Executive Briefings

Published July 2008
Things CEOs (and CLOs) Should Think About
Brian Summerfield

In these economic times of trial, the most successful businesses will have leaders who are thinking about key aspects of the enterprise: its strategies, its processes and its talent. Tom Northup — management consultant at the Leadership Management Group, member of the Forum for Corporate Directors and author of *Five Hidden Mistakes CEOs Make: How to Unlock the Secrets that Drive Growth and Profitability* — has some thoughts about how leaders can move beyond the organizational status quo and adjust to rapidly changing market realities.

According to Northup, these actions include:

1. Develop strategically with purpose. This involves building an outstanding company that is proactive and able to identify, develop and realize opportunities — year in, year out. For effective strategic development, an organization should have a clear definition of a desired future and effective operations.

2. Focus on core competencies first. This entails understanding the key success factors that drive your marketplace and developing those into core competencies in your company.

3. Target opportunities intentionally instead of reacting to problems. The difference between these two approaches is the difference between a weak organization not meeting its performance objectives and an outstanding, profitable organization.

4. Embrace change. Make acceptance of any change part of your corporate culture. Involve your employees in discovering the need for change and include them in the plans for change so they don't become change critics and change resistant. If you make your people part of the solution, you will overcome resistance to change.

While Northup readily acknowledged that these recommendations apply for learning leaders and other members of executive teams, he maintained that the CEO should be the driver of these mindsets.
"In my mind, it all starts with the CEO," he said. "If he's not actively involved or interested, then it's not going to be as effective. Certainly, he should want his entire management team to be involved. He should look to the learning executive for detailed processes and programs, and hold them accountable by having them develop metrics he can use to measure progress."

For CLOs, aligning to these approaches means building robust leadership and management development programs first and foremost. "That's the chief learning officer's challenge: implement processes and programs that bring that effectiveness to the collective management of their organization," Northup explained. "In their particular area of influence and responsibility, they should want to understand how to build effectiveness throughout the organization, from the first level of supervisors up through the senior management team. Small changes in the effectiveness of management personnel, regardless of where they are, result in large improvements in the bottom line."

Another key area in which learning executives can play a crucial role is change management. While an organization can implement new processes, ultimately, it's the people who execute them. "If you need to improve old processes or add new processes, you've got to get the people on-board to accomplish the results you want," Northup said. "Your people drive it. How many organizations have you seen where the boss comes up with some new initiative and then six months later, it just kind of dies? That's because the organization's culture has not changed. That gets into the development of people, and learning executives should be part of that.

"Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results they're now getting," he added. "If the future you envision is different from your present, then you need to change the way you do things. Executives who get that and develop plans to make those changes are building excellence in their organizations in the long run."

Brian Summerfield is managing editor for Chief Learning Officer magazine.