

TEST YOUR TRAINING

When it comes to life, career or business goals, the vast majority of managers understand that they need to plan where they want to be and what they need to do to get there. So why is it that when it comes to learning and development, so few organisations have any clearly defined goals – let alone the means to measure their achievement?

Ambitious organisations must set and link their key business objectives to carefully targeted and closely monitored organisation-wide training – yet so few of them do.

The beleaguered BBC is a good example. Imagine the corporate shudder when a reported £35million leadership course for 7,000 staff was criticised by a specialist in analysing training programmes. It was a waste of licence-fee payers' money, he alleged, because the five-year investment had no link to performance objectives. The development programme is about values, creativity and innovation, and the consultant couldn't see how these could be linked to what, in his opinion, is the BBC's bottom line – viewing figures.

Companies misalign investment in learning and development with strategic business needs at their peril. The consequences can be economic and operational. In far too many cases it's only when a company sees a tangible negative impact – poor shares performance, failed sales targets, steady staff departures – that it realises it might have made a strategic error. But the bold questions they should have asked at the outset are: what contribution does learning and development make to achieving business goals? And how will it continue to improve that contribution?

With the BBC example there was concern that business objectives were set after the course was designed. How to evaluate training is an ongoing debate, but in my experience there's one thing for certain: you can't



With training budgets on the increase, **Lyn Bicker** explains why learning and development needs to be closely linked to key business objectives

effectively evaluate something where there are no measures to begin with.

Ideally metrics should be identified almost in the same breath that the need for any type of learning and development is established. There should be close collaboration between those people at the top responsible for establishing business goals and objectives, and those charged with the development and delivery of learning. This approach brings about recognition of the people development need and achieves much-needed buy-in from the top.

One of the most effective organisation-wide leadership development programmes I've delivered involved 450 people ranging from senior management to the chief executive. A benchmarking project using the EQFM model for Business Excellence had established the need for good and effective leadership. Critically, this approach meant the client had also got the leadership profile right.

ON PRINCIPLE

The cornerstones of our design work were two principles: learning had to relate directly to the organisation's aims and to an existing cultural change programme. The beacon for the work was the leadership profile,

around which all exercises and tools were specifically designed. And it was a real success. Crucially, an external benchmarking analysis of the impact of the programme showed year-on-year improvement in the organisation's strategic leadership and in staff perceptions of how they were led.

In another 'best practice' example, one UK transport network is halfway through a 12-month organisational coaching programme designed to help a top team focus on achieving four core business objectives. It's working – 'best ever' periods for performance are being recorded – because service delivery plans have been translated into tangible objectives. The organisational coaching helps the company achieve its specific goals through the development of the individual.

I find it easy to weave together learning and development with business objectives, but many companies seem to make such a meal out of it. Tesco, however, keeps it decidedly simple. It uses its own version of Robert Kaplan's 'balanced scorecard' approach to execute chief executive Terry Leahy's philosophy: that strategy is only valuable when implemented. At a leadership summit in October, Sir Terry explained that performance targets and measures are set in four key areas and reviewed annually. Importantly, each month the workforce can see how the company and its teams are performing.

Tesco identified its means of delivering the performance that makes it king of the retail hill via 'the price of a book', as Sir Terry referred to the role played by Robert Kaplan's publication. But there are other ways to begin the process of matching organisation-wide learning and development investment with performance objectives. A good start is to be bold and ask yourself, and others, intelligent and sometimes impertinent questions. ■

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To ensure that training actually works, key measures need to be decided at the outset