Mentoring: Bridging the Competency Divide

RANDY EMELO

Traditional learning interventions may not move fast enough to close skill gaps. Different types of mentoring offer relational strategies to help employees compete in today's fast-moving business environment.

Despite a surplus of workers in the market, organizations are experiencing a growing skill gap.

According to a 2009 ASTD study, almost 80 percent of executives from 1,179 organizations agree that there are growing skill gaps in their organizations in eight key areas: leadership and executive skills, basic workplace competencies, professional or industry-specific skills, managerial and supervisory skills, communication and interpersonal skills, technical, IT and systems skills, sales skills, and process and project management skills.

The "National Employer Skills Survey for England 2009" by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (Figure 1) also noted significant skill gaps. For example, both customer-handling and problem-solving skill areas experienced a nine-point jump as areas where skills are lacking.

Most of the skill gap areas identified in both

studies pertain to complex competencies relying on context, judgment and relational savvy to achieve results. That has not changed in 2012, nor is it likely to in the next few years thanks to the slow economic recovery and the increasing speed with which business has had to adapt to changes in technology, globalization and market volatility.

"People skills and teaming skills are popping up as needs today," said Tom Reed, former director of leadership development for MillerCoors and MillerCoors University and current vice president of product development and integration for Emergenetics International, a company specializing in organizational behavior. "Ten years ago we were moving away from the soft skills, yet today here we are facing as big a need as ever."

Part of the reason could be the economic meltdown and slow recovery. There will be exceptions, but most organizations won't engage in aggressive hiring to close skill gaps. Instead, they will have to use existing talent to fill gaps, which may exacerbate the problem.

"Organizations will continue to promote sharp people who have little management experience and fewer people skills into positions where they will need an abundance of both to be successful," Reed said.

Relying on Relationships

To avoid a critical talent shortage, learning leaders must act today to identify the gaps, decide how to close them and assess if their efforts are successful. "World-class learning and development programs are the price of admission now for successful global companies," said Debra Clawar, global head of talent management, organizational development and learning, and staffing for Novartis Consumer Health, OTC.

Closing the top skill and competency gaps that exist today relies on providing learning within the context of employees' daily work. For example, the U.K. study showed the teamworking skill gap grew by 11 percent from 2007 to 2009. To close these kinds of gaps, tacit knowledge, craft know-how and relational strategies have to increase dramatically.

"Part of people skills is the ability to build and lead teams of highly talented individuals," Reed said. "This is a competency we may be losing. I see few team leaders and fewer managers who know how to build and sustain team performance, especially in the midst of all the change teams must deal with on a daily basis. Building sustainable team performance is becoming a lost art."

Knowledge workers will need to learn these skills from other people, not from non-relational sources

such as e-learning. This need for a high degree of contextual awareness in these skill areas is driving the necessity for person-to-person learning processes, such as mentoring. Traditional classroom training is too slow to meet the growing needs of today's workforce, and e-learning, while faster to develop, lacks relational interaction and contextual understanding.

"Ten years ago corporations talked about training, and that meant in-person, face-to-face, didactic classes," said Novartis' Clawar. "We've seen a move away from this narrow notion of training, and new terminology suggests a broader scope like learning and now development. At Novartis, this broadening has led to the introduction of more varied and personal learning modalities like leader-led, multi-day mentoring sessions that emphasize how leaders can have the most business impact and personal satisfaction by making explicit connections between their talents, values and motivations and the kind of work they do."
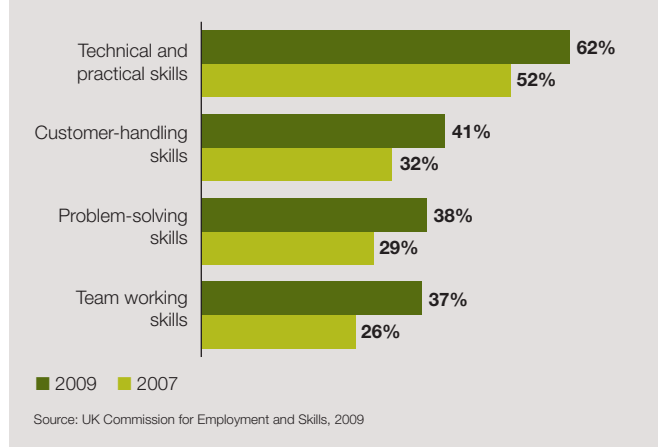
Complex competency solutions require effective human relationships and interaction to be productive. From social learning to expanded mentoring use, relationally based modes of learning have risen to prominence in the past few years as a method with which to effectively address competency gaps.

Topical mentoring: Topical mentoring experiences, such as the one Clawar describes, leverage leaders' expertise and other learners' collaborative experience. One or more advisers lead numerous learners in conversation, knowledge sharing and practical application around a specific learning topic or a point of affinity. People can find or create learning groups on their own, or organizations can manage the process. People learn from the advisers

FIGURE 1: WHAT SKILLS DO U.K. EMPLOYEES NEED?

- Technical and practical skills: 62% (2009), 52% (2007)
- Customer-handling skills: 41% (2009), 32% (2007)
- Problem-solving skills: 38% (2009), 29% (2007)
- Team working skills: 37% (2009), 26% (2007)

■ 2009 ■ 2007

Source: UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009

IN PRACTICE THREE WAYS TO REV UP REVERSE MENTORING

As more millennials join the workforce, reverse mentoring is growing as a developmental practice. It's also helpful as more baby boomers stick around past traditional retirement age. Large organizations have made it a tool in their learning repertoire. For instance, at Dell, 19 percent of people in the company mentoring program engaged in reverse mentoring in 2010.

As these generations turn traditional mentoring on its head, learning leaders must pay attention to how organizational power and hierarchy impact relationships. The adviser in reverse mentoring likely will wield less power and authority than the learner, and may even take direction from the learner. Conversely, the learner will have to take more responsibility for engagement outcomes.

At first this nontraditional mentoring dynamic can cause problems, such as poor communication, vague understanding of the relationship's purpose and fear of reprisal for actions taken during mentoring. The following three tips can help counter these potential roadblocks and build a collaborative reverse mentoring relationship.

1. **Focus on learning.** The relationship should not be about power; it should center on learning. This might be difficult at first, since the learner is higher in the organizational hierarchy, but it can help to determine goals for the relationship and use them as a guide. Learners should express their desired outcomes, and advisers should discuss the extent to which they feel capable of contributing to those goals. Both parties need to be in accord on the general goals and direction for the relationship, adjusting them as necessary.

2. **Share responsibility.** Mentoring is intended to be collaborative, with both parties having input on topics for exploration. The adviser needs to have permission to be more directive at times as the acknowledged thought leader in the relationship. If the learner is a senior leader, this permission needs to be explicit so the adviser feels safe speaking honestly. Learners also need to take responsibility for their own progress and commit themselves to the mentoring engagement.

3. **Practice respect and empathy.** Trust is a cornerstone of all mentoring relationships, yet it will only develop if conversations are confidential. Both parties must talk about the political realities that surround the relationship and determine the level of confidentiality they want for their engagement. This shows that both learner and adviser hold one another in high esteem and value the relationship. To show this in practice, people should contemplate how their mentoring partner's positional power affects them before making a request, offering a possible solution or processing a critical issue. Even if the relationship is about learning a new skill, offhand comments need to be handled with care.

Reverse mentoring can be beneficial and provide valuable learning opportunities for all involved. As with all mentoring, commitment, respect, honest communication and specific learning goals are key for success. CLO

– Randy Emelo

and from other learners, helping to build deep expertise across the enterprise.

Situational mentoring: Situational mentoring gives individuals a way to address immediate learning needs with one or more advisers. Several people can offer ideas simultaneously so learners get quick-hitting answers on a high-impact problem or opportunity quickly. Learners then synthesize this knowledge into a solution that fits their needs and bring that solution back to the job in a timely manner.

Peer mentoring: Peer mentoring connects colleagues at the same hierarchical level in the organization who may be in different functions or divisions. Learning relationships of this sort are beneficial because peers can be a great source of social support and encouragement. They understand and experience the same pressures based on position in the organization and can provide insight and advice.

Reverse mentoring: Reverse mentoring places those who would typically be considered advisers into the learner role, and learners into the adviser role. Reverse mentoring often exposes leaders to new trends in technology, new ideas and innovations, and new perspectives from younger generations, while bringing bright young minds to seasoned leaders' attention.

Open mentoring: Open mentoring programs that promote self-directed relationships allow people to address their own learning needs in a manner of their choosing, while still aligning with overall organizational goals. Using technology to facilitate distance mentoring lets people collaborate with one or more mentoring partners globally and allows the programs and mentoring networks to grow organically throughout the organization.

These new approaches to mentoring can empower workers to direct their own career development, a reality that may hold significant appeal for younger generations in the workforce. "Gen Y has grown up learning from the global crowd-sourcing they do on the Internet," Clawar said. "They seem to have vast knowledge and the ability to synthesize this information and make sense of it quickly."

Their desire for broad learning will force companies to re-evaluate how they look at learning and development. "Organizations will have to find innovative ways to help support this kind of learning while balancing the need for subject-matter expertise, business continuity and historical knowledge," Clawar said.

Staying Proactive

The pressures learning leaders face can be difficult, but the key is to have more real-time approaches to

identifying gaps, closing them and measuring success. "We have a company filled with top talent and incredible subject-matter experts," Clawar said of Novartis. "To unleash the power of this knowledge and enable real-time learning requires a way for employees to connect to each other and understand who can give them what they need."

In our hyperactive world, the core competencies people need to master are constantly changing, regardless of what role they play in a company. Learning designed to bridge competency gaps needs to be flexible and dynamic. Nontraditional forms of mentoring can provide the vehicle for learning as leaders work to close competency gaps.

Systems today should be able to answer several questions at a glance:

- What are the most-needed or sought-after competencies?
- What is the organization's current talent level in that regard?
- What can it do to leverage the talent it has to meet this need?
- Are these gaps closing or widening over time?

Applying this information to learning plans to close skill gaps can be as straightforward as learning leaders seeing a competency area emerge, suggesting that current experts start a few topical mentoring events to leverage expertise in real time, and analyzing if the gap closes between those seeking more expertise in the emerging area and those who have it after a prescribed amount of time.

Success will not be measured by a compliance exam at the end of a learning intervention, but by the overall application of shared knowledge and the perceptions of achievement from those involved. "We know from research that the most successful executives are those that are in constant learning mode every day, on and off the job," Clawar said.

The use of mentoring can help accelerate learning in a relational way. "Employees are more connected today than ever before; however, that connection is non-relational," Reed said. "They can get sales numbers, inventory data, product and marketing information faster than ever. They can reach out to the decision makers faster and get immediate direction, yet it's all non-relational."

Reed said different types of mentoring can address this and offer value. "People want to be connected in organizations as in society," he said. "That is one reason why mentoring is more important now than 10 years ago. Networks connect people to information; mentoring connects people with wisdom and knowledge."

That is the difference between contextual learning for skills and competencies that are critical today, and training for skills that no longer hold value in the workplace. CLO

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Crabb said everyone is extremely busy at Facebook, which means most of its learning content is fashioned into bite-sized bits and delivered as seamlessly as possible through technology and over the firm's internal version of the Facebook product.

In between meetings, Crabb said he purposefully finds time to meet with external visitors — the journalists and other practitioners who visit Facebook's campus. Then, taking from the "Energy Project," Crabb takes around 90 minutes at lunchtime on Tuesdays and Thursdays to visit the Facebook gym.

Three nights a week Crabb manages to get out of the office by 6 p.m. to spend time with his children. The other two nights he tends to stick around until 8 or 9 p.m., grinding through the mammoth flood of email or working on learning projects.

Yet time, as scarce a commodity as it is at a fast-growing global business like Facebook, might be one of the last things on Crabb's mind.

"One of the things that's important to know about Facebook is we don't watch the clock," he said. "No one is going to judge you on when you come in or go home — it's all about if you're killing it on your goals. Honestly, if you're killing it, who cares?" CLO

— Frank Kalman

At a building fire, the fire doubles in size every 90 seconds. When Google employees entered the smoke-filled environment, they had to quickly adapt to the changing environment by making a series of rapid decisions to extinguish the flames.

"We have always believed that it is important to launch early and iterate often. This philosophy allows us to innovate quickly to build successful products," Laureno said.

Google competed against seven corporations and was tested on how well its members worked as a team, communicated and solved problems. The company exceeded the FDNY instructors' expectations and placed first. Through every scenario employees worked as a team to resolve situations they had never before encountered.

Google was one of several corporations that participated at the Sept. 30 event. Some of the other companies that took part in the Team Challenge were Boston Consulting Group, New York Stock Exchange, the American Society for Training and Development and BNP Paribas.

In a survey of 24 participants conducted by the FDNY Foundation from that event, 92 percent agreed with Google that the FDNY Team Challenge improved their teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills. CLO

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