

# CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

- The Global Leadership Mindset
- Learning Styles: Threat or Opportunity?
- Employee Work Passion
- Teaching Right and Wrong
- Company Consciousness

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# Environmental Awareness

The learning culture is key to business impact • BY JOSH BERSIN



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Organizations that demonstrate market leadership, high levels of employee productivity and excellent customer satisfaction have more than great learning programs in place. They also have strong learning cultures. A recent Bersin & Associates study titled “High-Impact Learning Culture: 40 Best Practices for an Empowered Enterprise” found that a company’s learning culture has greater business impact than any other factor — including training budgets, structure and staff size. In fact, the companies that scored in the top 10 percent in learning culture had 37 percent greater employee productivity, were 44 percent more likely to be innovators in their markets, were 32 percent more likely to come to market before their competitors and were 17 percent more likely to be the market share leaders in their industry.

## A Flood of Content, Systems and Tools

In the past decade, we’ve dramatically changed the way we build and deliver learning. Today, online learning programs form the foundation for almost 30 percent of all training, providing tremendous reach, range and cost efficiency to the practice of employee development.

In addition, organizations are focused heavily on informal learning, social networking tools, knowledge sharing and the use of rich media. Most L&D professionals are now aiming to build a formal architecture for these approaches. Learning professionals are evolving into roles such as content managers, community managers, facilitators and performance consultants.

At the same time, businesses are exploding with content. Employees are blogging, commenting, and tweeting and rapidly collecting audio, video and PowerPoint materials at rates never seen before. Gaining access to this content is easier than ever, too, thanks to Sharepoint and other internal sharing systems.

And businesses have undergone radical changes as well. Many are reeling from restructuring, layoffs, executive turnover and a new focus on globalization. To compete today, organizations must build deeper skills and expertise in their workforces and implement integrated solutions for on-boarding and leadership development. According to recent Bersin TalentWatch research, 72 percent of all L&D leaders cite leadership development as their top challenge for 2010.

So how do you foster a strong culture of learning in today’s environment? Some of the pioneers in learning culture, including Edward Schein and Peter Senge, defined this field of study many years ago. These researchers pointed out that the impetus needed for individuals and organizations to adapt is not content or programs, but a whole series of other factors that encourage people to learn.

## The Next Step: Focus on Learning Culture

Our research looked at nearly 100 different practices and how they contribute to organizational learning and success. We found that the highest-impact practices fall into six categories: building trust, empowering employees, encouraging reflection, enabling knowledge sharing, demonstrating learning’s value and formalizing learning processes. Within these six areas, we found 40 practices that correlate to the highest performance in organizations.

One of the highest-impact practices, for example, is creating an environment that encourages people to ask questions. Intel calls this “constructive confrontation.” Engineers are expected to ask leaders tough questions. Such practices create an open and ongoing quest to learn and improve.

Creating an environment in which it is safe to question decisions is not easy. It may involve the coaching of senior leaders, changes to existing processes and sharing stories that honor the company’s ability to learn from its mistakes.

Another of the top 40 practices is frequently giving employees stretch and developmental assignments. Such programs, which can be executed at all levels, challenge people and organizations to think differently, develop deep skills and confidence, and demonstrate that individual growth is valued. Again, such a program may seem difficult: It can involve thrusting people with narrow skills into critical roles.

If you are not already doing so, explicitly include developmental assignments in learning, succession, leadership readiness and on-boarding plans. Reward and communicate special assignments at all levels. Encourage managers to ask for help from other departments when critical projects are behind.

It’s now time to take culture seriously. A focus on this seemingly soft area will provide hard-hitting results. **CLO**