

MOVING TO A STRATEGIC LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT APPROACH



BYGGERIDES

All things strategy seem *sexy* and are often referred to as the highest level of work in different professions. Many people in our industry aim to act as strategic learning and development professionals which seems a healthy ambition to me. But it is not always easy to do so because strategy can often seem quite complex and vague. Let's get rid of the mystery surrounding strategy, by exploring a pragmatic approach to create a strategic learning and development agenda.

Get the bigger picture

The first step is to take some distance - and I really mean some distance. There is a big chance that your day-to-day focus is on individuals, teams and departments and their learning needs. Astronauts who have spent time in a space shuttle report that their view of Earth changed so much from being able to observe it as a whole from a great distance. That is the perspective you need to take on your organisation. What is the position of your organisation in the market, in society, compared to competitors, and what is the primary reason it exists? What is the purpose, the added value of your organisation? Be sure to understand the essence of your organisation in the bigger picture - what is its place within the ecosystem?

Be brave and look differently

The second step is to get rid of your learning and development lenses. (Don't worry, it is just for a while - you will need them again later). Instead take out your strategy lenses. Let me help you with your strategy lenses; strategy is both a simple and a complex thing. Let's start with the simple part. Strategy is creating an idea about a desired future for the organisation. It is a simple thinking process of looking outside and looking inside and relate the findings to the desired future.

Looking outside has its focus on the environment and how it changes: markets, competitors, economy, legislation, and technology to name a few. Looking inside is a kind of self-

reflection on the organisation looking at people, processes, culture, systems, resources and the like. Looking outside and inside will provide ideas about opportunities and threats, strengths and weaknesses related to the desired future. Knowing this, one can decide where to allocate resources to best create the desired future. That is the essence of creating a strategy. Leaders, senior leaders and strategy consultants won't agree with you that it is that simple. And you know what - they are right. Most of the time in reality it is a bit more complex. It doesn't matter - I hope this helps you to get your strategy lenses on.

Conquer the hydra-headed monster

In real life strategising will be more complex when supported by data gathering. You might need to undertake more complex approaches to make sense of the available data so the insights facilitate thinking. Some thinking might be explicit and shared while other parts might stay implicit inside the heads of different people. And you know what happens when the *same* thing resides in heads of different people - at the end they are different things. The next aspect of complexity of strategy is that it results in different appearances; has different faces. It can be more of a Plan, a Ploy, a Position, a Pattern, or a Perspective or Purpose. Or any combination of these!

Don't worry - just try to find as many 'strategy chunks, themes, topics' as you can find. Look at formal expressions in documents and presentations but also 'read between the lines'. Go out to have conversations with stakeholders who are involved in strategising and tap into their thinking.

Be a hungry Performance Omnivore

When gathering strategy chunks you act like a hungry Performance Omnivore. Not all strategy chunks will be edible for you. Some might be financial or legal ones or other things beyond your scope. Your assessment will be are there

consequences for people and work processes related to the strategy chunk? If the answer is 'Yes' put your learning and development lenses back on and do your second assessment. Make a best guess if people will likely need to have new knowledge, skills or attitudes to be able to get their work done in an effective way. This can be because of changing requirements, new technology, new work processes, different ways of collaborating, new product or service launches, serving different industries or geographical locations to name a few.

As a Performance Omnivore you like those strategic chunks best - you can add value by creating learning related to changing performance needs. The last part in this step is to get a better view on different target groups: how does this strategic theme affect different target groups. Create your overview of strategic themes that will have influence on performance and in what way for different target groups.

Connect, consult and contract with owners

Each strategic theme must have an owner. The owner of a strategic theme is a person (just one!) who feels the need to solve the strategic issue or is eager to reach the strategic ambition and who has decision power and resources available to get the job done. Most of the time this will be senior leaders maybe even at C-suite level. You have to connect with the owner to consult and discuss the consequences for target groups of employees and how it will change their jobs, and whether additional competencies are needed to get their jobs done. If so, I try to contract with the owner to work together on solving these competency gaps. Some say strategic learning and development professionals must try to get a seat at the C-suite table. I think it is kind of crowded at that table. I prefer building partnerships with owners of strategic themes and don't care at which level they operate. Depending on your position within the organisation you might find it hard to work with senior

| STRATEGY APPEARANCES | LOOKS LIKE... |
|----------------------|---|
| Plan | From Situation A to Situation B |
| Ploy | They won't tell you in the open, this will be classified |
| Position | A relative position compared to competitors in market share, size |
| Pattern | Open 'x' new branches/stores every year |
| Perspective/Purpose | How we want to serve customers/society, what we are good for |

leaders. Be brave – if you want to work on strategic learning and development topics you have to work with senior leaders.

Create a strategic learning and development agenda

You have gathered the pieces of the puzzle and now it's time to connect them and see what you have got. Create an overview of strategic themes, an owner per theme and target groups whose work will be effected and need additional competencies. You now have your strategic learning and

development agenda. This will give you the opportunity to make a plan - let's say a year plan so you know what to work on, when and with whom. Use it to communicate with owners and other stakeholders. Now you have placed the 'big rocks' on your agenda. Beware of the incompleteness of this overview.

You also will need to consider risk, compliance, induction, and any other activities that support the business that involve learning and development. There is enough space between the big rocks to plan the smaller rocks and even the grains of sand in your planning.

Check and determine if your plan has the right balance. Leaders want their 'regular' learning and development stuff is taken care off but also like when you work with them on strategic themes. So my concluding motto is: be sure on the regular stuff, be brave on the strategic stuff!

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