

Finding the Road Less Traveled



My road was not very well traveled at the time. As you have seen, UCSB and the Gevirtz School gave me the connections and foundations to make my own journey. And as I reflect on this sometimes-meandering trip, these six lessons have continued to be my beacons.

Six Behaviors for L&D Professionals Moving Forward

Unlike teachers, L&D professionals are not lone actors, they exist within and have accountability to organizations. And within organizations there are generally two types of jobs: Critical jobs are those people that make or sell marketable products and services (bringing in the money), while overhead jobs are those functions that support these efforts (e.g., marketing, IT, finance, HR, and L&D). Support functions make important contributions to those fulfilling critical jobs, but these contributions, as the name implies, are often considered secondary. This may not be accurate at all---just ask generals to win a war without planning or logistics or cooks—but this is a perception held by many.

L&D professionals must deal with this reality, especially if they desire to play a more meaningful, significant, and strategic role in the future. They need to shift the perceptions of colleagues and stakeholders from viewing learning and development as a nice-to-have support function to an increasingly valuable strategic capability.

A second adjustment, once credibility and trust among colleagues has been achieved, is to make a difference by solving important business problems and improving productivity and responsiveness for all. L&D professionals don't just teach courses and grant certifications, they solve business problems, improve experiences for customers, help achieve strategic advantage, and sharpen business performance.

I have found these following six behaviors to be vital in helping me make adjustments over the years while working on such projects as the release of the Apple Macintosh in 1984, helping revamp IBM's manufacturing workforce, improving FedEx delivery drivers customer service skills, assisting Ford dealers to understand the concept (and business benefit) of the lifetime value of a customer, improving the effectiveness of the HR function within the CIA, or helping SHRM launch its new global HR certification (GPHR).

1. Become a Better Business Person.

"I don't consider myself a Chief Learning Officer at all. I am a business leader who focuses on talent, culture, and results." Fortune 50 Chief Learning Officer.

Before L&D professionals can be successful in their new role, they must gain the respect of business colleagues. The best pathway to enhanced respect and credibility is to demonstrate to colleagues that you are just as committed to improving the business and advancing the organization's strategy and competitive positioning as they are. Your goals are their goals. Your measures are their measures; and we are 'all in' on this commitment together.

Several key behaviors that demonstrate this commitment to become a stronger business person are: 1) see the bigger picture of the market and socio-economic factors that impact the business, and understand both the intended and unintended consequences of organizational actions, 2) know the organization's most critical measures and financial goals, 3) align projects and actions to the most critical strategies and goals, 4) model the organization's values, 5) position learning initiatives for the value they bring to people and the organization, and 6) be accountable for driving business results. These behaviors move L&D professionals *out of their silo* and into the realm of shared, not separate, accountability with other colleagues for organizational achievement and success.

2.Experiment with New Approaches, Discover What Works and Doesn't, and Adapt.

“Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you are standing still.”
Will Rogers

There are two types of organizations today: The quick and the dead. The speed of change is a defining characteristic of these times, and organizations that are hierarchical, layered, and control-driven are too slow and cumbersome. Vibrant organizations today embrace change, test the limits, try new approaches, discover what works, and adapt. While the old Facebook mantra of “move fast and break things” may not be the best advice, it does suggest vastly different behaviors that favor responsiveness, agility and adaptability over efficiency and control.

All business leaders are expected, especially in a rapidly adjusting economy, to experiment, take risks, learn, and adapt. It is critical to challenge conventions, ask tough questions, look for new approaches, and respond to what works. In many ways this behavior is a key test for establishing and sustaining credibility among business colleagues.

One leading CEO keeps track of the number of experiments being conducted in the workplace. She is worried that the organization continues to do things that have always been done, not what could be done in more challenging times. Interestingly, research shows that even if an experiment is not successful, the very

act of trying new ways of thinking and working leads to faster responses to the future that eventually presents itself.

Another useful practice is to reward people for taking “intelligent risks” that fail. Amy Edmondson (2023) has studied the science of failing well in “The Right Kind of Wrong.” She rightly points out that some failures are just sloppy and bad. But intelligent failures, especially those that explore new territories, can be hugely instructive. They are, as Garry Ridge of WD-40 has said: “true learning moments,” and they should, in fact, be celebrated throughout the organization.

3. Provide Systems and Techniques for Colleagues to Share Wisdom and Insights.

A past leader of Hewlett Packard once said *“If HP only knew, what HP knows, we would be three times more profitable.”*

HP is not alone. Most organizations have not unlocked and shared the knowledge and insights held by their employees. Employees remain isolated by poor systems, old values that discourage the sharing of insights, an infatuation with external versus internal content, and embracing overly complicated processes and rules. The result is stalled productivity, organizations not learning from their own experiences, everyone continues to do their own thing, and then the same mistakes are made over and over again.

Instead, it is possible to unleash the wisdom and insights of people, share these perspectives with colleagues, crowdsource content creation, and enable all to learn faster so the organization can grow more quickly. The benefits for employees are significant: to expand your network of dedicated colleagues, engage in new challenging experiences, make a strategic difference, play a significant role in driving the company forward, and contribute to the growth and development of others.

The research on the importance of social capital and the value of connected networks and communities of colleagues versus independent and separate practices by individuals is dramatic. Multiple studies have shown that people who have strong cross-functional networks of colleagues are from 20 to 40% more productive than people acting by themselves. Seth Godin, a well-respected

strategic thinker, has observed that value in this economy is about connections and relationships. Those with the strongest connections win.

The challenge is then how to create lean and easy-to-use practices and systems that enable colleagues to share wisdom and insights in often large and dispersed organization. These systems should enable collections of recorded explicit knowledge, and enable connections to people that have had those experiences so that in-depth conversations can occur. These rich conversations often reveal the tacit knowledge that provides deeper levels of insight.

“Ain’t none of us as smart as all of us.” Satchel Paige

4. Instill, Embed, and Live Cultural Values.

Every organization has a set of values it espouses, and usually they are listed on the web site and referenced in talks by leaders. But are these values actually lived and owned by employees or are they simply words that look good? Many organizations pay lip service to their cultural values. Great companies live them every day.

One reason for this discrepancy is that it is hard work to operationalize and implement a set of values across a diverse and distributed organization, especially in such a rapidly changing world. These values must be clearly defined, identified, measured, modeled, coached, recognized, and reinforced. They must be communicated in a compelling manner, made visible to multiple audiences, and be credible to the entire workforce. Values-based decision-making skills must be modeled, practiced, and coached; and these tasks take professional skill to accomplish, not just promises from leadership.

Why should all this effort be undertaken? *Values* are important for several reasons. First, they help to define what the company is and is not, and this becomes a competitive differentiator that influences brand credibility with customers and shareholders, the ability to hire talent, and be successful vis a vis competitors. Second, *values* become the spirit of the company and are extremely meaningful to employees who want the workplace to provide more than a paycheck. Human beings, as Victor Frankl has reminded us, seek meaning. They

want to be associated with an organization that does things right but also does the right things. They want to work in an organization that they believe in, and the payback for a culture of meaning is higher engagement, a feeling of ownership, and enhanced productivity (a 20% increase by engagement level is usually demonstrated). And third when properly implemented, *values* become a powerful form of governance because people know what is expected and how they should act. These norms are often more powerful than written rules and procedures.

5. Equip Others to Learn Quickly and Deeply.

L&D professionals should be good at learning quickly and deeply, but it is easy to default to what is easy to teach, not what is essential to learn. It is less important to teach specific knowledge and skills today because the half-life of technical knowledge continues to get shorter, and with tools like ChatGPT that can find and synthesize information in real time. Two keys to learning *quickly* are 1) becoming proficient with artificial intelligence tools and 2) easier and more direct access to professional networks and internal knowledge sharing systems (see behavior #3).

Learning *deeply* (and not superficially) is probably more important to achieve lasting change and improved performance. Two critical ‘deep learning skills’ are: 1) the ability to verify and question generalizations, observations, and statements that may be correct, incorrect or partially correct. This skill is increasingly valuable in a world of social media, AI tools, and bots, in which rumor and innuendo can be confused with facts and corroborated insights; and 2) A set of ‘*learning how to learn skills*’ that enable people to continuously adapt and grow to new requirements and situations. These ‘Learning Meta Skills’ can be used over and over again, and they are never out of date, because learning is almost a constant requirement in periods of turbulence and uncertainty. These meta skills are not transient, they endure. Examples of eight practical Learning Meta Skills are: A Learning Mindset, Learning Velocity, Curiosity, Humbition, Anticipating Change, Resilience, Influencing Others, and Systems Thinking.

6. Be Fearless.

“The secret to getting ahead is getting started.” Mark Twain

For L&D to become recognized as a greater strategic contributor; bold, decisive, and fearless actions are required. These actions send a signal to colleagues that actions and times are very different. But being fearless is not being reckless. Far from it. Fearless is being prepared and committed to the new role and reality, and having the courage to begin the journey with conviction and strength.

This final behavior—Being Fearless—recognizes that this is not an easy road. This journey is not for the timid. It takes an inner strength and commitment to deal with the ups and downs. My last two books both had “Fearless” in their titles because this quality is so crucial.

Over the years I learned to concentrate on qualities that enabled me to take calculated chances and be more fearless. First, never be outworked. There would be smarter people and those with more resources, but I would be the best prepared that I could be. Period. This was under my control and I was not going to compromise this principle. Next, remember the wins. We all have faced tough situations and adversity, whether at work, in school, on playing fields, in creative endeavors, while in the military, or just in life’s activities. Often adversity was difficult to escape but there are memorable times when it was overcome and positive results happened. Take pride in those wins and gain confidence from them: When a positive mindset frames an opportunity (I can do this!), it often becomes a reality.

These six behaviors have helped me over the years to traverse new terrain, make transitions, and be accepted by people outside of my specialty. They have enabled me to see opportunity where others might just see roadblocks or problems. When I reflect on why this is the case, I always come back to the Gevirtz School: The people I met, the support I received, the skills I learned, and the experiences I gained. The time working with Murray Thomas was foundational, the other great teachers who taught me about the essence of learning and development, my Indonesian student friends in the International

Education program, and great colleagues such as Roger Sell who opened up the Nebraska opportunity for us. My heartfelt thanks to you all.
