

Better Together

- Learning & Development that really works!

As my mind occasionally drifts towards visions of a warm holiday by the beach, I consider the perfect ingredients? My children claim to be *too old* but I am still partial to messing about in the sand, especially if armed with my trusted bucket and spade. They really are better together - lose the bucket and it's hard to make those elaborate castle shapes. No spade to dig with and you end up using only the dry sand

at the top which is prone to crumble!

It's universally known that certain combinations in life just work. So when it comes to Learning & Development (or L&D) in business, what really is better together? The April HRD 2013 Conference in London is dedicated to making an impact on your business through L&D. The 100+ line up of suppliers that the CIPD has gathered will cover a myriad of topics.

However, there are two insights that may not be discussed in polite conversation. So why is it that most L&D investment today doesn't work!



1. Train to Drain

The L&D badge has been with us for some time now. In many cases it has simply been hijacked by training interventions, and some training today is still quite frankly crap! Since its inception, the new language of L&D promised much, but the results have been mixed. In the same way that rebranding Polytechnics as Universities did not automatically change anything, why did we expect that to happen with training into L&D?

“Earlier this year in Europe one of our clients brought in a training supplier to deliver a tailored 1 day session to support their Sales & Accounts Management. I saw zero evidence of the company tailoring their offer; it had come straight off the shelf. The trainer promised not to bury delegates in Power Point slides but that is exactly what happened. As the day rolled on, the timings slipped and the trainer lost control of the group and the overall impact was low.”

A lot of trainers fall into a very old trap – they simply regurgitate the same material time and time again and often attach big claims about the benefits and results you'll achieve as a direct result. The reality is often significantly different. A lot of training simply works for the small minority. But training itself is not the problem – good training is a powerful and very important development intervention. Good training companies understand the fundamentals clearly;

- **Good Commissioning**, where the situation and desired objectives are well understood and agreed.
- **Good Design** that is fit for purpose and tailored to the audience and cultural dynamics.
- **Good Delivery** that is flexible enough and yet maintains a consistency in quality and what is taught.

Good training works. Bad training, or training that is mis-sold as a panacea of all ills, serves only to drain motivation and the belief in all people-based development interventions.

2. Whose Agenda is it anyway?

There are three very distinctive sets of needs and motivations in play with all L&D activity; the sponsor or commissioner, the recipient(s) or beneficiary and the change agent or catalyst. Over time we've seen an erosion of the link between these three sets of needs. Sponsors are often losing sight of their organisational reality.

One of the big trends is to outsource L&D activity. The real but undisclosed driver here can be to reign in spend, rationalise local buying and supplier lists and outsource the organisational risk. Whether it's the Group Centre or the Divisional MD doing the commissioning, the only way to guarantee the right impact for L&D is to stay close to the target audience, to seek to understand first, and to be clear and honest about organisational motives. Get this right and congratulations, you are creating the right levers with the potential to move your business forward. Get it wrong and you simply fuel scepticism and resistance to change from within.

Companies like the people services one described on the right, are the ones who expect miracles from L&D interventions and will quickly criticise when no 'silver bullet' is produced!



A People Services Business. Last year, this UK based firm was in the midst of a painful restructure. The industry is one that is notorious for its poor retention levels. They lost people and moral took a big hit. Instead of being brave and listening even harder to its people, the management team chose to cancel the annual people survey, fearful of what it might say. Naively they were keen to plough ahead this year with a refresh of their Vision & Strategy without taking their people with them.

So what really works?

We would argue a strong case in two opposing directions of doing less or doing more!

Do Less:

Especially with non-technical training, it's often the organisation's leaders that are not ready to change! Further down the organisation, this can leave the poor old recipient high and dry in a momentary 'bubble' of motivation during a course or a programme. As they re-enter their organisational reality the buzz ebbs away and the relationships / support are often not in place to make the desired change stick.

Action:

Sponsors should keep their money and find alternative investments that support their business plan (do less L&D).

Do More:

HRD 2013 Conference: Amongst the exhibitors are providers who specialise, like us, in OD / Change Management, Leadership Development and Engagement. It is very difficult for an individual to succeed in his / her change ambition if that ambition is not supported more broadly in their organisation. This is especially true of non-technical / behavioural change.

First, determine whether it's the right time for change. We must consider not only the mind-set of the workforce but that of the management team. They are often the ones with significant influence on the hidden levers for change. If they are not prepared for their own journey of change it does not bode well for payback on investment and for those they are charged with leading! Managers and leaders need to consider a more strategic approach to L&D if they want to truly maximise their return. One of the major ways of doing this is to minimise one-off or stand-alone interventions. In our experience, true and lasting change is systemic and requires a longer term approach.

Actions:

- Demonstrate being *better together* and join up agendas and motivations in an honest conversation with your people.
- Work with partners and not suppliers who understand and can teach you the core principles of systemic change.
- Create strategies that will effectively *pair up* or link interventions over time to create programmes within the L&D arena.
Examples include:
- **Diagnostic listening exercise with Training Needs Analysis**
- **Training Programme with follow up Mentoring**
- **Leadership Programmes with Team Effectiveness / Dynamics work**
- **Capability Development Programme with Coaching**
- **Refresh of Vision / Strategy with Organisational Restructuring**

Having studied and supported dozens of organisations over time, we are clear on how L&D can really make a sustainable impact. There is a strong link between employee motivation / engagement levels and the success of strategic L&D investments. Organisations that are serious about their investments will make the effort to ask the right questions of themselves and their development partners.

So this summer, whether it's your poolside novel & sunglasses or your bucket & spade – remember they are always *better together*!

Written by Steve Bernard, Founder, Connectwell

