

The CLO's Role: What's Next?

Jeanne C. Meister

Once your run in the CLO position is complete, what's next for your career? It's a question mostly whispered over lunches, at conferences or on private phone calls, but it's also a question every CLO needs to answer. The fact is, the average tenure for a CLO these days seems to be about three years—roughly half as long as the typical CEO. Why is this? And when CLOs do move on, where do they go?

The Three-Year Building Initiative

Anecdotal evidence supports the position that something begins to change for a CLO after about three years. For some, the issue becomes a version of the famous "Field of Dreams" line: "I have built it, so I will move on." CLOs brought in to turn things around or to build an innovative learning organization from the ground up find that such a mission takes at least three years. Then what? Some CLOs mostly enjoy the excitement of a turnaround or a startup. That kind of person may find the period following a major reinvention to be just a series of incremental changes.

On the other hand, after a CLO has proven value to the organization through a turnaround, staying on in the position can be vital to ensure that those new initiatives truly thrive. One CLO I spoke with recently embraced that perspective, following several previous experiences with turning around learning organizations. Today, he is starting to enjoy seeing the work he has done come to fruition and then shepherding it along. "It's true that I liked the mad, frantic pace of the turnarounds I orchestrated at my earlier positions," he said. "But now I'm enjoying seeing the things I started really take off—helping to make learning more deeply integrated into the culture of the company. I'm also pursuing the creation of a number of for-profit offerings." Not surprisingly, while his tenures at his earlier turnaround jobs were both three years, he has been in his current position more than five years.

The CEO Relationship

The tenure statistics suggest that most CEOs will oversee at least one changing of the CLO guard during their reign. If one presumes that CEOs generally build their own executive teams, that means CEOs are saying goodbye to their own hand-chosen CLOs. Any particular reason? One learning executive speculated that a CLO may begin to lose close contact with the CEO after a time: "In the first year or so on the job, a CLO is spending a lot of time with the senior executive team because they're all trying to learn how to sing in harmony. Then, after a while, it's natural that you just go off and begin to execute. But that may actually mean you get out of tune with the CEO and with the business." It's an interesting bit of conjecture, particularly in light of one of the tracking and success metrics used by another CLO—face time with the CEO on a monthly basis.

Moving On—to What?

Regardless of the possible reasons for moving on, or even the length of tenure, where does a typical CLO go next? Most learning executives I've spoken with are passionate about staying in the learning industry and would look for another CLO position in a different industry or even one with a vendor firm.

None expressed an interest in moving from a CLO role into a senior line position. "I'm not an operational person, nor is it what my career focus has been," one CLO said. However, a number of fellow learning executives did say they would consider moving into a senior role in global HR, perhaps one that managed the CLO role. This, however, would require the development of new skills in compensation, benefits, talent management, corporate governance and strategic management of mergers and acquisitions, to name just a few. In fact, one of the CLOs I spoke with is pursuing the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certification and could envision being a candidate for the board of directors.

Finally, as you experience success in the CLO role and sponsor initiatives that drive top-line revenue and transform the learning function, be sure to challenge your thinking on the timing and characteristics of your next career adventure. E-mail me at jmeister@clomedia.com, and I'll share some of your thoughts in a future column.

Jeanne C. Meister is vice president of market development at Accenture Learning. Comments on this article can be sent to Jeanne at jmeister@clomedia.com.

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