

# **The Relationship between Business Planning, Professional Development and Learning**

by Sonja Winburn, SPHR

There can be no identifiable relationship between business planning and professional development until we learn how to learn in the organizational environment. As we navigate through the wilderness of this uncharted changing world we work in, it has become necessary to re-learn some of the assumptions that we use to make decisions in our organizations. At Rosser International we try to create a learning environment that embraces professional development that is directly tied to our business planning. The Information Age has given us access to a mountain of information and no one person can keep current in all areas. We must depend on each other and our ability to learn as a unit. As we enter the Communication Age we must re-think how to effect learning in this new environment so that all of our activities are aligned with our vision, strategies and goals.

To do this, old terminology must be replaced to signify this change in focus. The old terms were created from models developed for the manufacturing environment, they carry with them the focus of that day. We must develop a new language to reflect the model for our professional services' environment. The change in terminology is part of an effort to advocate a different way of looking at organizations and our view of "learning." Finding a way to communicate the focus of firm strategy and how it filters into the practicality of daily decisions is at the heart of change and learning. The words "change" and "learning" give us clues about how to proceed.

For example, we must recognize a distinction between training and learning. Training is the end product of your business planning and learning is the beginning. Learning is a much larger undertaking. It involves alignment with the strategies and principles of the enterprise. It attempts to shape attitudes, principles and values of individuals with the common goals in the business environment. The new environment will require "Knowledge Management" and "Life Long Learning." More words showing up in the terminology and jargon of our day.

Our new view of learning must identify the relevant questions, search for the answers, in context, and somehow stretch that search into a continuous process. At Rosser we standardize the way we all communicate. For example, we created a company wide electronic project filing system with templates of our standard forms and checklists. We have also formalized the way teams work together by producing a manual with visual aides and guidelines describing the roles of each player and an organizational chart of relationships and reporting responsibility visually depicted. Our company Intranet has relevant information that is easy to access. And we have forums to share problems and find solutions. These are a few practical examples of things we have done at Rosser International to deal when all the new information. Each brought us closer to learning, professional development and business alignment with our shared vision. Each firm needs to discover what practices align with their own corporate shared vision.

We must constantly test our assumptions and their validity in current situations. This is the real purpose of a learning organization. Mental models from a past time can impede organizations from generating and practicing new ideas. In reverse, building new strategies based on new relevant assumptions or a shared vision can be a real competitive advantage.

The way we can check to see if we are using outdated solutions to make our present business decisions is to examine our dilemmas. Is the way we have always solved problems still working? Does working longer, harder and faster still work in the present environment? The questions are changing and if we do not recognize the underlying principles and use the most relevant information we may fall into the trap of making decisions based on what we have known to be true in the past or what makes us comfortable. When we as organizations define our questions accurately and align our thinking with relevant principles creating in our minds current accurate paradigms, we will feel more confident about our decisions and practices and it will give us and our organization a true sense of stability.

Situations where group thinking can take place and be applied to the issues at hand need to be planned and attended by as many relevant parties as possible. Relationships need to be strengthened and a level of trust for each other achieved so that discussions can be productive. New learning has to be prevalent and valued in your culture. The business of managing knowledge must be viewed as a group responsibility.

This is why we must learn. This is why we must focus our professional development on alignment with our business planning and practices. This is a long slow continuous process. There are no quick fixes. The price will be our time, our minds, our patience, and our understanding. The rewards will be profitable firms and relationships both personal and professional that can deal with stress and change and conflict.

*Sonja H. Winburn, SPHR is the Human Resource Manager at Rosser International, 524 West Peachtree Street, Atlanta, GA 30308. Rosser International won **the 2000 CES Award for Excellence** in the Large Firm category.*