A Seat at the Table

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Your job as a CLO is the same as everybody else’s in the C-suite — to drive business results and grow your organization’s competitive advantage. Consequently, you must equip people at all levels with a compelling context that drives desired behaviors, provide learning that closes performance gaps and is focused on real-world applicability, offer a way to measure ROI, and implement a sustainability plan that ensures what is learned becomes a way of life, rather than the skill of the month.

This requires that you have a prominent seat at the table where goals are clarified and strategies designed. So I offer the following food for thought:

Be an equal: Operate as an equal, a business peer versus a subordinate. Be one of the first people the CEO looks to involve in high-level planning. Ask, “Given our goals and challenges, what are the gaps we need to close?”

Patricia Nazemetz, vice president and chief human resources and ethics officer for Xerox, continually earns her place at the table. I was with her when she told her team the greatest immediate contributions HR could make to Xerox’s success were to provide three A-plus candidates for every opening and to clarify compelling benefits for top candidates to accept an offer. It wasn’t easy, but they did it.

Think further: Decisions often stop short of brilliant. Thinking further is a practice — make it yours. Push past the obvious, the easy. Don’t follow the herd. What does your gut tell you? If you could give the CEO the best possible advice, what would you tell him or her? Don’t pull any punches.

Two practices that must take center stage for CLOs are human connectivity and radical transparency. While conventional measures of business success shouldn’t be ignored, the next frontier for exponential growth and the only sustainable competitive edge lies in human connectivity, as opposed to strategy and tactics.

Whether your goal is improved workplace relations or improved market share, your most valuable currency is relationships — emotional capital. If you want to become a great leader, connect with your colleagues and customers on a deep level. This is far from a naive, feel-good notion. It’s good business sense because today we are making different choices about how we live our lives, who we spend our time with and how we spend our money. Everywhere, people are hungry to connect, and this has an immediate and powerful impact on how we design business strategies, market our products and services and ultimately on whether our businesses succeed or fail.

Also, no more truth-telling squeamishness. If a problem exists, it exists whether we cop to it or not. Yet millions of business people, perhaps your colleagues, are withholding what is really going on from the very people who are central to their success. Instead, we must come out from behind ourselves, become confident in our conversations and make solutions real.

No shortcuts: Make a clear and compelling case for how what you are recommending will deliver a significant ROI and why it must be done right — no shortcuts. Take a stand, enroll your partners in the change that’s required, fight for what’s needed, and push back if necessary. If you’ve ever said something like, “They’re all busy, so we have to teach a two-day course in three hours,” that was you caving, not earning your place at the table. If it takes two days, it takes two days. Get to ground truths. What will actually work?

Sponsorship: Require high-level sponsorship. Leaders must model the beliefs, skills and behaviors you’ve identified as central to success, so if they need training too, insist on it.

Sustainability: Follow through by measuring the ROI from the outset of any learning initiatives you offer and provide a minimum 12-week sustainability plan post-event; this is a key to produce the greatest ROI for any learning endeavor.
All in this together: Operate as if your organization’s progress depends on your progress as an individual — because it does. The bar in our field is higher than it has ever been. Hold yourself able to meet this standard.

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