



Establishing Best Practices for Learning Governance

by Grant Ricketts





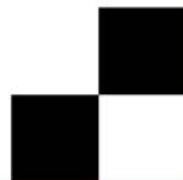
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hen Peter Senge articulated his vision of a learning organization 18 years ago — that organizations are in situations of rapid change and only those that are flexible, adaptive and productive will excel — he motivated an industry to discover how to tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels.

This insight was soon followed by successive waves of technical innovation that enabled learning to be developed faster, better and cheaper and delivered further across the enterprise. Now, with another wave of technological change emerging, fueled by Web 2.0 technologies and “user-contributed” content, this technical innovation will only become more integral to our capabilities.

However, even with these advances, the talk of the highly adaptive, flexible, competitive learning enterprise of tomorrow still remains a largely unfilled promise today.

Why is that? Is the vision just “too ideal”? Building the learning organization of tomorrow is still a great aspiration — all people have the capacity to learn, and we are no longer limited by technological capability and reach. However, we do remain limited in our ability to reshape the organization into this learning machine for structural reasons. The hierarchical structures and operating silos in which people function are often not conducive to easily adopting new ideas, principles and tools. Likewise, many learning teams get stuck operating within the confines of these organizational silos. The situation hasn't proven conducive to implementing the necessary change to deliver learning services more effectively and efficiently across groups — thereby limiting the potential impact enterprise-wide.





So, the desire, will and technical capability are there, but the inability to drive broader organizational change remains an inhibiting factor. What's missing is a strategy, process and methodology to break out of the traditional hierarchical framework and extend learning further across an extended enterprise.

This is where *governance* becomes crucial. It is the *next learning gap* to close. This article will address the challenge further by presenting a change management model and methodology to help implement learning governance. It's called the *Learning Governance Lifecycle* model.

Closing the Gap

A big part of capturing the impact and ROI of the promise outlined above is through governing learning more effectively, thereby increasing the impact of all kinds of learning on business goals and needs. A "managed learning" strategy needs to span the organization or extended enterprise, link more closely to business objectives and strategy, achieve new standards for efficiency, effectiveness and performance, and capture economies of scale in order to realize the full value of the vision set out many years ago.

For this to happen, practitioners need to recognize that enterprise-wide learning is not just a *technology* challenge. It's a *people* and *process* challenge: listening to people; managing people; motivating people; training and supporting people; designing processes that work for people.

The business process and stakeholder alignment (i.e., people) issues are disciplines that come out of *change management* and *organization design*, where governance is rooted, which have not historically been part of the learning teams' repertoire. The strengths learning teams have in program planning, curriculum design and adopting new tools need to be augmented with new skills in leading organizational change, determining best practices for improved business processes, and adopting new principles of personal and organizational change management. More focus on these important dynamics will expand the impact of learning on the organization.

A Simple Proposition

The model can be introduced with a simple proposition:

1. It doesn't matter whether your organization is more centralized or decentralized,
2. You can establish effective Governance if you have:
 - a) Well represented *stakeholder* views
 - b) That cover a *lifecycle* of learning processes

There has been a lot of research and discussion the past couple of years about whether learning functions should be more centralized or decentralized and whether new roles and account man-

agement functions should be introduced. Much of the discussion has been fruitful — though there has been an over-reliance on organizational structural approaches, and relatively less on the business processes and best practices needed to support them.

The two abstractions — well represented stakeholder views that cover a lifecycle of learning processes — get us back to focusing on people, and propose an organized framework to implement a governance model in practice. The model's strength also recognizes that the resulting design may vary among organizations, emulating the way each organization actually works in order to assimilate necessary changes for learning.

**Figure 1: Learning Governance Lifecycle model
Five-Phase Learning Lifecycle Processes**



While there are a lot of functions in learning that can be organized as a "shared service," a very decentralized, autonomous governance model for learning, which is seen in some healthcare organizations, can still effectively serve the enterprise if the processes are identified and supported accordingly.

The *lifecycle* model places emphasis on business processes explicitly, where the most productive changes occur by managing real change through people who do the work. This helps make operational teams the focal point for the organization's knowledge and learning activities as well as assimilators of new technical capability. Fellow colleagues often refer to this as "managing the middle." Done well, the processes become more organic, and will lead to greater executive visibility, budget authority and even professional responsibility.

By working with *stakeholder* views — such as business unit leaders, program managers, content sponsors, learners and other recipients or sponsors of learning — across a *lifecycle* of learning processes, responsibilities become more clear and the *process* flows easier to design around them. Governance becomes more effectively rooted in process design, not just a concept to impose on organizational structure.

As one industry colleague recently commented, "How we govern learning really matters! Engaging stakeholders, managing suppliers and building healthy and effective processes to plan and deliver learning may be the most important challenge for our field."

So, how do we adopt this governance challenge and put a plan into action?

The Learning Governance Lifecycle Model

The model started with two key abstractions — stakeholder

views represented across a learning lifecycle. Let's now take a closer look at the governance lifecycle framework and see how it works.

A learning lifecycle model can represent many different phases for planning, designing, developing, testing, deploying, managing, facilitating and evaluating the outcomes of learning. A simplified framework consisting of five phases is represented here. (See Figure 1.)

The framework identifies core tasks to be completed during each phase. It then addresses the risks that can occur as programs move from phase to phase and other stakeholders enter or exit the model. The transitions are where most of the problems come up. Hence, the in-between stages are identified as areas of risk. Using this model, process gaps are uncovered; roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders are clarified; supporting tools, guidelines and checklists are established; and best practices are designed to manage the flows across all phases for the overall benefit of the organization.

While the framework is simplified, the same model can expand — to address roles, responsibilities and related issues around LCMS implementation for example — or extend — to address issues around administrative readiness, learner experience, reporting governance and even staff support.

Importantly, the framework creates a “customer lifecycle experience” perspective that helps align governance processes that go beyond the view of any one person, team or stakeholder group. People whose primary work may be more “upstream” in the model e.g., program planning, content development or procurement, etc. may not have a full appreciation for some of the dependencies “downstream” — e.g., testing and validating content interoperability, maintaining systems, managing resources or capturing reports, and vice versa, yet actions or decisions are frequently made by either party that adversely impact upstream or downstream roles.

These upstream and downstream gaps are common, as illustrated by recent comments from other industry colleagues. One states, “In our current configuration, the most frustrating aspect is the disconnect between designers and the training staff that delivers our programs.” And another states, “My group has limited insight into how other teams are spending their resources.”

In reality, people frequently aren't provided enough visibility in various areas of the organization. The governance process is designed to help expand this capability by incorporating the par-

ticipation of divergent stakeholder perspectives and defining more complete engagement processes.

Without such visibility, there's less ability to realize true cost savings or achieve organizational scale. Additionally, many things “break” or can go wrong in the hand-offs between these lifecycle phases despite people's best intentions, further exacerbating cost pressures and/or causing program delays. The result is that learning activities remain largely fragmented, subject to “turf wars,” instead of better integrated. This is not a picture in which executives like to invest.

The Promise of Process

There are many risk elements, and they come up differently in different organizations. The *Learning Governance Lifecycle* methodology is very efficient in uncovering areas of potential risks. Resolving these risks then becomes the foundation for establishing new best practices to govern learning on a more expanded basis.

Creating effective processes requires bringing together diverse stakeholders as active participants. Without broad stakeholder participation, key issues and risks may be overlooked, and further exposure to the learning team can result. A more formal approach to governance can finalize critical processes, clarify roles and responsibilities and provide tools and guidelines for how these processes can be conducted. One such output can be the organization's Learning Governance Management Guide which then becomes an ongoing “living” document to share with others.

Having stakeholders participate in the creation process also increases the sense of ownership and commitment, greatly increasing chances of adoption and success for a more broadly defined learning charter. These benefits, coupled with overall cost reductions and efficiencies, and fewer disruptions, will put learning teams on the path to gaining more executive visibility, building the case for greater investment and generating an environment that truly builds the learning organization of tomorrow.

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Takeaways

- Improve alignment and build consensus among learning leaders and business units to increase adoption for a more broadly defined learning charter.
- Uncover and manage “risk” — quickly uncovering pitfalls, both known and unknown, and resolving conflict.
- Gain more executive visibility by demonstrating greater business impact and justifying further investment.
- Lead learning processes that integrate with talent and human capital management initiatives as well as leverage new Web 2.0 tools and capabilities.