



Strategic Catalyst or Order-Taker?

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Three techniques may help you to become a strategic catalyst who can play a proactive role to influence and shape the organization's strategic agenda.

"We would like one session on leadership, three sessions on process improvement and one coaching session on the side." Sound familiar? Unfortunately, the CLO role is still treated as that of a "short-order cook," rather than a "strategic leader" in many organizations today.

While we have heard for years now that the CLO needs to take a strategic seat at the table, very few of these gatherings include the CLO. Instead, the learning and development function is typically represented by the senior vice president of human resources or another surrogate.

So how does the CLO get a seat at the table? Although there are no magical formulas or tools to apply, three techniques may help you to become a strategic catalyst who can play a proactive role to influence and shape the organization's strategic agenda.

Learn the Industry

This sounds simple, but it can be very difficult to implement. It typically requires a considerable investment of time beyond your traditional "day job" as a CLO. If you are a CLO with previous experience as a line manager, business unit head or a similar role within the same industry, you are ahead of the game.

While there has been a recent increase of line managers and executives who hold the CLO role, the traditional career path is still through the human resources and development function. This often results in CLOs who are relatively well-versed in HRD-"ese," trends and tools, but have limited knowledge and exposure to the organizational "core" industry.

When was the last time you attended a forum or conference that focused on the latest industry predictions, trends, benchmarks and challenges? When was the last time you researched what differentiated your organization from key competitors? If your answer is yesterday, last week or even last month, I applaud you. You may possess some important information that will help you get closer to the table.

Know the Score

Position yourself to facilitate the development and reporting of the organizational scorecard, or at least become part of the "team" that helps orchestrate the organization's performance

measurement system. Although this has not been considered a traditional learning and development responsibility, the CLO is ideally positioned to help lead this strategically important initiative. Taking this course also supports the transition of the CLO's role into that of the CPO (chief performance officer), becoming an even more influential business partner.

When I say "scorecard," I do not mean just developing and reporting on the HRD function. Unfortunately, by focusing your efforts primarily on this solely functional deliverable, you end up missing the interpretation of trends and results for other aspects of the organization (e.g., financial, customer-related, market, operational, community, etc.) and their specific implications for the organization's short- and long-range strategies and tactics.

Experience the 'Business'

Although not a requirement for succeeding as a CLO, I highly recommend negotiating a personal development plan that allows you some time to get hands-on experience with operational aspects of the organization, such as sales and marketing, operations, customer support, finance, or research and development. This could involve some part-time rotational assignments "living and learning" the business of the organization.

How can a CLO be a respected executive partner if he or she doesn't fully understand the organization's business model, operational challenges and opportunities, and real-world people development needs? On several occasions when I have facilitated executive planning sessions with the CLO present, the CLOs have been unable to add value to strategy development discussions, because they did not have the organization-specific experiences, operational knowledge or technical abilities necessary. By actually experiencing a range of critical roles, you learn to speak "their" language, demonstrating your understanding and increasing your credibility.

Clearly, taking the lead in this manner will require an investment in your own learning and development. Enjoy the journey of learning about your organization, its industry and how it is actually performing. Your seat at the table is waiting! ■

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