

Garner Support from the C-Suite

How to obtain buy-in and funding for training from chief decision-makers in your organization. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q: My organization's answer to last year's economic downturn was to cut budgets, including training and development: Our staff was cut, vendor programs were suspended, and the number of courses offered was greatly reduced. Now that there are signs of recovery, how do I convince my organization T&D should be one of the first places to invest if we are to be competitive?

A: As a learning professional, you realize employee development not only contributes to market competitiveness, but also impacts retention and morale. Neglecting it can have devastating repercussions.

At the same time, the folks responsible for strategy and budgets—namely, the C-suite executives—are concerned about getting the maximum return on investment (ROI) from every dollar, especially in this economy.

Recognizing that such priorities are not in opposition, focus on aligning your interests.

Start by challenging your own assumptions and objectives. Does remaining competitive require as much initiative and innovation as in the past? What business argument is there for the programs you have in mind? Invest in benchmarking to find out what the rest of your industry is doing. It will help identify reasonable expectations (e.g., we only have to do “x” to keep up) and specific opportunities (e.g., if we do “y” now while others aren’t, we’ll be that much farther ahead of the curve). Even though you might feel frustrated by a more modest budget, you might be delighted to learn it’s enough to allow you to remain ahead of the competition.

Now, uncover your CEO’s specific goals for the company and for the individual business units. This will help you avoid creating an L&D strategy that is working toward achieving outdated objectives, and align your initiative with the organizational needs and goals. Be sure you’ve grasped and communicated a full understanding of the CEO’s interests before you express any of your own goals and ideas.

When you do, begin by juxtaposing the impression

your statements might create with your intention for stating them: “While it might seem as though I’m trying to defend my job and the justification for my role in the company, my intent in raising this issue is to protect the organization, increase productivity, and get the highest ROI from every dollar spent.” Emphasize

the distinction between “impact on the listener” and “intent of the speaker” whenever it seems you might have struck a nerve, or when someone says something that evokes a similar response in you.

Then address the merits of the situation. Present your case by citing data, explaining your interpretation of that data, and, finally, sharing your conclusions and suggestions based on those interpretations. Telling a CEO, COO, or HR director it’s important to implement a particular training initiative is far less persuasive than citing a 13 percent increase in productivity following a previous rollout of a specific training initiative, linking the increase directly to that training, and suggesting that achieving similar results next year will increase organizational profitability by an estimated 2 percent. Be open to new (additional) data your counterparts introduce and to their interpretations of the data, and be prepared to draw new conclusions of your own based on that additional information.

Finally, explore creative options for meeting your shared interests. While utilizing vendor services (which have few commitments and are easily scalable) instead of increasing headcount might be a strategy worth discussing, exploring less obvious solutions might prove more insightful and valuable.

Your commitment to learning is powerful and important. Bring that same spirit to the challenges you face in your role. The abilities to be open-minded, articulate, and creative have never been more essential to one’s success in L&D, as well as in all areas of business. **T**

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