

# Creating business-critical value

**Andrew Gibbons** outlines how L&D can make a real contribution

**T**his article is for anyone frustrated with how often our best-intentioned, most committed efforts to have a positive impact on our client organisations so often result in either no sign that we were ever there or that we came tantalisingly close to actually changing something for the better, but not close enough.

When I started this wonderful, confusing role, as a young, fired-up internal trainer, I had a vague idea that I was doing what I could to develop people and that the value of this was greatest when they actually applied that learning in the workplace, but I couldn't have been specific about much beyond those thoughts.

Twenty nine years on, and for the last 20 as an independent developer, I am now crystal-clear about the absolute necessity of tangibly, and credibly, delivering quantifiable, measurable value outcomes for the client business that significantly exceed cost.

The problem is, this is hard – it's very hard indeed – and, do you know what, it's not all our fault that it is so rare we see an attributable long-term effect that returns serious value to our client businesses, whether public or private sector or whether we are an external consultant or an internal resource.

Let's keep this between ourselves, as we don't want to annoy our clients, but the fact is that they too often do not play their part in creating value from L&D events. Indeed, too often those within 'the business' are the principal source of barriers and obstructions to us genuinely bringing in revenue-generating and efficiency initiatives that can be measured in big-money terms.

After much reflection (I have kept a handwritten learning log of more than a million words in 1,200 entries since 1987<sup>1</sup>), here are

three essential issues I will focus upon and that, together, create that unusual but, we must believe, entirely possible context that we need to bring real value from our hard work:

- from passive attendees to active, enthusiastic, energised learners
- from anxious, defensive managers to nurturing, encouraging coaches
- from disinterested, preoccupied organisations to positive, optimistic environments.

## **From passive attendees to active, enthusiastic, energised learners**

Times have indeed changed and it's simply no good at all for someone to keep a chair warm, say the right words, then do nothing back at work.

Focusing on group, or 'classroom' learning events – okay, training courses if you want – these are usually inhabited by people who have no past history of a genuine expectation to make real efforts to apply what they learn. For this reason, we need to select with more care the motivated, the energised and the supported, as they are more likely to overcome the many barriers to learning transfer and thus provide a return over cost of attendance.

Prior to arrival, we can often do more to match events to real needs. I still find myself in rooms of people who have been sent on the basis of a →

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## We must get better at focusing on the business-critical factors that determine corporate success

course title by well-meaning but disinterested line managers, who feel that their responsibilities have ceased at the point of 'sending their people on the course'.

Put ten people in a room and we who call ourselves L&D professionals have a duty to our fee- or salary-paying clients to do all we can to pay back that four-figure investment.

Not everyone wants to take on the hard graft of looking for, and planning to use, new learning. Here are four options for dealing with this:

- **appeasing** Fair enough, I see what you mean – so that's not possible
- **accommodating** I see an alternative, but you know better than me what will work
- **challenging** Yes I really do understand that – let's explore this as it could help
- **confronting** I don't agree. It's not easy but, if we are serious about this, we must...

The choice we take is dependent on many factors – not least of which may be the desire to maintain paid employment.

Small groups of ten or less are better for maximising learning value – but administratively, more people appear, incorrectly, to create best value. It depends if cost means more than the quantifiable business benefits from applied learning.

It really helps that we are working on an event that is genuinely designed with organisational needs and outcomes in mind, and that we have learners capable of, and wanting to, learn and, critically, use that learning. During any event, I always use learning points sheets – seven small boxes on an A4 page to capture 'aha moments' – these are referred to throughout and it's great to be asked for more. The traditional, hurried 'action planning' at the end of the day has very limited value.

A motivated learner returning to an interested manager with specific learning points, requiring joint planning to prompt deliberate actions in the

workplace, is what we should be making happen where we can.

### From anxious, defensive managers to nurturing, encouraging coaches

It's not easy being a line manager. Too many of us fail to understand that when we are frustrated with the apparent lack of interest in helping those we work with apply their learning on return, and thus show we are of real benefit to the organisations we work with.

We can typically do much more to engage with line management, to clarify their expectations of those they give us to work with and to make both learning and its use more likely. As Donald Kirkpatrick said so wisely: "People will support what they helped to create." This is surely true, and the lesson for us is to do all we can to work with and help line managers to see the value of genuinely nurturing the fragile motivation to put what is learned to use, and not let it wither and die.

Many line managers will welcome our efforts to maximise the value of our work to them and to the business. Many will spend time, particularly if prompted and given a structure for this with their people before we see them, and will focus on the learning outcomes sought from an event. The best line managers will also find time that is not in plentiful supply to debrief the learning and, just as significantly, to plan and directly assist in ensuring new practices are embedded and that the business gets measurable value from a development event.

Some however, will not do any of that, and these are the unhelpful 'have a good holiday?' managers that resent time spent on L&D and are an inhibiting force within the business.

These managers are the 'I wouldn't ask anyone to do a job I couldn't do myself' people that disempower, criticise and feel diminished if any of their people grow and develop beyond their own capabilities. These are the managers that a business needs to do something about but so few do, which is more than tragic – it's plain bad and makes no sense.

So we need to engage more with line managers, understand their issues and learn how best to help them achieve their goals through the development of the colleagues we see a little of and with whom they work each day.

### From disinterested, preoccupied organisations to positive, optimistic environments

First we need to remind ourselves that every organisation is a complex system of competing

### References

- 1 Gibbons A, Greene M "Learning logs for self-development" *Training and Development* (February 1991)
- 2 Kirkpatrick D "How to Manage Change Effectively" *Training and Development* (May 1989)
- 3 Bennis W *On Becoming a Leader* Random Century Press (1994)

issues, priorities and truly business-critical decisions. These are difficult beasts to run, and I spend a lot of my time reminding those I work with that heading up, or having a leading role in, one is a hard task. That said, many organisations are run in a way that disappoints us in the L&D function, and this means our serious potential contribution is too often dismissed or not given the support and resources needed. We can create high-value opportunities at times of very fine margins. This is something we must get better at and quickly.

Every business is constantly seeking to improve its efficiency, to compete with others for limited resource and to develop a sustainable edge, usually with reductions in budget and capacity. We must get better at focusing on the business-critical factors that determine corporate success. It's not good enough to churn out lists of training courses that look very similar one decade to the next. If we are to gain the confidence of our most significant clients within the organisation, we must get much more business savvy.

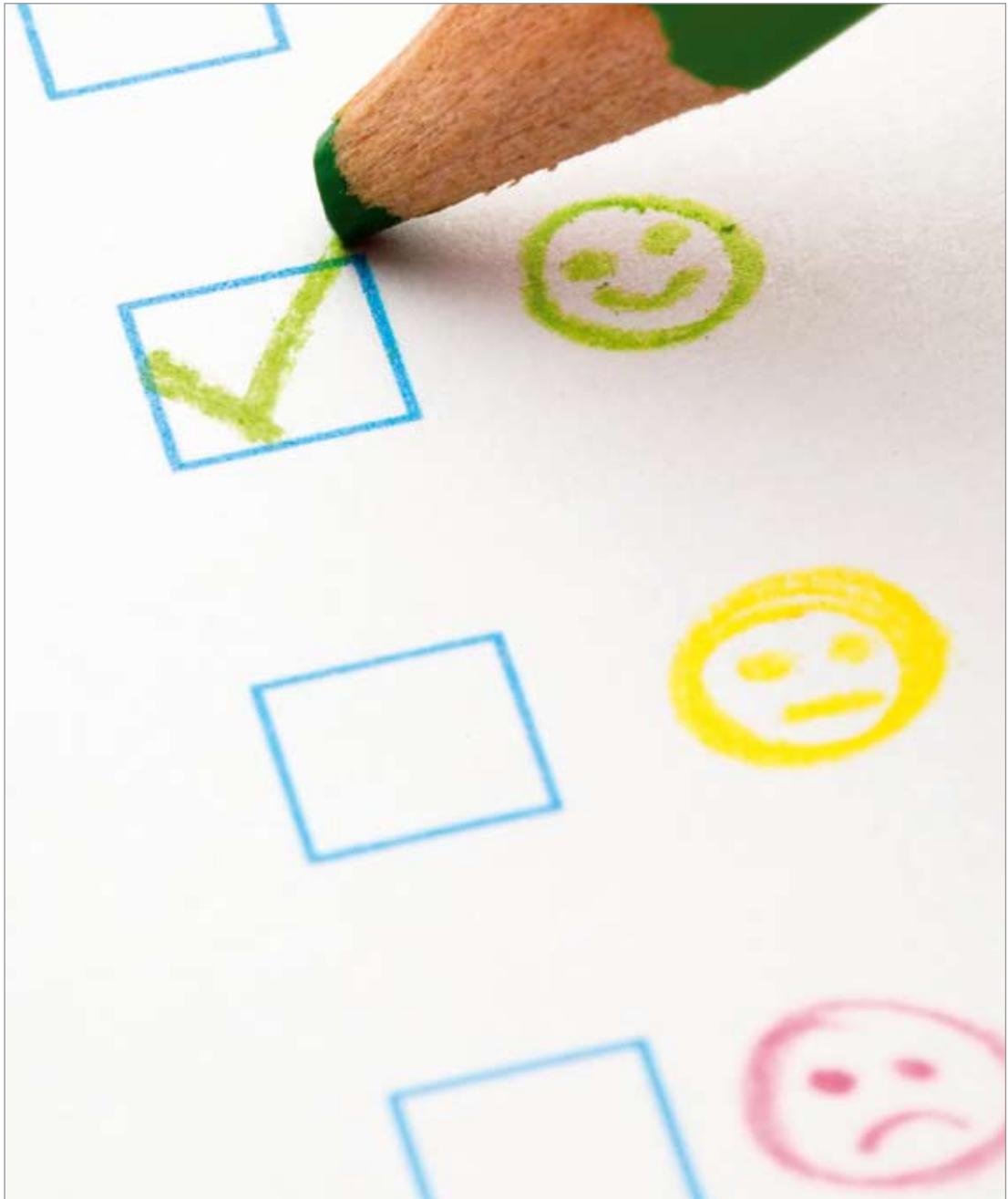
The fact is, we simply haven't convinced enough businesses that we are a net value creator within the organisations we serve. If there was a real perception that we deliver tangible and measurable value over cost, our budgets and the resources we are given would grow because our sponsors would want more of what we are doing to benefit the business. So that's what we must do better.

In my own practice, I am now returning seven-figure, quantifiable financial returns via leadership programmes signed off by line managers, presented to the chief executive and then, given that level of backing, ensuring implementation of the project element that specifies business value return over investment.

Such a level of support is rare, and has been earned from years in the business of establishing a credible programme that has now gained real backing because it delivers. We must seek quick hits in friendly areas of the business and avoid wasteful, attritional political fights and dead ends. We must also plug away and believe over a long term, showing what Warren Bennis calls "courageous patience"<sup>3</sup>. We must believe our business-critical contribution will be recognised as we lock in to the real needs and language, and persuade those we need to that what we are doing can have a serious impact on the bottom line. We might just have to wait a while!

It is always disappointing to me that I see so many internal L&D people who clearly have very little awareness of the business in which



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they operate. This is not always so, however, and the best are those who read the reports, know the complex organisational structures, and are driven by explicit corporate priorities instead of operating in a weird and insulated 'training' environment that is not connected to organisational realities.

**So in conclusion**

I hope this article has given you some specific thoughts on how you can best make a more

direct and tangible impact on the business(es) you serve.

If we are to survive as a function, we must do what the best of our breed do well – genuinely listen to the client and deliver creative learning events that, by working with the right people, develop competencies that are supported in the workplace and are measured in hard financial terms. **TJ**