Investments are made on perceptions. Most would agree that this is a dangerous way to fund a functional area. Sustainability comes into question when the funding is based on perception of value, intangible benefits, or other logical deductions.
2. Middle managers cease to support investments in learning. Middle-level managers are critical to the success of learning and talent development functions. Participants in the program usually report to these managers. Because these programs normally take participants away from the time needed to perform their jobs, their managers need data to show what participants will do and accomplish with the new skills. Without these types of results, support will be minimal.
3. The commitment for learning and talent development will diminish. Commitment translates into support from the top. The tangible evidence of commitment is the budget and resources for learning, and this includes the actions that top executives take to be actively involved in learning and support and encourage the learning process. Without business results, commitment will suffer.
4. The influence of the learning function is diminished. It is hard to have a seat at the table without a clear connection to the business value of the organization. Consequently, influence suffers, which hampers the ability to secure approvals and implement processes to get the work done.
5. Budgets are curtailed or not funded properly. While budgets will be funded, the right programs may not be funded properly or the total amount of funding may be less than needed to address the organization's needs. In tough economic times, the learning budgets are the first to go; during a recession, this sometimes happens in a very dramatic fashion. This is occurring now in some industries in the USA and in many other countries.
6. The image of the learning and development function suffers. Some managers perceive learning and development as a "necessary evil." The image could be shifted to a perception of learning as a business-driving process, one that makes a difference to important metrics in the organization.

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7. Team satisfaction will diminish. All learning and talent development stakeholders would like to see their contribution to important, bottomline measures in the organization. This line of sight from each person's contribution to the business has to be clear. Without that connection, without evidence and proof that they make a difference, the team becomes concerned about the value of what they contribute.

The cumulative effect of these consequences may be tough to measure but they are almost certainly devastating, both to Learning and Development professionals and to the organization as a whole, with loss of budget, influence, and respect. The approach followed for many years is not sustainable. Programs must focus on results at every step of the learning cycle. This will increase influence on the talent development investment in the future.

#### References:

1. Phillips, Patti P. and Jack J. Phillips. *The Business Case for Learning: Using Design Thinking to Deliver Business Results and Increase the Investment in Talent Development*. Westchester, PA and Alexandria, VA: HRDQ and ATD Press, 2017.

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