Catching the Wave

by Dr. Liz Stewart

**Leaders and Employee Development –
Challenges and Actions**

Leaders in any organization must focus on change - in fact, those leaders who can help their organizations change faster and more effectively will contribute to the success and survival of the institution. During times of cost cutting and reduction, education and training efforts are often first to be cut. Actually, these cuts result in a false economy. An effective employee development process not only improves productivity but also aids in the retention effort – especially for those employees you really want to keep. Organizational leaders must become more knowledgeable about employee development trends and assume a greater involvement in the education and growth process. Training and education are not frills, but rather a strategic foundation for organizational success. If we're going to do the same or more work with fewer employees, they need to be the right people with the right skills.

Eight key trends reflect the challenges affecting all organizations. A starting point should be to identify how these trends impact your organization.

1. **Increased technologies**. Today there are so many technologies available that assessing what you really need is an education need in itself. Focusing on necessary outcomes helps define not only the selection but also the appropriate usage of technology. For example, a client of mine recently told me that his email was no longer as valuable as when it was instituted. Now he has 300 email messages a day so he only reads them weekly. Technology used this way in fact defeats the communication process. Another client stated that just as staff becomes proficient in using a software program, the IT department upgrades or replaces it so that staff feels constantly in a non-productive learning curve. These upgrades should be assessed on the basis of a true business need, not just the acquisition of the latest bells and whistles.

2. **Speed.** Everything happens faster today. The ability to make good decisions more quickly in order to become better positioned for rapid change is a valuable strength. Developing this strength is contingent on a strong education process to make certain the right information is available to the right people as soon as possible.

3. **Increased volume of information**. There is so much information available that simply determining what is necessary and appropriate for the achievement of the

organization's goals is a key reason for leadership involvement in the education process. It used to be that gathering enough information was the challenge; today the challenge is the management of a glut of information to find what is truly useful.

4. **Shift to the strategic.** Learning with a focus on the future need is a luxury we can no longer afford. Just-in-time learning is the trend. And, that learning must be connected to applications that accomplish the strategic objectives.

5. **Focus on competencies.** With most organizations facing some sizing issues, those who remain must be better able to perform. Defining and measuring competencies and multi-tasking are key trends. When an organization develops roles based on measurable competencies, employees feel more vested in the organization's goals and values and retention is enhanced.

6. **Focus on outcomes versus processes.** As we focus on performance management, less attention should be paid to designing systems for the sake of systems and more attention paid to how the processes affect outcomes of value. This means that leaders must have an awareness of how the processes are impacting results.

7. **Accountability**. One of the most significant factors in successful change management is the development of a system of accountability. Defining a balance between the values of the organization and the achievement of the outcomes needed for survival must drive this system. Because it is more critical today to have the right outcomes, this trend is vital.

8. **Adding value.** How an organization is perceived in its marketplace is clearly dependent on the value-added services delivered. Survival and success today are, in fact, based on creating a more marketable service or product. That means creating a system of adding value by focusing on how the service is delivered as well as what the service is.

Based on these trends, the actions for true leaders are:

1. **Shift from reactor to initiator**. Those leaders who focus on creative, innovative actions rather than waiting to see what happens will pilot the most successful organizations.

2. **Balance visions with ethics.** Great leadership means never losing sight of **how** you get to the future. Visions are only great if the process of achieving them is ethical.

3. **Balance outcomes and values.** Outcomes are only successful if they truly support the values of the organization. Defining "reality checks" is a leadership challenge.

4. **Validate the mission with real world needs.** In changing environments the mission must often shift to support external customer needs. The mission clearly defines why

an organization exists. Being able to validate the mission consistently means that the rationale for existence continues to be valid.

5. **Build a broad and innovative network base.** Because different results are often necessary to meet marketplace demands, different alliances and collaborations must be formed. The leadership challenge here is to become adept at recognizing existing skills and talents and integrating them into your organization.

These trends drive the challenges facing all organizations today. It is the role of leaders to rise to the challenges using all tools available. Education and development is clearly a viable tool in building the successful organizations of the future. In fact, in times of change or cost conservation, education and development efforts that focus on these challenges and leadership actions will be true investments in success. These are the key roles a leader should play in education and development within his organization:

1. **Attach value to learning objectives.**
2. **Foster a deep commitment to a powerful vision.**
3. **Develop a vital and powerful organizational culture.**
4. **Keep the focus on development outcomes – stay away from fads and "quick fix" training.**

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