



**At Nextel,
keeping ahead
of aggressive
competitors
requires a focus
on learning that
begins at the
inception of
a business
initiative.**

It's not rocket science, but learning functions at Nextel Communications run in an environment that is so predictive and so perfectly planned, it might as well be NASA. And that may be the most important lesson about workplace learning, performance, and leadership development at the wireless communications company.

Nextel's training organization is challenged to stay ahead of its fast-moving business environment. Being reactive, or even proactive, will never be satisfactory. In fact, the only way it can successfully operate is to be completely preemptive.

As Jim Caprara, vice president of human resources development at the Reston, Virginia-based Nextel, explains it, business training managers—or BTMs—are based in each of the company's many business functions. Although they still report to the HRD organization, they are fully engaged team members in their respective business units, and they are expected to contribute to those teams and to earn their respect and trust. Only by being trusted and respected members of their business units can BTMs expect to gain an appreciation of the team's learning needs. The BTMs must also function as the accepted learning experts within those business units.

"Our BTMs have a detailed understanding of the business function they support and can attach defined metrics based on actionable solutions," explains Caprara. "Training decisions are no longer reactive; rather, they are future-oriented. They take into account short-term and long-term goals and preemptively target growth opportunities."

Having a savvy, well-respected BTM in a business unit who can identify the team's impending training needs is only useful if the company has the resources—and the will—to make it happen.

Nextel believes that value must be expressed at a strategic level. It instituted a companywide scorecard, and the BTMs are a vital link in its implementation, which further enhances their role as key partners in the business. "The end result is the business training managers, as a group, can clearly articulate business strategy, objectives, and goals," notes Caprara.

Top-down commitment

All company programs and initiatives of significant impact or expense must pass muster with Nextel's Program Oversight Committee. The POC is the starting point for funding and resource allocation. Resources that must pass through the POC include IT, engineering, new product development, marketing, legal, and, of course, the HRD learning organization.

Beyond Reactive

According to Caprara, as new products, initiatives, and programs move through the process, “the line of sight gained by the learning organization is prior to program approval and, therefore, often well in advance of the individual business’s attention.”

Caprara says that embedding HRD early in the decision-making chain ensures that the learning solution is developed in tandem with the initial project approval, as opposed to an afterthought. “This is the preemptive approach, and it allows training and development to be incorporated throughout the launch of an initiative,” he explains. “The end result is that training and development decisions are linked directly to critical business decisions, and the end products are more cost-effective, timely, and impactful.”

The learning organization is heavily invested in the process. Caprara says, “That a member of the learning organization has a seat at the decision-making table is impressive. It allows HRD to flag and involve training at the earliest stages in the development of anything that the company is going to do. Because that’s where the finances are accrued, it allows Nextel to make certain that there are training funds attached to programs.”

Cost-effective, cost-controlled

At Nextel, 100 percent of the funding for educational activity is housed within HRD. That means not only training dollars, but also all the professional development funds as well. “If someone wants to go to a seminar in the field, the request comes through a very controlled avenue,” he explains. “The request comes in from the field through our business training manager and it goes to the Business Management Institute.”

In the Business Management Institute, the request is matched against the person’s individual development plan. “We take that request and match it against our own internal inventory of programs,” says Caprara. “If there is something that we own, then obviously that’s the route we follow. Then, we look at our vendors to see if there is a preferred provider for the training.

Nextel University is Born

Nextel Communications unified and connected its many learning functions under the auspices of Nextel University in 2002. The partnership among formerly disparate units was envisioned as a method and a central location to provide training representation and support through a direct connection to the business units themselves.

This effort then morphed into a comprehensive human resources development model in 2003. The end result saw a large number of resources that had previously been attached to separate business units become a single framework that expanded the core capabilities of Nextel University. The university also enabled new efficiency and quality in program design, development, and implementation.

In addition to developing and delivering point-of-need learning, Nextel University plays another important role. Linked to Nextel’s greater business strategies, the university develops the company’s talent pool by creating development solutions, participating in succession planning and leadership development. In this key role it empowers Nextel’s diverse talent base through a variety of technical, management, and sales training.

Human resources development consists of six institutes, which make up Nextel University, and one shared resource center, creating a single platform from which knowledge is created, assembled, and deployed.

Nextel University’s six institutes fall under both organizational and professional development and strategic skills development. The institutes represent all functional areas within Nextel as a whole and provide a direct business connection between functional departments and training and education.

Then and Now

Jim Caprara, vice president of human resources development at Nextel, describes the need to undertake a preemptive learning approach:

“Prior to the formation of [a fully engaged HRD organization] and Nextel University, Nextel had a decentralized training structure. Business functions sourced and funded their own training teams and, as a result, there was limited knowledge sharing across business functions; there were high-cost redundancies; and often training

was developed simply for the sake of training.

“In this traditional version of training, trainers often accepted the diagnosis of the business function’s management or leadership and responded with a training program designed to satisfy the client’s request.

“Now, there is a greater focus on consulting and business alignment in the planning of training and development to further a business function’s strategy.”

Two Nextel Centers for Excellence, including this facility in Las Vegas, provide customized, interactive educational tours in addition to individualized customer education. Bringing the Las Vegas Center online was the responsibility of Jim Caprara's organization.



"If there is not, then there's a good chance that we go ahead and take part and fund it. But, it's a very strategic environment. We have been able to substantially reduce costs in professional development that way. So, there's a lot more control financially in this organization than normal training organizations would have."

But Nextel could not make those training decisions on a case-by-case basis if it did not have a detailed plan for each employee. "We have individual road maps and development plans for every position in the company," notes Caprara. "It allows us to take a look at where you are and at what stage in your professional development you should be."

The individual development plans for each person in the company might target learning outside the curriculum road map to keep the employee well-equipped for a current position. Or, the IDP might be used to shine the light on a path to further career development and advancement.

The Business Management Institute, also a part of HRD operations, is responsible for Nextel's core business literacy. That covers all of Nextel's business management training—including new hire orientation as well as compliance training. It also is the source of any broad management initiatives that are identified for the company as a whole.

Nextel's Leadership Institute is also a part of HRD. Unlike many large companies that shake the bushes for any potential leadership talent, Nextel keeps it to a strategic number: 150 men and women. "A lot of companies' leadership development programs cover a broad base over lots of people," he explains. "Here, our leadership program is just what it says. These are people that we believe will run the company."

Is it working?

According to Caprara, customer satisfaction ratings for his group demonstrate its success. "With a consistently strong customer satisfaction rating, our customers let us know that we are providing a valuable service to them," he notes. "When business function leaders were recently asked if HRD is doing a good job of supporting company business objectives and goals, more than 90 percent of respondents agreed that we are."

"Because of their support and buy-in, we will continue to have a direct impact on the business. And through our preemptive approach, we will continue to partner with the business to ensure that Nextel employees and business partners are fully able to develop to their fullest potential." **TD**

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