

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

Experiential Learning Integrates Action Coaching to Maximize Results **April 2007 - Jeanne C. Meister**

What's the one trend that has continued to dominate chief learning officers' mind share? Experiential learning. This type of learning is directly linked to a company's top strategic business priorities.

There are three reasons why interest in experiential learning has stood the test of time and is now growing. First, many high-performing learning organizations have developed "leaders as teachers" as a core principle of operation — leader-led learning sessions are one of the ways leaders pass along their vision, values and best practices to the next generation of managers.

Second, C-suite executives are looking for development opportunities that give managers exposure to real-life business challenges, as well as insight into a company's business and strategic priorities.

Third, executives are intent on using "hard business metrics" to evaluate the impact learning has on the organization.

Programs often close the gap between theory and real-world challenges, and they provide participants the opportunity to immediately apply what they learn to relevant business problems or opportunities rather than academic cases.

What Does a Best-Practice Experiential Learning Program Look Like?

ASCENT, the UBS learning and development two-year talent program, weaves experiential learning with action coaching, networking and personal leadership development to give midlevel UBS participants an opportunity to work on their personal development, network with peers, work on a real-world business challenge, and get input and advice from action coaches.

Participants in the business-challenge component of ASCENT work on a business issue that has been sponsored by a UBS executive. During the 12- to 15-week business challenge, participants pull together a business plan and then provide a series of recommendations and action steps to solve the business challenge based on primary and secondary research and analysis.

This culminates in a presentation back to the business executive sponsor. Along the way, participants have an opportunity to work on critical business issues, write business plans, conduct original research and present their findings.

Critical Success Factor: The Action Coach

There are many factors linked to the success of an experiential learning program such as ASCENT. In their book, “Action Coaching: How to Leverage Individual Performance for Company Success,” David Dotlich and Peter Cairo define action coaching as “a process that fosters self-awareness and results in the motivation to change, as well as the guidance needed if the change meets organizational needs.”

What exactly does an action coach do? Cairo says these senior executives ensure a business context is incorporated into the experiential learning program, work with participants to keep them on track and focused on recommending doable solutions for an organization’s challenges and identify opportunities for managers to “reflect” on various aspects of how their learning ties to the core of an organization’s business priorities, be it innovation, competition or entering emerging markets.

Action coaches appear to be in demand now more than ever as the trend to customize learning to business needs permeates throughout organizations. And experts such as Cairo expect their roles to expand and to gradually incorporate technology into their toolkits.

This means integrating into the team experiential learning program tools such as social networking, Second Life virtual world, wikis and learning on mobile devices. Why? This keeps team members engaged and represents a comfortable way for them to contribute, share and collaborate with their team members.

So, as you design experiential learning programs, remember to step back and ask yourself: How are team participants and their coaches staying in touch to maximize business results?

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