

Learning Matters!

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Projects are more than 100% more successful today than they were in 1994, according to the Standish Group. How can we explain this tremendous improvement? We're learning.

Learning is one of an organization's most critical intangible assets. It's not listed on balance sheets, yet learning drives product innovations, responses to change, and process improvements.

Learning matters today now more than ever. In a 2006 ASTD / IBM study, researchers asked executives to explain exactly how learning provides strategic value. The top four responses were strategic implementation, transformation, leadership development, and capability building.

Strategic implementation. Each year, organizations identify the few strategies that are critical to taking the business to the next level. These strategies almost always require change: change in workflow, priority, approach, or procedure. And change always requires learning as people let go of old ways of doing business and adopt new techniques.

Transformation. Organizational transformation cannot occur without learning. As Eric Hoffer has said, "In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while [others] find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." Learning must occur during transformation—or else organizations and individuals find themselves well-prepared for last year's challenges.

Leadership development. Despite popular opinion, the majority of leaders are not born. They emerge after having learned enough through experience, challenging assignments, and support from others to lead their companies. Visionary companies know this and tend to promote from within. 88.9% of the companies represented in the benchmark study of organizational success, *Built to Last*, promoted from within to the CEO level. These CEOs gained their positions after their companies invested heavily in their learning, development, and growth. Those investments paid off in shareholder gains, organizational advancement, and long-term success.

Capability building. Market pressures make organizational—and individual—capability building a necessity. For example, emerging businesses must build the capabilities to compete successfully in their environments. Software developers must constantly adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of programming languages. Learning from experience, experiments, and other companies helps organizations and individuals build the capability to achieve more.

Making Learning Happen

Let's say that you buy the concept that learning helps organizations achieve. How can you make learning happen in your company?

- ❑ *Keep an Eye on the Landscape.* Strong learning organizations consistently scan the environment for competitor developments, new opportunities, changing customer needs, and industry trends. These findings point the direction towards future learning priorities.
- ❑ *Drive People to Improve.* The continual drive for better, more effective, and more efficient results fuels learning and increases an organization's ability to reduce costs, increase customer satisfaction, and improve results.
- ❑ *Allow Occasional Failure.* Failures do occur as part of the natural learning process. Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO, said that he doesn't mind if 90% of ideas fail provide that the other 10% generate income for the firm. Organizations that make failure impossible encourage groupthink and uniformity, not creativity and invention.
- ❑ *Uncover the Blind Spots.* Organizations and individuals create conceptions of themselves: their strengths, their weaknesses, their challenges, and their opportunities. However, these conceptions don't always align with the realities that others can see. Blind spots, which can take the form of overlooked strengths or below-the-radar weaknesses, can prevent a company or leader from advancement. Taking the time to uncover those blind spots creates opportunities to address them.
- ❑ *Create Tolerance for Dissent.* In the most innovative and successful companies, employees are encouraged to speak up about redundant processes, repetitive tasks, and alternative techniques. These differences of opinion, and the creative tension that emerges from respectful dialogue about differences, produce learning, innovation, and often surprising results.
- ❑ *Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is.* One kind of support is financial: paying for employee learning activities. As critical as money is commitment to learning: making the time in employees' schedules for learning. Benchmark companies allocate between 32 and 36 hours per year per employee for learning, according to the ASTD / IBM Study.
- ❑ *Share the Knowledge.* It's no fun to solve a tricky problem only to discover that another division already solved it last month. Best practices companies go beyond innovating and improving practices. They also share them so all can benefit from learning.