

Workforce Performance & Learning

Return on learning, Part 2: Creating a vision and plan for learning and enterprise transformation

By Donald B. Vanthournout

Donald B. Vanthournout is Accenture's chief learning officer and the head of the company's Capability Development organization. don.b.vanthournout@accenture.com

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, as the ancient Chinese proverb says. In the case of an organization initiating a transformational change program focused on learning and workforce performance, that first step is picturing and then planning for the final destination. It involves creating an enterprisewide vision of how the initiative will reshape the company through new capabilities, and then planning and putting in place the right team to make that vision a reality.

Creating the vision and plan was, indeed, the first step taken by Accenture's Capability Development organization as we made plans to transform the learning function at our company and return it to its preeminent position, not only within Accenture but within the entire global learning and business community.¹

Across industries, organizational transformation programs have a fairly low success rate. Many reasons lie behind such failures. Some factors are outside the control of change leaders, such as economic downturns or a reassignment of key executive leadership midway through the program. In many cases, however, failure can be traced back to the beginning—to overlooking or giving short shrift to a number of visioning and planning activities. For us, these activities included achieving executive buy-in; presenting a clear business case for the transformation program;

choosing the right team; and aligning the vision with the core values of the enterprise as a whole.

Inspiring conviction among the executive team

Early in the planning phase for our learning transformation program, the chief executive of one of our operating groups provided a succinct and powerful summary of the challenge ahead: "Your goal is to make enterprise learning one of the top three issues that our executive group, especially the CEO, is working on. If your program is not on the short list of issues, it will be very difficult to get executive attention and buy in."

Key to making learning a top-three priority among our leaders was taking the time to meet with as many of them one-on-one as we could. During those meetings, executives discovered that many of their presumptions about the current state of learning and training at Accenture were no longer true. The vaunted core curriculum of the company, and the shared experience and enculturation at a central training facility, were no longer in the condition the leaders had experienced themselves. Short-term needs and goals had interfered with the longer-term development of our people, and that in turn had implications for the performance of the entire company.

These meetings accomplished something very important. They did more than just give our leaders

¹ The full story of Accenture's learning transformation story is told in a new book, *Return on Learning: Training for High Performance at Accenture* (Agate, 2006).

information; they inspired conviction among them that change was needed and that their personal involvement would be critical to the success of the learning transformation program.

Sustaining conviction with a clear business case

We had successfully gotten buy-in from our leadership that a learning transformation program was the right thing to do. But we also had to give them the hard numbers to prove that it was also a business-savvy thing to do.

To make clear that link between enterprise learning and business impact, we began a series of research initiatives piecing together the evidence we needed. We commissioned a competitive analysis that helped us hone in on the key activities or levers that would help deliver a positive return on learning, such as increasing the number of hours of training that employees receive. More telling: our survey of college graduates showed that recruits valued corporate learning so highly that they were willing to work at a reduced base salary in exchange for top-notch training. In other words, they were willing to take less now for the prospect of making more later. Secondary research based on several academic studies confirmed the link between learning investments and financial indicators such as productivity and shareholder return. Finally, we conducted a groundbreaking ROI study, including the development of a university-endorsed economic model, which proved that, even in its current state, training was delivering triple-digit returns on Accenture's investments—353 percent, to be exact. As that study continued to win

external awards in the learning industry, it was hard to ignore. Accenture leadership soon let us know: "You have our attention."

Choosing the right team

The core leadership team in the Capability Development group—those involved in planning and executing the learning transformation program—was really more of a business team focused on corporate education than it was an education team trying to have a business impact. A number of us had served Accenture performing client work for many years before joining the Capability Development organization. Others had specific expertise in such areas as technology, methodology and performance measurement.

It's not that we were no longer committed to developing great, leading-edge training. Quite the contrary. Continuing the award-winning tradition of Accenture's training organization was one of the key goals of the transformation. But in the end, identifying great ideas for learning design and delivery is not the hardest part of what a learning executive does. Managing those great ideas toward positive business results, with sufficient rigor to earn the trust of executive leadership, is the biggest challenge. Hence, putting together a team with the right business experience and program management skills was vital.

Our core team included experienced business people in areas such as learning strategy, curriculum planning and development, training operations and technology development. Once the team members were assembled, we made an effort to inspire conviction in them too. In effect, we were asking them to take a risk: Put your profes-

sional backgrounds on the line to see if, together, we can successfully transform the training situation at Accenture.

Aligning the vision with the company's core values

The strongest buildings sink their foundations deep into the ground. Similarly, the strongest visions are founded on the deep cultural and social values of a company. The Capability Development group tied the overall vision for learning transformation to the publicly stated core values of Accenture: stewardship, best people, client value creation, respect for the individual, integrity and one global network.

We also linked the vision to the leadership model at Accenture. This model emphasizes three important components of leadership: value creation for the company; people developers on behalf of the workforce; and business operators who are effective stewards of company resources. Aligning our vision and plans to our corporate values and to our own leadership model was an important success factor. It gave us a structure—it based our work around what we valued most and what those values meant for how we led our people. And it resonated with Accenture senior executives and helped secure their ongoing commitment.

Of course, even the best visions and plans must be followed immediately by effective execution. But the right vision—created, planned and reinforced the right way—can become a beacon for the challenging journey of organizational transformation.

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A vision for learning transformation

The vision for Accenture's learning transformation initiative affirmed that professional education at Accenture would:

- Become a strategic investment of the highest priority, even during difficult economic times.
- Be measured according to how well it supported the business strategy and improved the performance of the company overall.
- Offer exceptional development opportunities that stretch and challenge individuals and teams.
- Be delivered with world-class efficiency, maximizing the value of the investment.
- Build the Accenture brand of people—individuals who lead and create value in any context.