



Learning from the Future

A key to success in this era of disruption is developing leaders' long-term thinking so they can "look back," bringing a futures perspective to everything they do.

BY MARLA LEPORE

What does the future hold? And how would you change what you're doing right now if you knew the answer?

In the training business, it's our job to prepare people for success, both today and in the future, and it's a task that's never been more challenging. Companies, individuals, and entire industries are being disrupted as the world changes at an ever-accelerating pace. The skills an organization needs to stay competitive keep evolving, and yet we can't say for sure what will be required tomorrow. In an environment like this, it's not enough to be competent; you have to be constantly learning.

This era of continual disruption was on the minds of the members of ISA-The Association of Learning Providers when they gathered for the association's Annual Business Retreat in Scottsdale, AZ, this past March. The business retreat offers these owners and executives of training, learning, and performance improvement firms the opportunity to discuss



emerging industry trends, hear from a variety of thought leaders in business and learning, and share best practices for shaping the strategic direction of their businesses to meet the needs of clients and learners in a rapidly changing world.

“The consensus from members this year was clear,” says ISA Executive Director Pam Schmidt. “No matter what lies ahead, if you want to thrive, you’ll have to be both fearless and focused.”

Everything You Know Is About to Change

Chris Pirie, founder of The Learning Futures Group and formerly a partner-level general manager at Microsoft and VP of eLearning at Oracle, delivered a simple message to those who attended an invitation-only meeting for owners, presidents, and CEOs at the retreat: Everything you know about workplace learning is about to change.

With so many disruptive forces at work, the one thing CEOs, CFOs, and CHROs all can agree on is that the biggest issue they’re dealing with is the failure to attract and retain top talent. Meanwhile, soft skills such as leadership, communication, and collaboration are the No. 1 priority when it comes to employee learning and development. The bottom line: Talent, skills, and capabilities are top of mind for every organization.

And yet, there’s not a lot of confidence in Talent and Learning teams to make things happen. Pirie cited several studies that highlight the dismal view leaders, learners, and even Talent and Learning professionals themselves have of the ability of Learning and Development (L&D) to impact business goals, corporate performance, and learner needs. Clearly,

something needs to change.

Pirie shared his own experience working at Microsoft as it transitioned from a “know it all” to a “learn it all” culture. Every organization needs to focus on building a new learning culture, he says, and that’s a good thing. As he puts it, the flip side of disruption is opportunity.

What can L&D do to make the shift? For starters, L&D professionals need to become learning scientists (see sidebar below). By drawing on several disciplines, including *data science*, *computer science*, *neuroscience*, and *social science*, learning scientists will be able to make learning more effective and efficient. Just as important, they’ll also be able to create the kind of learning culture that engages people’s natural curiosity and embeds learning into the fabric of work.

Leading a Fearless Future

We may not necessarily be able to predict the future, but there are some people whose job it is to look for the patterns and clues that hint at what may be waiting for us down the road. Bob Johansen is one such person. A futurist with the Institute of the Future and author of “The New Leadership Literacies,” Johansen spoke at the Annual Business Retreat about what it will take for organizations to flourish in a future where “extreme disruption and distributed everything” are the norm.

No matter how connected we think we are today, it’s nothing compared to what’s coming, Johansen says. The next decade will bring explosive digital connectivity and an even more rapid shift from centralized to distributed organizations. As he puts it, the future will be “scrambled.” It will be complex, messy, and threatening. And most leaders aren’t ready for it.

Part of the problem, he notes, is that the volatility and uncertainty of the last 10 years have led to an epidemic of short-term thinking among business leaders. One of the most important disruptions they need to face now is how they’re going to disrupt their own “short-termism.” His advice: Develop leaders’ long-term thinking so they can “look back,” bringing a futures perspective to everything they do. This means leaders have to do more than just take action.

The Learning Scientist: Examples of Opportunities from Computer Science

- Identifying and predicting future drop-outs
- Content curation based on sales pipeline
- Calculating your optimum time to learn
- Retention assists
- Real-time coaching from ambient listening
- Identifying the right expert to coach you
- Productivity enhancement suggestions

Learning from the Future

Developing New Leadership Literacies

CURRENT LITERACY

- Leaders focus on the present first, then think out gradually as far as they can toward the future.
- How can I look 10 years ahead when I can't even make sense of the present?
- Leaders who express certainty are viewed as strong leaders.

FUTURE LITERACY

- The best leaders will jump 10 or more years ahead and then work backward from the future.
- Long-term forecasting is easier than short-term—leaders will have to look long to make sense of the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world.
- Certainty will be suspect, but the best leaders will have clarity.

"The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything." Copyright © Bob Johansen, 2017, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

While being action-oriented may have been enough to make a great leader in the past, it's not enough to win in the kind of future that's emerging.

The good news, though, is innovation thrives in times of scramble. Leaders who can take advantage of the scramble will be able to make the future a better place.

Focus Makes It Happen

For many leaders, however, the idea of looking out and planning that far in the future can seem like an impossible feat. For one thing, who has the time? We're all so busy and stressed out. In a keynote on declaring a bold vision and making it happen, Wendy Leshgold, president and cofounder of The Fast Forward Group, encouraged the group to help leaders reframe their thinking about what's possible, beginning with that knee-jerk response to how we're doing ("Busy!"). A simple change, such as saying you're "in demand," can change your perspective, just like declaring a bold, seemingly impossible vision for the future—and putting it out there as a foregone conclusion—can turn fear into possibility and self-confidence.

Leshgold advises leaders to complete a visioning exercise that answers the question: What does extraordinary success look like a year from now? Following the example of other historic "impossible" feats such as the moon landing, the key is to make the vision specific, detailed, time bound, and intentional.

This process requires soul-searching. "As humans," Leshgold says, "we're Teflon for the good and Velcro for the bad." Leaders need to figure out what limiting beliefs might be holding them back, take a look at what those beliefs are costing them, and then think about what would be possible if they let those beliefs go. Once leaders get clear and focused, they can transform their anxiety about the future into excitement for what's to come.

Harnessing the Power of Imagery

After two-and-a-half days of learning, networking, and building off the collective intelligence of the ISA membership, it was time to do a little drawing.

Dan Roam, author of "The Back of the Napkin" and "Draw to Win," pulled off a bold feat of his own in managing to get a group of executives to put away their state-of-the-art

devices and pick up that old-fashioned but powerful instrument of communication: the pen. In a roll-up-your-sleeves session on how to sell, lead, and innovate with your visual mind, Roam took a deep dive into how to use seven basic shapes to explain just about anything to just about anyone.

Think you can't draw? Roam quickly proved anyone can. He also pointed out that pictures help people learn, and the most effective drawings are the simplest. Even better, "hand-drawn pictures make people smile," he says, "and smiling people think better." ISA members found that the visual thinking techniques they explored with Roam can be applied to selling, leading, training, innovating, and just about any task or function.

"When it comes to being fearless and focused, unleashing the visual mind requires a bit of both," says Schmidt. "But

Unleashing Your Visual Mind

- **LEAD:** Pictures help you clarify your vision and share it so other people see where you want to go.
- **SELL:** Pictures help you deeply understand a problem and then show other people you have a way to solve it.
- **INNOVATE:** Pictures help you look at the same old things in new ways—and then find ways to make those old things undeniably better.
- **TRAIN:** Pictures help you map out the steps of what you do so you can show other people how they can do it, too.

as Dan says, your visual mind is a great friend, especially for those of us who work in the learning profession."

Drawing has been a way of communicating for 30,000 years or more. When you consider that approximately 90 percent of everything that's shared online today is visual, visual thinking is both rooted in the past and a pathway to the future. And it's just one of the many tools we have available to us as we and our learners face the "scramble" of the future.

Whatever the future holds, one thing is clear: A learning culture will keep people and organizations open to possibilities, ready to seize new opportunities, and continually evolving on pace with an era of ongoing disruption. **1**



Since its founding in 1978 by some of the leading minds and visionaries in training, learning, and performance consulting, ISA-The Association of Learning Providers has been guided by a single mission: to be the resource for strategic growth, expertise, and best practices for executives in the business of training and performance development.

More than 80 companies comprise the membership of ISA, representing more than 5,700 employees who serve more than 100,000 clients across the Fortune 500. From pioneers to new innovators, members all share a passion for learning; for new ideas; for better solutions; and most of all, for helping their clients develop healthy, productive, successful people and organizations.

For more information and a list of ISA member companies, visit: <https://ico.memberclicks.net/publicmbrdir> or call 703.730.2838.

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Founded in 1978, ISA is the only association devoted exclusively to helping executives in the training, learning, and performance consulting industry expand their knowledge to support their clients' business needs. Choose a training provider or consultant on ISA's member list, and you'll get a partner that has access to an unparalleled collection of experience—and has an exceptional commitment to your success.

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