

## What's on the Mind of Your Senior Executives?

Jeanne C. Meister

---

Each year, Accenture surveys more than 400 leaders of the largest companies and public-sector entities around the world. The survey questions boil down to a central theme: "What's on your mind?" That is, what are those executives' most important strategic goals, and how do they feel about the organization's ability to achieve those goals?

It's exactly the kind of information that can be helpful to CLOs, because—let's face it—interaction with CEOs and others in the management suite is not necessarily a weekly (or even monthly) occurrence for most learning executives. A relative handful of senior leaders are closely involved with employee development. But that doesn't necessarily mean they don't care.

But when you combine infrequent interaction with the C-suite with the pressure CLOs feel to stay closely aligned to the most urgent needs of the business, you can see there is a basic disconnect at the heart of many organizations' governance structures. It's like the game Telephone, where someone whispers a phrase into someone else's ear, that person tells another and so on, until it ends up back where it started—never exactly what the first player started out saying. In "organizational telephone," executives' thoughts and attitudes are often misinterpreted and poorly translated. To overcome communication breakdowns, CLOs cannot wait for information to come to them—they must always be looking for ways to stay connected.

This year's survey results should be heartening to learning and HR executives: People issues lead the list of executive concerns, with attracting and retaining skilled staff coming in at number one. Up from its ranking at number five last year, 40 percent of CEOs indicated they are concerned about their business's ability to compete for talent. Changing organizational culture and employee attitudes was number two on the list. Recent years of intensive cost-cutting have taken their toll on the workforce, and CEOs know it. Top talent needs the support of a strong culture to succeed, and learning and development have been shown to be strong shapers of culture.

Of course, the need for innovation never went away, but this year's survey results indicate that many senior leaders are feeling optimistic enough to think about innovation. Two related issues made the top 10: developing new processes and products to stay ahead of the competition (number four), and being flexible and adaptable to rapidly changing market conditions (number 10).

But consider the interesting implications about which C-level leaders care about which interpretation of innovation. If "innovation" is interpreted to mean new processes and products, it is the chief marketing officer and the chief operating officer who are paying most attention. This issue barely makes the CEO's top 10.

But if innovation is interpreted liberally to mean a willingness to try new patterns of behavior or ways of responding, then it is the CEO and the HR executive who are most on board. Again, a point of extreme relevance to today's CLOs who know how to use learning, knowledge management and collaboration to fuel the "new patterns of behavior" that can lead to innovation.

Here are three ways you can use the findings of this survey to improve the impact of your learning organization:

- Use the survey findings to generate a conversation, or get a meeting scheduled with one or more senior leaders. Start a conversation about what your CEO is thinking regarding the first overall finding of the survey: strengthening the organization's human capital.
- Stimulate a conversation about these issues with your peers and colleagues in the learning field. How do the imperatives they face compare to yours?
- Pick one or two of the issues around human capital management and be proactive. Prepare a briefing about what you are doing about this topic. Remember that sharpening the ability of your organization to respond to important strategic challenges is vital to success.

Keeping employee development focused on the most critical strategic objectives could depend on efforts like this to generate dialogue about what executives care most about.

*Jeanne C. Meister is vice president of market development at Accenture Learning. She can be reached at [jmeister@clomedia.com](mailto:jmeister@clomedia.com).*

---

copyright 2002 - CLOmedia.com / Chief Learning Officer Magazine - MediaTec Publishing

*Chief Learning Officer Magazine*  
<http://www.clomedia.com/>