

## Fast Company

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## Will Companies Ever Learn?

Judy Rosenblum has dealt with all of the obstacles that keep companies from getting smarter. Here is her 10-point curriculum for getting smart about learning.

by Alan M. Webber

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"Introducing learning into a large, diverse, global organization is a struggle," says Judy Rosenblum. "But when you look at customers and how they're changing, at the competitive environment and how it's changing, it's clear that learning is critical to any business."

Rosenblum should know. For 5 years, from 1995 until June of this year, she was vice president and chief learning officer at the Coca-Cola Co., where she was responsible for devising and executing Coke's learning strategy. She joined Coke after spending 14 years at Coopers & Lybrand, including a 3-year stint as the firm's vice chairwoman for learning and education. So what is her advice for people who seek to create learning organizations in their companies?

"I don't believe that there's any one way to do that in a company," Rosenblum says. "It depends on the culture of the company and on what its leaders will stand for." That said, Rosenblum learned a lot from her experience at Coke. "Learning has got to be connected directly to the business," she says. "The idea is to stay away from a standard 'learning program.' Instead, learning needs to be embedded in processes, projects, and experiences. If you put your energy into people who are ready and willing to join you, and if those people add value to the business, others will come."

At Coke, Rosenblum created an entity, called the Coca-Cola Learning Consortium, that acted as a catalyst for learning. The consortium was composed of two parts: directors of learning strategy, who acted as a liaison between learning efforts and business units; and four small consulting operations, which were organized around learning skills, knowledge management, competency development, and global training support. "One thing that we accomplished," Rosenblum says, "was to teach leaders that learning is a strategic choice; it doesn't just happen. Learning is a capability. It requires skills. It requires processes. And it requires leaders who value it."

Earlier this year, a change in focus at Coke, coupled with her own desire to work at an organization where learning is the primary focus, led Rosenblum to leave Coke and to join Duke Corporate Education Inc., a company launched by Duke University and the Fuqua School of Business this past July. Now 48, Rosenblum lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she serves as executive vice president and director of corporate advisory services at the new company.

What has Rosenblum learned about learning? In an interview with Fast Company, she outlined the 10 lessons that any would-be learning organization needs to learn.

### Learning is not a given.

That's the first principle, because it represents the nub of the learning issue for any company or organization. The fact is, this statement is both true and not true. Learning is a given. It happens, just as change happens. The real question is, Do you drive learning, do you create change -- or do you just let it happen? What is not a given is whether you will adopt learning as a part of your organization's way of doing business. It's not a given that you'll be able to create your future by virtue of learning.

People are learning things all the time. But can you harness that process and make it work for your organization? Before that can happen, learning has to become a strategic choice: Someone in your organization has to decide that learning is strategic, that it's connected to the business. Someone has to decide that the company is going to make learning not just an individual experience but also a collective experience. When that happens, learning isn't just something that occurs naturally -- it's something that the company uses to drive the future of the business.

You can see learning becoming a way of doing business in companies that have very short product life cycles -- companies like Intel. And you can see that in companies with very strong leaders -- companies like General Electric. One of the best examples of an organization that embraced learning as a way to drive change is the Army. Leaders there decided to take a hard look at the system that they had created and to embrace learning as a strategic activity. One of the tools that came out of that decision was after-action reviews, in which the Army takes time after a war game or a simulation to reflect on what happened: "What did we learn?"

Why is it so hard for other organizations to make learning strategic? You'd think that it would be relatively simple for a leader to get up and say, "We will learn, and we will use learning to create our future." But put that aspiration in the context of a very large, decentralized, performance-based business. Think about all of the people and markets that would be affected by that kind of announcement. Think about how hard it would be to get lots of different people in lots of different places to accept learning as a shared aspiration. And even if people have bought into the initial premise, think about how hard it is to take the next step -- to get them to devote energy to building the skills that are necessary to learn.

## **Most organizations have real structures that limit learning.**

There's a tremendous urgency in business today. Everyone is connected to the financial markets, and quarterly results matter more than ever before. That sense of urgency creates a bias for action. And that, in turn, prevents organizations from taking the time to learn. You have this phenomenal asset -- your organization's collective experience -- but this bias for action keeps you from focusing on it.

After all, taking the time to think would mean stopping what you're doing. And you're not rewarded for stopping what you're doing. You're rewarded for doing more. The way that most organizations work is very simple: You think about what you already know, and, using what you already know, you take action. From that action, you get results. And in most organizations, that's where it stops. Either the action worked, or it didn't. If it worked, you do more of it. If it didn't, you try something else. In a learning environment, you ask people to go further: After you get results, you take the time to ask, "Why did we get those results? And how can we use those results to grow what we know?" It's that last loop that people in most organizations feel that they don't have time for.

There are other structural obstacles to learning. In most organizations, "learning" still equals "training." More and more companies have people called "chief learning officers." But, say what you will, what those people really focus on is old-style training. Another obstacle is compensation: Most companies reward people on the basis of individual performance -- so why should anyone focus on collective learning? If you're serious about learning, you have to confront those structural obstacles.

## **Learning involves both a leadership decision and a way of leading.**

The way that we think about leadership, what we expect from leaders, and what leaders demand of themselves -- these things can stop learning in its tracks. The fact is, not all leaders see learning as a way to lead. There are still a lot of leaders who think that their job is to control their organization. And control and learning don't usually mix very well. At the same time, there are plenty of organizations in which followers impose this old style of leadership on themselves. New-style leaders will go to their people and say, "Here's a direction that I'm interested in exploring, but I need your best thinking about it." Too often, the response from people is "You're supposed to tell us! You mean that you don't know?" Again, it's hard for an organization to be committed to learning when its people expect to be told what to do.

This is a real dilemma: If you go all the way toward a command-and-control style of leadership, then <http://pf.fastcompany.com/online/39/rosenblum.html>

learning simply can't occur. At the same time, learning can't occur without some kind of direction. So lots of leaders are caught between "control" and "direction."

## **Corridors are essential for productive learning.**

Where do you see a solution to the leadership dilemma? You see it in companies that are explicit about their values -- companies that hold constructive conversations about their mission, their core strategies, the core competencies of their people. Those fundamentals provide what I call "corridors" -- spaces within which people can move. People know that they can learn and work within those corridors, so managers spend a lot less time trying to chase down people who are outside the "appropriate" space.

Think of it this way: Imagine a building with no hallways. If you're in that building, it's very difficult to find out where you're going, or what direction you're moving in. You find yourself wandering around more, and you have to check with more people more often just to see if you're headed in the right direction. You have to stop and look at different signposts to know where you are. To me, that describes a company that can't articulate clearly to its people what it stands for. So a company needs to provide corridors: "Here's our purpose, here are our values, here's how we do things, here are the core strategies that we're focusing on, and here's what people need to do to succeed here." People who work in a company without those corridors end up wandering around. They spend time on what they think are constructive activities, but they never really know whether they're focusing on the right things -- things that are essential to the future of the business.

Having those kinds of corridors in a company is good both for leaders and for followers. Corridors give people informal guidance -- a sense of whether they're in the right space, going in the right direction. People don't have to ask for directions all the time. They don't have to check to see whether what they're working on is relevant or not. They don't get nailed for doing things that aren't "on strategy." They have freedom to act -- and their leaders don't have to exert very much command-and-control authority. Providing corridors gives both sides the freedom to act and to learn. In my experience, a learning environment is neither completely open nor completely boundary-less. But it does have corridors -- spaces that are well defined, clearly marked, and designed to lead people in the right direction. That way, followers won't get lost, and leaders won't have to micromanage them.

## **Companies need to clarify whether learning is a "people thing" or a "business thing."**

It can be both -- but only if you're clear about the outcomes that you want. I used to go into companies and say, "I think that what you want to do with your learning initiative is good and noble -- but tell me why you want to do it. What outcome are you after?" As it turns out, that's not a question that most people are prepared to answer. They simply see learning as good and noble. Often, they don't even believe that there has to be an outcome, except maybe the creation of a learning environment.

If I push them harder, if I say to them, "The only way you're going to create what you really want is by visualizing the outcome that you're trying to achieve," what I usually hear back is "We want to retain our key people." Now, think about that for a minute. The presumed outcome of creating a learning organization is a set of connections that can help move a company in the direction that it needs to go. In other words, the point is to use learning as a strategic tool. That's very different from using learning as a tool to help you retain your key people.

Unless you're clear about the outcome that you're trying to achieve, you're going to be disappointed. There's no question that learning can be part of a retention strategy. One important reason why good people leave companies is that they don't feel that they're growing or developing. A learning program can help solve this problem: It can give people a community that they belong to and feel great loyalty to. But a learning program doesn't give you a complete retention strategy. It doesn't take into account all of the other levers that help you retain key people: their career path, where they move in an organization, how fast they move, how well they're compensated. And it doesn't take into account the real heart of learning: the creation of processes that help people not only to understand their

experience but also to create a new vision for their business. If your company's goal is to use learning as a core retention strategy, that seems like overkill.

If you want to retain people, there are lots of things that you can do -- and learning is definitely one of them. If you want to win in the future, then learning has to be an element of your retention strategy. But regardless of which path you take, the important thing is to articulate why you want to take it. In particular, be clear about the potential dichotomy between learning as a people thing and learning as a business thing. If you don't want to be disappointed at the end, ask the hard questions at the beginning -- and do the hard work to answer those questions.

### **There is a link between the "people" and "business" approaches to learning.**

If you want to get a twofer from your approach to learning, focus on the capabilities that your organization needs in order to meet its objectives. Let's say that you identify "customer understanding" as a fundamental capability that your company must have in order to succeed: "I want customer understanding in my business, I don't understand why I don't have it today, and it's one of the key things that's causing me not to get the results that I want. We don't understand our customers well enough."

One thing that you can do in that situation is to use learning to think through what gaining a better understanding of your customers would mean. How would it affect people development, for example? You can use learning to come up with processes for customer understanding, for building a knowledge base around each customer, and for designing ways to share that knowledge in order to propel the business forward. If you take that approach to learning, you get the "people development" win, and you get the "business strategy" win. You're building the skills of your people, and your people feel directly connected to the central elements of your strategy.

Now, here's the dilemma: A lot has been said and written about capabilities -- but most companies don't really understand how to plan for them. And capability is a factor that still doesn't have an equal place in the business-planning process: It's not at the table along with finance and marketing. This goes beyond the old problem of the HR department not having equal standing in a company. This isn't just about human resources. Capability is an issue that affects almost every function in a company. But when you sit through business-planning meetings, there's an enormous amount of time and energy devoted to strategy, vision, finance, and marketing -- and almost no time devoted to the issue of capability. And, in the end, it's capabilities that carry the day.

### **Learning is itself a capability.**

When you hear about companies that have embraced learning, what you often hear about are the events, the practices, the activities that those companies have developed -- such as General Electric's "Workout" sessions. What I've learned over the past five years is that learning is not about events. It's not about concepts. It's not even about a way of thinking. Learning is a capability. It needs to be embedded in an organization, and it needs to be viewed as a system. You need to take a holistic approach to learning if you want it to become a part of your business.

If you think about learning as a capability, you can quickly see the factors that go together to make learning a corporate priority. First, people need skills. For learning to be relevant, learning skills need to have equal weight with sales skills. Second, a company needs to focus on its processes. And those processes -- particularly the business-planning process -- need to be designed and led from a learning perspective. The business-planning process should be the central learning process of any company -- although it seldom is. It's hard for learning to have any credibility in a company whose business-planning process is a "hope you survive" exercise. Third, a company needs to identify its critical knowledge assets and to manage those assets as a portfolio. Fourth, the environment that a company builds should foster learning and the exchange of knowledge. That can happen only in a company whose leaders make it clear that they value learning. And finally, measurement systems need to be designed around learning -- not only around what the organization is learning but also around how people contribute to learning. When you combine those elements, you get a total approach to learning.

## **The key to developing a culture of learning is answering the question "Why?"**

There is gold in answering the simple question "Why don't we have what we want today?" Companies spend lots of time articulating goals and describing a vision. If they spent as much time trying to understand why they don't have what they want, a great deal of learning would occur that might increase the probability of meeting those goals and achieving that vision. Think about it: If vision is so important, and if we're such bright people, why is it that just articulating a vision doesn't make it happen?

Now, it's not hard to understand why many companies don't like to ask the question "Why?" Faced with the press of time, people assume that they already know the answer to that question -- so why waste more time on it? In cases where the question concerns less-than-favorable results, asking why can be perceived as a search for the guilty party: It gets tagged as dwelling on negativism, or rehashing old history. Most companies prefer to bury their mistakes, or they just deny those mistakes and move on. But real learning remains hidden if you don't clearly define success up front. And you don't learn if, at key milestones, you don't ask the question "Have we achieved success, and if not, why not?"

## **Most traditional organizations neither understand nor accept the time and effort that it takes to build a learning capability.**

Companies that are still operating in the old economy simply haven't confronted the new reality: They haven't had to deal with short product life cycles. For them, it's a lot easier to say that learning is just a human-resources thing -- that it's a passive experience, just another part of what they offer as training. Their attitude is "We'll do it when there's time." In other words, for these companies, learning is event-driven. They teach their people new skills when and only when they want their people to learn those skills. I call this the "just-do-it approach to learning." The alternative is to take an active approach: "We have to lead it, we have to embed it in our processes, we have to build capabilities into the way we do business. Learning isn't about doing it -- it's about being it."

For most big, old-economy companies, that distinction hasn't sunk in yet. The big issue for learning is whether it will become part of leadership over the next 10 years -- or whether it will be put aside as something that fell short because it didn't generate business results.

## **Learning can fall victim to overstated expectations.**

Done right and done well, learning does offer short-term wins. But overall, learning is a marathon, not a sprint. Leaders are still held to short-term performance measures, and if learning doesn't generate business results in the time that's allotted to it, then leaders will be tempted to abandon it. And that would be a great loss.

The question that we've all got to answer is "If learning is so intuitively appealing to so many people, why is it so hard for companies to adopt it?" High expectations play a large role. But so does having an installed base that defines "how things get done around here." So do entrenched mind-sets. So do the traits of certain leaders.

One hope for the future lies with the Web. The Web can help to embed a different type of learning model into the kinds of offerings that are out there. And the Web can facilitate feedback loops. In some respects, we're still stuck with a classroom model of learning: There's a teacher at the front of the room who has all of the answers, and there are students who need to have information poured into their heads. The Web moves learning toward performance support, coaching, feedback, and reflection on the difference between the desired performance and the actual outcome. The Web can embed a learning loop into how we teach people.

Another problem with the way that traditional learning happens is that we give knowledge to the wrong group of people, or we give people the wrong knowledge, or there's just too much knowledge. The problem is that we don't know which kind of learning a given community is naturally attracted to. If you focus on each community, then you can make learning a part of the agenda for that community.

So the Web and the technology of the new economy are huge enablers that can reshape how learning takes place. But the Web won't solve the leadership side of the problem. Ultimately, someone has to declare that learning is central to the way an organization operates. Someone has to say, "This is how we do things around here." Otherwise, learning gets minimized -- and it never becomes a given inside the organization.

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