

A brave new world for coaching and mentoring?

Lawrence White and Bill Osmond



In the aftermath of the financial crisis, businesses are demanding greater accountability and return on their investments. Learning and development (L&D) functions are being challenged to truly align with the business and demonstrate their worth against hard business metrics. At the same time, technology is developing at an increasingly rapid pace, creating opportunities for new ways of accessing, practising, sharing and applying new knowledge and skills. Is transformational change in L&D not only possible but long overdue? If so, what does the brave new world of L&D look like – and, in particular, what’s the future for coaching and mentoring?

Keywords

Learning and development, VUCA, Return on Investment, blended learning, 70:20:10, technology development, integrated learning, evaluation

A big question

‘What’s the future for coaching and mentoring?’ It’s a big question and one that can’t be considered in isolation. We have to consider it both from the context of what’s happening in the wider business world and from the broader Learning and Development (L&D) perspective. From our view from the present, one thing seems clear. Coaching and mentoring can no more stand still or navel-gaze than any other business function or discipline if they are to be valid and relevant in today’s fast-changing and ambiguous world. ‘VUCA’ (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) is the ‘new normal’. If the daily conversations we have with L&D professionals are anything to go by, the whole L&D environment is being challenged to step up and develop the skills and environments needed for individuals and organisations to thrive and succeed in such a working world.

Overthrowing the old regime

The warning signs for L&D in general, and for coaching and mentoring as core components within this, appeared as the 2008 financial crisis took hold and businesses looked at how to reduce their operating costs. Imagine the board meeting when the finger fell on the L&D budget line with the question: ‘What exactly do we get for this money?’ L&D functions that could not demonstrate clear business outcomes continued to rely on leaps of faith, conjuring up claims to demonstrate Return on Investment (RoI) from the vagaries of engagement, empowerment and confidence.

As the financial crisis unfurled, Lucy Kellaway of the FT penned one of her customary tongue-in-cheek articles entitled ‘[The Scarcity in Silliness](#)’, in which she proclaimed that “the bottom has fallen out of [the] management bullshit [market]”. Why? In part, at least, because ‘Management guff costs’ and those with the money had stopped paying for ‘a management training course based on a study of ancient tribes’.



Lucy Kellaway, FT columnist

Further repercussions of the financial crisis came in 2009. McKinsey’s Quarterly survey ([McKinsey & Co. Insights and Publications, October 2009](#)) revealed that “79 percent of all companies have cut costs in response to the global economic crisis—but only 53 percent of executives think that doing so has helped their companies weather it”. In their subsequent commentary McKinsey advocated ‘A better way to cut costs’: avoid cutting equally across all of your business; rather rifle shoot. In many companies the red dot settled on L&D and the shot was fired.

Faced with the instruction to ‘downsize, streamline or eliminate’, the L&D world now needs to adapt fast if it’s to thrive as a valued contributor and influencer within the business.

Evolution – even at an unprecedented pace - may not be enough. Revolution may be the only option. Revolution will not happen by making cosmetic change or creating new buzzwords. It comes through re-engineering L&D’s DNA.

Rising from the ashes

The present situation is characterised by greater uncertainty, complexity, risk and an ever-increasing speed of change. And that creates a climate in which L&D - with coaching and mentoring at its heart – should have a critical role to play. To thrive in this ‘new normal’, the business world is crying out for the best talent, equipped with the right knowledge, skills and ability to adapt fast.

It demands substantial changes in mindsets, roles, activities and expectations across the entire stakeholder base – from those responsible for the development of others through to those setting the business goals. For those that can genuinely align L&D to the wider needs of the organisation and its market and demonstrate clear and valued outcomes, the impact will be significant.

A braver new world?

Forget blended learning

Blended learning systems, also sometimes referred to as 'hybrid learning', "combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction" ([Definition, Current Trends, and Future Directions; Charles R. Graham](#)). The much lauded 70:20:10 principle has brought this concept of blended learning into sharp focus. Attributable to the works of [Allen Tough](#) (1971) and Michael M. Lombardo (1996) and much popularised over recent years, it promotes the idea that only 10% of learning occurs in 'formal' learning environments, 20% comes through engagement with others and a full 70% through experience. 70:20:10 should not have been an epiphany for L&D. Rather, it should have been another welcome addition to L&D's common language – a short-hand for something we know and do, yet found hard to articulate succinctly to the business. Whilst the reference model of 70:20:10 may hold good for some years, we can expect deployment approaches to mature and the language of 70:20:10 to morph into something else over time.

Today, there is wide variance in understanding what 70:20:10 really means and how to apply it in practice. Working through an e-learning module is not learning on-the-job. It has its place but it is still formal learning. Similarly, L&D should not try to micro-manage and control the 70:20 learning experience but rather develop and support an open learning culture and working practices. In short, 'blended' learning needs to change.

The new 'blended' is 'integrated'. Integrated with people's real work, integrated with leadership and, crucially, integrated with the business. Forward-thinking organisations will consign one-off, sheep-dip style learning events to history and move to long term, integrated programmes with coaching as a critical learning transfer mechanism and continual evaluation built-in.

Coaching and mentoring have, by their very nature, been closer to the 70:20 than classroom-based learning and other forms of development delivery. For that reason they can adapt more quickly to their new environment. But adapt they must.

Technology has one of the greatest rates of change. We have seen our personal lives transformed, from our social interactions, our access to information and entertainment and our shopping behaviours. Wearable tech is transforming sports and fitness training and is now finding its way into the workplace. (This [article](#) gives some interesting examples). Some [Learning Management Systems](#) (LMS) are starting to extend functionality beyond managing course curricula and staff training records to deliver a more inclusive approach that encourages leaders, coaches and other stakeholders to set and track clear goals and to participate fully in development interventions. In the short to medium term, there will be an increasing number of specialist learning transfer platforms that will do this and the stakeholders will need to adapt and integrate with these new environments, rather than overlap or blend.

Beyond blended learning as we know it

But that's just a start. The integrated learning of the future will involve technology in ways we are only just starting to perceive today. From today's e-learning, wikis, knowledge bases, discussion forums, web conferencing, emerging learning transfer and collaboration platforms and much-debated [MOOCs](#) (massive open online courses) we will see technology move rapidly to support learning in a more mobile, contextual and on-demand environment where a combination of formal, co-created and user-generated content and support will merge.

As technology enhances access to expertise on demand, anytime, anywhere, we might argue that everyone becomes a coach or mentor in supporting colleagues – or themselves being supported - to develop their knowledge or skills.

Implications for coaching and mentoring

Over the next 10 to 15 years, we may expect to see growth in video use, interactive ‘coach’ avatars supporting the learning journey, mobile, contextual app-based services, the ‘gamification’ of learning platforms and the use of virtual reality as a means of exploring different scenarios. According to Accenture’s 2012 article [The learning enterprise](#) “Most employees recognise that much of what they need to perform better, improve their skills and gain more knowledge is around them all the time: learning by observing colleagues, receiving coaching from a supervisor, having access to proven ideas and best practices, as well as simply getting on-the-job experience every day. The challenge for companies is to transform the inherently ad hoc nature of this informal learning into something with more structure and rigour. That’s where social networking and collaboration technologies are now beginning to create learning opportunities”.

The individual nature of much of today’s technology-based learning will change to become more collaborative and ‘social’. In collaborative learning much engagement is, by its nature, unstructured and serendipitous and that’s to be encouraged. There’s an important role, though, for a more considered, ‘formal’ learning support and that’s where the coach and mentor might reside. Coaching, sometimes today still reserved for senior managers, needs to genuinely reach to the masses to support individuals to make sense of and apply learning in a way that develops both the employee *and* supports the goals of the organisation. In the future, coaching and mentoring roles may be performed by external professionals – who will almost certainly have a hand in designing, implementing and supporting new learning environments – but will also increasingly be delivered internally. Line managers will have a crucial role but so too will subject matter experts and ‘virtual’ team members.

Whilst technology will change the delivery environment for L&D, truly integrated learning places much greater emphasis on the accountability of stakeholders in aligning, modelling, coaching, reinforcing and measuring the impact of learning and development activities against business goals.

And that leads us to:

Business-wide accountability

Many coaches and mentors have long focused on supporting clients to apply learning to the workplace but now they will need to define – or support their coachee / mentee to define - those expected outcomes in advance, and to show a clear return on investment. Through changes in language and approach we can create much greater transparency right across the L&D community and, in doing so, achieve greater accountability and influence. Only then will L&D professionals, coaches and mentors truly become business partners, helping to shape the business of the future, instead of being merely service providers.

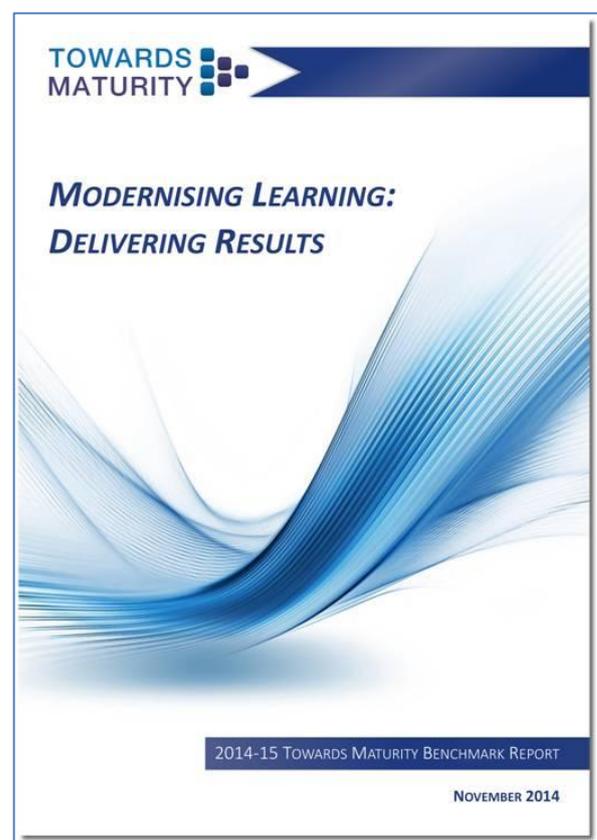
In an environment where integrated learning becomes the norm the need for that critical link between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ will still remain. Now, and in the years to come, that link will need to be visible to those who make the investment. Evaluation will become real-time.

External and internal coaches and mentors will need to extend their focus beyond those they are coaching to work more collaboratively with those who will, in turn and with skill, influence the application of learning within the workplace, track contribution and determine future investment in L&D. The role of leaders as coaches will continue to develop and we should celebrate and support this expansion of leadership capability. In an era of matrix-management, virtual teams, greater fluidity of working practice and remote working, the 'traditional' hierarchical line management function is anachronistic and the simplistic division of accountability suggested by 70:20:10 breaks down. Leaders need to create working environments that reflect their corporate values and in which their teams are encouraged to grow and flourish in pursuit of the organisation's goals. The new world requires L&D, trainers, coaches, mentors, leaders, line-managers, learners and those responsible for the wider business systems to be collectively, not individually, accountable for success or failure in learning – and its impact on individuals, organisations and market sectors.

Tighter business metrics

Not surprisingly, therefore, evaluation is a hot topic yet many are still trying to crow-bar old-style evaluation methodologies into this changing world. When the business is talking about growth, bottom-line profit, working capital, cash-flow, liquidity, compliance, social responsibility, transparency, accountability and ethics, L&D needs to do the same. Towards Maturity's 2014 study ([Personnel Today, August 2014](#) or read the [full report](#)) showed that 60% of those who took part in their study believed their L&D teams to be aligned to their businesses strategically. A ratio of 3:5 is quite encouraging but we should take into account that all of the 250 participants were L&D professionals and their views may not be reinforced by their colleagues in the board room.

It is entirely appropriate for business leaders to look for a return on their investment. After all, new machinery investments come with guarantees, warranties and service contracts that ensure they perform the required task. The company can predict pay-back before they make the purchase. Of course, human behaviour is more complex than the workings of a piece of machinery, but we still need to adopt that robust level of thinking in our approach to evaluation in order to establish 'what's the required outcome?' That will require HR, L&D, coaches, mentors and managers to mature in their approaches to specifying, scoping, designing and delivering learning and development interventions and to measuring and reporting outcomes - in language and metrics the business understands and values.



So, evolution or revolution?

The financial crisis, technological advances and the shift in expectations of those who invest in learning have created rapid rates of change. Evolution relies on long-term, reactive mutations that create entities that are fitter than their predecessors – that's fine in geological timescales but we do not have that luxury of time. Revolution is needed; short, sharp, informed, intelligent, far-reaching change that mitigates and even leverages the risks of the here and now and anticipates the demands and expectations of the future.

Those changes can be summed up in some simple first steps for coaches, mentors and the wider L&D profession: align our language, think forward, forecast and anticipate the needs of the business. Create clarity of purpose in our design and delivery methodology. Move to integrated learning with 'built-in' evaluation. Above all, demonstrate the value that we deliver but may, in the past, have put on our 'too difficult to do' pile. Now, more than ever before, we need to be accountable not just for what we put into the learner but for what we pull out for the business.

But wait, stop the press, I've just received a seminar invitation: 'One hour to maximise my motivation'. By Lucy Kellaway's measure, the bad times must be behind us. Back to business as usual? Please. No.

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Lawrence White has been working as a coach and facilitator for over 15 years, originally with HSBC, before joining Phoenix as Head of Learning in 2009. He passionately believes that any learning initiative, including coaching and mentoring, must have a clear business case, and must be designed with the end in mind. Failure to consider these two critical elements, in Lawrence's opinion, seriously undermines the chances of creating a meaningful event with a clear ROI. You can contact Lawrence via E: lawrence@phoenix-training.co.uk or T: 020 7234 0480.

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