

INSIDE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

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Speaking the language of business

■ How to create a social learning environment

■ All change for learning and development



SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS

Jay Cross explains why it is vital for Learning and Development to speak so that others in the business – particularly executives – will understand.

When you plan to pitch a learning and development investment or decision to someone with the power to sign cheques, you may be unsure what to say. If so, ask yourself one question; it will help you find the right approach.

That question is this: **what would Andrew do?**

Andrew Carnegie was born in 1835 in Dunfermline, Scotland. The industrial revolution put his father, a weaver, out of work and drove his family into poverty.

Andrew emigrated to America as a teenager and joined the Pennsylvania Railroad at 18. He took out a bank loan and invested in sleeping cars. Six years

later, he was named superintendent of railroad's western division. Two years after that, he invested his sleeping car profits in an oil company. At age thirty, he founded a company to build bridges of iron instead of wood.

In 1875, Carnegie opened his first steel plant. Fourteen years later, he was earning \$25 million a year from steel. In 1901, Carnegie sold his empire to J.P. Morgan for \$480 million, becoming the richest man in the world. He spent the rest of his days a philanthropist.

Andrew Carnegie is the quintessential hardnosed businessman. Your objective will often be to do convince Andrew what you say/do is worthy of investment. When in

doubt about ROI, just ask yourself "What would Andrew Carnegie do?"

YOUR SPONSOR

Metrics are measurements that matter. The internal customer for metrics is your sponsor. Your sponsor is the person who pays the bills. I assume your sponsor is a business person. It might be a committee of business people. When you talk with a business person, you must talk like they do. Executives only care about training as it relates to execution. Their interest is in moving the corporation forward. You should share that interest. That is why they pay you.

Sponsors are responsible for championing

the case for change (i.e., the vision), visibly representing the change (i.e, walk-the-talk), and providing reassurance and confidence (i.e., the implementation plan).

A couple of years ago, I was leading a webinar for representatives of several dozen training departments at a Fortune 50 high-tech company. Someone interrupted with a question when I was saying that trainers need to be aware of corporate objectives and rate their contributions by their impact on the business. "Wouldn't that require us to understand how the business worked?" he asked. Yes, of course. How could you do your job right without knowing where the corporation was headed? Several others jumped in, saying essentially that organisational success and helping meet strategic objectives was "not my job."

The days when corporations were larded up with layer upon layer of management whose job was to translate strategic imperatives from above into job descriptions and projects down below are long gone. Now all of us are supposed to sing from the same hymnal without the intermediaries.

If you work for a public company, define your job in terms of the issues described in your firm's annual report. Getting ahead in business requires forming solid working relationships with your sponsor and the other stakeholders it is your duty to support.

So before you go any further, ask yourself these questions. First, who is your sponsor? And second, who are your important stakeholders? Once you know the answers to these questions, you are ready to proceed. Without them, you cannot progress.

You and your sponsor

Measure results throughout your programme, not just before and after.

Keep your sponsor informed. Ask people where they bank, and they'll tell you where they keep their current account. This holds true even if their relationship with their mortgage banker is fifty times larger. Frequency is sometimes more important than content.

Monitoring things early on may enable you to make mid-course corrections.

The responsibilities you share

We'll get businesslike right away. Peter Drucker is hailed as the father of management. He is a business guru's guru. Drucker singled out eight characteristics of effective executives.



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These are precisely how you and your sponsor are going to address metrics.

- They asked, "What needs to be done?"
- They asked, "What is right for the enterprise?"
- They developed action plans.
- They took responsibility for decisions.
- They took responsibility for communicating.
- They were focused on opportunities rather than problems.
- They ran productive meetings.
- They thought and said "we" rather than "I."

THE METRICS CYCLE

There's no cookie-cutter formula for applying metrics, but there is an underlying process.

Generally, you'll follow these five steps to identify, agree upon, assess, and use metrics. This is not rocket science. It's the same process you already use to accomplish a lot of things in life. Let's briefly consider each step.

1. State Desired Outcome. Results do not exist inside the training department. In fact, results do not exist within the business. Results come from outside the

business. Imagine a no-nonsense businessperson, say, GE's former boss, Jack Welch. If you can explain yourself to Jack, you've mastered this step.

2. Agree How To Measure. The only valid metrics for corporate learning are business metrics. Examples are increased sales, shorter time to market, fewer rejects, and lower costs. How do you decide what measures to apply? You don't: that's the responsibility of your business sponsor, the person who signs the cheques. Together you agree on what's to be done and how you'll measure success or failure. Once you've settled on the project and its metrics, get it in writing.

3. Execute Project(s). The projects could be training and/or an incentive bonus plan and/or more advertising. Training programmes are often part of a larger scheme, and it's fruitless to try to isolate them. In fact, savvy training directors look for major corporate initiatives they can hitch a ride on.

4. Assess Results. You must evaluate the impact of your efforts with the measures you set up back in step 2. In other words, you are not allowed to mimic Charlie Brown, who would shoot an arrow and then paint the target around it. Why stick with the measures you came up with before? Because that's how to maintain credibility with your sponsor. You can bring

up unforeseen outcomes or anecdotal evidence, so long as you follow up on those original methods first.

5. Begin Anew. The only thing worse than learning from experience is not learning from experience. Your post-mortem on the completed project should include a section titled "What to do better next time." This is where you start the cycle anew.

Don't just talk like a business person; become a business person

In an article in T+D Magazine titled 'A Seat at the Table', Kevin Oakes, then president of SumTotal Systems, masterfully described how speaking the language of business is one of the biggest skill gaps in the learning profession. Kevin quotes two respected industry figures, John Cone, the former CLO of Dell Computers, and Pat Crull, CLO of ToysRUs, that hammer home the point. Here are their original words.

"Learning professionals who have the ear of senior management come to the table to talk about business results, not learning pedagogy. They understand the drivers of the business, how the executives think, and the metrics that mean the most to them.

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They talk about business outcomes, not learning enablers. And they talk about their business using real business language and real data. They talk about revenue, expense, productivity, customer satisfaction, and other quantifiable stuff that business people care about. They've learned that every conversation had better include information about money or time saved, revenue or new business generated, or customer problems solved." *John Coné*

"During my presentation (at an industry conference), I stated that as a CLO, I see myself as an officer of the corporation. I worry about improving shareowner value. If it doesn't make a difference to the bottom line, then my work has little of no value. At that point, a woman in the audience got up from her seat and left the room."

"Later, during the Q&A section of our presentation, someone who was sitting next to the woman who had left, stood up

and said, "Do you know what she said right before she exited? That she didn't get into the training and development field to worry about the bottom line." I was stunned. To me, that summed up the biggest problem in our profession today." *Pat Crull*

In summary, to 'earn a seat at the table' where the business managers sit, you must:

- Speak the language of business
- Behave like an officer of the corporation
- Think like a business person
- Act like a business person.

*Jay Cross leads the Internet Time Group (<http://internettime.pbworks.com/>). This article is an extract from his book *What Would Andrew Do? Available as an e-book from Lulu, at <http://www.lulu.com/content/7196453>**