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Create an Exceptional Learning Culture

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MANAGING THE LEARNING FUNCTION

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Award-winning—it's an adjective that many covet. And why not? It evokes distinction and quality. Wouldn't it be great to have that phrase attached to your workplace?

For a learning organization, *award-winning* denotes talent development that is regarded as top-notch, outstanding, and the best of the best. Of course, it's a sought-after designation. It describes a culture that is a win for both the customer and employee, making an emotional connection that differentiates itself as elite. A truly great learning organization contributes to enhanced business results, assuring greater success in talent recruitment and retention, productivity, and employee engagement. Creating a learning organization of excellence gives your company a strategic advantage and enables it to stand out in today's tight labor market. It's an intentional, proactive change initiative that unlocks potential and inspires performance.

With all those benefits, why aren't more companies aiming to unlock that type of culture? Many find the process overwhelming and simply don't know where to start, so they never get their culture change off the ground.

For companies that want to develop a sought-after culture of excellence, one place to begin is by looking at award-winning companies.

These organizations have applied for and won awards that reinforce what employees already know about them: They are desired environments in which to work and grow and develop. By looking at the award applications and criteria as metrics for excellence and comparing that with your organization's strengths and weaknesses, you as a talent development leader can proactively begin to create and manage your organization's culture.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will provide:

- a five-step process for creating a culture of excellence
- ways to use award applications as a benchmark for developing change
- a list of benefits to elicit C-suite support
- guidance on how to align with strategic internal and external partners
- job aids and essential tools for building and sustaining a high-quality learning organization
- ideas for measuring your progress and celebrating and sharing your success.

You will also read about four stellar learning organizations, their best practices, and their journeys to award-winning excellence. At the end of your journey, you may even be ready to apply for—and win—an award that showcases your hard work.

Step 1: Develop a Road Map

There are ample references to starting distinguished journeys with a specific goal in mind, including President John F. Kennedy's goal 50 years ago to put a man on the moon. Alamo Colleges (see case study 1) characterized its quest to be the best in the United States as a moon shot. When it received the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, a congressionally established award for quality management, it celebrated with a citywide party and served up a drink called the Moon Shot.

Creating an award-worthy learning organization requires a laser focus on achieving something extraordinary, coupled with a well-thought-out plan; strong alliances; foundational talent development programs; and an obsession with feedback, measurement, and continuous improvement.

Numerous reasons explain why undertaking this change initiative is difficult—among them mergers,

Researching Award Winners

Many associations and organizations offer awards to recognize companies' efforts in being high-quality places of employment. As you and your team embark on the culture-change effort, look to these associations and their award winners for insights to help you on your journey.

1. Explore the websites of organizations that offer awards. Look for deadlines, eligibility requirements, the judging process, previous winners, and other specifics.
2. Research the companies' publications. Some organizations, such as the Association for Talent Development, offer publications that profile the award winners.
3. Research the award-winning organizations for benchmarking data and best practices, including strategies, modalities, processes, systems, and tools that have achieved measurable results.
4. Use these award requirements to assess your current and ideal states in charting your path to excellence.
5. Assess whether to start with a systemwide or a singular, strength-focused approach. Some organizations have the bandwidth to tackle both. Others choose to start small, get some experience, and then move into more comprehensive criteria.

acquisitions, layoffs, budget cuts, and the ubiquitous "We're just too busy right now." Sound familiar? The flaw in this thinking is that creating a culture of excellence is a program. Rather, it is a transformative, step-by-step process.

Most, if not all, reasons to delay embarking on this culture development are based in fact. But the truest is that the time will never be right. You're a talent development professional, and you will always be busy, with competing priorities, limited resources, and a plate full of initiatives.

Don't wait. Put on your aspiration hat, plant your feet firmly on solid ground, and take that first step toward building a great learning culture in your organization. It will never get easier. But tackling a culture transformation

process can bring structure and sanity to your talent development role. It will show your organization—and possibly the world—that you are a transformational, visionary leader committed to excellence.

Determine Your Goal

Changing your company's learning culture begins with a first step: Determining what you are striving for. Are you pursuing learning excellence to improve organizational outcomes, such as achieving excellence in a particular area of your talent development work—for example, onboarding or leadership development programs? This can deliver short-term wins while demonstrating your organization's learning values. Or are you striving for something concrete like an award or a Best Place to Work designation? This goal will require a long-term, methodical approach.

Depending on the size of your talent development team, you may be starting this mission by yourself, or you may have an internal support team that can contribute and help you along the way. Regardless, carve out dedicated time to work on how you want to begin transforming the learning culture.

And this is where researching learning and talent development awards can provide insights. They can give you key metrics to strive for. For example, an award application may ask that an organization delineate how leaders support employee development. Another may ask for statistics on learning hours used or retention rates. By comparing those to your company's strengths and weaknesses, you can develop a goal to achieve similar results—even if you never apply for an award.

Plot Your Course

Thinking about what your organization needs to have a transformational culture and analyzing awards against which to measure your company can be a detailed—and somewhat tedious—process. Find a quiet, isolated space where you can concentrate without interruption, even if that means working from home or staying late. If you have an internal talent development team with which to divvy up the work, consider these practices. Note: If you're a talent development department of one, review these practices for applicability to your

situation. It will be critical to build strategic alliances with key stakeholders in your organization (see step 2 for more) as you pursue cultural excellence.

- Set up a share drive for each member to record ideas for the transformational change, data, and so forth. The items could note development initiatives—such as onboarding, leadership training, or management development—and include metrics and criteria from awards that the internal team has researched.
- Hold an initial meeting during which you launch the effort and define goals, assign roles and responsibilities, and agree to timelines. When possible, assign team members to the areas they know best (such as e-learning or compliance) and for which they have a passion. That will shorten the learning curve and promote motivation.
- Connect with previous award winners of recognitions that sound interesting. If an award-winning learning organization is in your geographical area, invite individuals from that firm to the meeting to spark inspiration to your effort, or take your internal journey team to tour the other organization to check out its practices and how your organization compares. If that isn't possible, provide your talent development team with links to that and other award-winning learning organizations and any information about their journeys or results that they realized. Even if you choose not to pursue an award, the practices that other companies employ will provide insight into your own change initiative.
- Create a spreadsheet for easy visual comparison of award application criteria, metrics, and related information to understand what sets winning firms apart.
- Investigate available resources (see the Researching Award Winners sidebar).

Once you've completed this background work, roll up your sleeves and use the awards criteria to look at your own learning organization and what you may want to measure yourself against (retention, key performance indicators, time to productivity, etc.). Then identify the cultural change goal you are moving toward and an anchor program to kick this off (see step 3 for more details). What will this program entail? What learning