

Turn Your Corporate University Into an Efficient Learning Organisation Development Tool

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Introduction

The theme of this presentation derives from an ongoing TSER research programme about HRD policies within large European companies which is headed by the Dutch University of Twente and to which we are participating as the French partner. Other presentations related to this TSER programme to which ECLO is collaborating will be made during this Conference by the Twente University representatives. This topic also results from my personal interest in management/leadership education, about which I wrote a book entitled "Education Managériale" published in 1998 in France.

It finally draws on my consulting activities and experiences with *BLV Learning Partners* as well as on my reflections about the operational challenge of managerial and organisational changes within large organisations (and the best ways to overcome the major obstacles). What is especially the case with the goal to build "learning oriented" companies and to initiate in depth new "learning organisation" dynamics.

My presentation will deal with the so called "corporate universities" or "corporate campuses" which are increasingly set up by large companies in France for a few years to facilitate the implementation of their corporate strategy and as a major human resources development tool. The focus of my reflection will bear upon the instrumental functions these corporate universities could play in the future to facilitate the transformation processes into L.O. oriented companies.

I will pinpoint what I consider as a very interesting emerging trend in the changing roles of these corporate universities which could pave the way to new potential and future functions. I will argue that within a "L.O. vision" they could become a key element of the corporate strategy and a major drive for its transformation into a "learning organisation oriented" company.

The short presentation of the ACCOR Académie case will illustrate my analysis about these ongoing changes taking place with some of these corporate universities and will support some of my reflections and suggestions about this issue. I will show that these corporate universities

could be turned into efficient tools not only to better facilitate the corporate strategy implementation but also to initiate the necessary organisational and managerial processes required to evolve progressively towards learning companies with enhanced global performances.

The Evolution of the "Corporate University" Concept

Since the early 80's quite a number of blue chips companies have set up their own corporate universities in the US and more and more European large companies have followed this trend with the setting up of various kinds of "corporate training centers", "corporate learning centers", "corporate universities or campuses".

The main purpose of these in house facilities is to provide the managers with the adequate and specific professional training , but also to improve internal communications and networking, to build the corporate identity and culture, to explain and to justify the corporate strategy, etc.

This movement appeared as a response to a real need for big companies with a large number of managers and executives scattered in various geographical areas and with different cultural backgrounds, who must act along the same corporate values, professional know how and aligned leadership.

The corporate university plays the role of a powerful "unifying" tool for the managers. Its main functions are the internal communication, the dissemination of the corporate culture and of the professional knowledge. It also has a very important "integration" function for the young or recently recruited managers (as well as in case of another company acquisition) for the alignment of the type of management and leadership. We must notice that corporate universities are also a HRD tools which may allow, besides their classical professional training role, to identify the "high potential" managers as well as to improve the internal mobility of the managers.

An interesting example of such a HRD corporate university strategy in France is provided by the AXA Group. AXA is a big French insurance company which has set up its corporate university in 2 famous wine chateaux of the Bordeaux region.

A noticeable trend has taken place among the corporate universities since the early 90's especially in the US, the United Kingdom and some northern European countries. Many corporate universities and corporate training centers within English speaking countries have changed their names into "corporate learning centers" or "learning business units". This change of name reflects an interesting evolution emphasizing more the learning processes of the individuals and groups that should take place in these educational organisations than the only traditional and rather academic "delivery of knowledge by experts" approach.

Another trend has emerged in the late 90's about these corporate universities, especially with the most advanced companies in the field of leadership and human resources management (or "learning organisation oriented" companies) as we can see from the ongoing TSER research programme about the HRD function in large European companies.

For these companies, the corporate university appears more and more as a powerful and efficient instrument to facilitate the necessary managerial and organisational changes resulting from the global corporate strategy implementation.

This new vision of the corporate university will enlarge its roles and functions besides traditional management training, professional skills learning, corporate culture communication, global strategy dissemination, etc.

It also changes the roles and the required profiles and competencies of the trainers who in this perspective will have to become more and more change agents, coaches, mentors and consultants.

To illustrate this very interesting evolution we will briefly quote the case of the ACCOR Académie which is the corporate university of the ACCOR Group.

The Experience of the French ACCOR Académie

The research on the French ACCOR Académie experience was performed within the first part of the TSER research programme. It was selected as one of the 4 national cases studies. (We have detailed it in the first part of the report about this research) which constituted the first part of this European research programme.

The ACCOR Académie is the corporate university of the ACCOR Group which is a major world-wide player in the hotel, car rental and travel agency industries. It was created by Paul Dubrule and Gerard Pelisson the founders of the ACCOR Group in the mid 80's.

It is the first service corporate university in Europe dedicated to the Hotel and tourism industry. The corporate university's main aims are to create and to implement training campaigns, to initiate inter-professional synergies, to convey group values and to meet the challenges lying ahead.

The ACCOR Académie plays an important role in the success of the group wide "ACCOR 2000 - succeeding together" project launched by the top management which is focusing on 3 crucial areas : new technologies, sales and marketing, technical and maintenance.

These are the subject of training courses in France and in other countries as well as various development programmes to accompany changes within the group.

The ACCOR Académie campus is located in Evry, a city located 30 minutes to the south east from Paris. It offers services and facilities for meeting and seminars in a pleasant, functional environment as well as accommodation and restaurant services. It provides all the necessary elements for modern, efficient training programmes.

It organises inter-brand and inter-professional training courses (more than 70 training courses are available) to allow participants to gain new skills and to share experiences which help to foster synergies within the Group. It also provides customized training courses for particular brands, operational units or teams which have special needs. These sessions are specially designed to develop the managerial capabilities and to strengthen the overall team spirit in order to guarantee the quality of service that clients expect.

In addition to these customized courses the ACCOR Académie offers personalised coaching, project follow up, pedagogical tools and supplementary kits for internal training in the different business areas.

We think that the ACCOR Académie experience appears as very interesting for 3 main reasons:

1 It reflects a "learning organisation oriented" development strategy with

a clear assertion about the links between the economic performances of the Group and the continuous improvement of the professional competencies of its people;

a widening of the main roles of the trainers who are increasingly becoming coaches, mentors and consultants; and

an effort to capitalize and to disseminate professional knowledge and "good practices" within the Group but also to outside companies.

2 Their major strategic programme called ACCOR 2000 stresses

the improvement of learning tools and methods,

the processes and organisational structures improvements,

the improvement of the corporate services quality.

3 The ACCOR Académie is becoming a major corporate tool for the change strategy of the Group

through various training activities which focus on professional competencies development, self-learning, personal development plans, group works, team "project based" learning, etc.

through new learning tools such as personal and group coaching, action-learning projects, mentoring, consulting, etc.,

through the regular evaluation of the adequacy of the training practices and of its internal organisational structure and operating processes to the challenge it must meet.

through the continuous implementation of relevant changes to better respond to the global corporate strategy and to the subsequent human resources development needs of the ACCOR Group.

We could also quote other corporate universities examples, especially those of advanced north American companies such as MOTOROLA (also studied in the TSER research project) which corporate university appear as very instrumental for the global strategy of the company . It has to stimulate and to implement managerial and organisational changes through various professional training and learning activities, internal communication and networking, but also through new activities such as project based team learning, group coaching, young recruits mentoring , internal organisation consulting, etc.

It is interesting to notice that these most "HRD advanced" and "learning organisation oriented" companies are increasingly opening their learning facilities and resources as well as their professional know how to their suppliers and clients, but also to other outside companies. This evolution features another significant characteristic of the future learning organisation which would endeavour not only to disseminate but also to exchange learning at all levels with its global environment for the benefit of everybody.

Some Reflections About Linking Corporate University Missions and Learning Organisation Development Processes

From the ACCOR Académie experience and the evolutions overtime of its various missions, it seems interesting to emphasize the growing contribution of such corporate educational organisation to the managerial and organisational change processes of large companies implied by their global strategy.

In many ways the corporate universities can be considered as powerful tools to facilitate global corporate changes and more specifically learning organisation development processes. So, we dare think they could become in the future a major component of a global leadership and organisational strategy to progressively build real learning companies. Given their dominant

learning activity, they could easily become for instance a kind of "micro-model" of a future learning organisation where new types of management procedures, new leadership practices and organisational structures could be developed, experimented and tested before being then progressively expanded into the whole company.

We have seen that corporate universities are becoming more "learning oriented" both at the level of the individual and at the level of team or group learning, especially for the best corporate professional practices. They are also a powerful communication and networking tool to explain and to disseminate the global corporate strategy and culture. So, they are an essential instrument to stimulate and to foster managerial and organisational changes along the corporate strategy.

What many large companies are discovering... with an investment in their own internal corporate university. We must notice that some of these new roles linked to the corporate strategy and culture changes cannot be played by outside resources (business school professors, consultants, etc.) even if they can have on some change issues a very valuable awareness and facilitator role...

Corporate universities can be considered as a major and increasing part of the HRD function and of the human resources management of the company, especially at the managers' level. In the future they should efficiently contribute to the necessary consistency between human resource management, organisation development, knowledge management, etc. to be in a position to better achieve the managerial and organisational change objectives implied by the global corporate strategy.

Within this perspective we would like to propose a new vision of the concept of corporate university for the future which should become more a major tool to develop efficiently the learning organisation processes and new leadership and organisational dynamics.

In addition to its traditional functions of professional training, communication, corporate culture dissemination, etc. the corporate university would have to stress the new emerging functions as we have seen, like team learning, knowledge management, individual life long development plans and learning, new leadership practices, new networking practices, etc. which are among the major features of "learning organisation oriented" companies.

The corporate university could become the ideal "testbed" for experimenting with limited risks new organisational modes and managerial roles which will aim at fostering and initiating permanent learning practices at all levels (individual, team, department, institution) within the company.

Such new orientations for corporate universities would require new professional competencies of the permanent trainers who will have to become more coaches, mentors and consultants than classical trainers teaching their professional skills.

Along this new corporate university concept, their main mission would be to act as change agents, as "catalysts" for individual and team learning, as expert in knowledge management and in leadership, as well as in organisation and culture changes. They would mainly act as facilitators for the company's change strategy and all its subsequent components : culture, organisation development, human resources development, managerial practices and behaviours, evaluation rules, internal communication policy, etc.

Likewise, new collaboration policies with outside "trainers" such as business schools, management consultants, etc. would be required. The emphasis should be put less on the teaching of the main basic management subjects and contents delivered by discipline experts and be placed more on a new kind of "trainers/consultants/facilitators" specialized in change process, human resources development, knowledge management system, etc. This will of course imply different types of profiles and competencies from these outside professionals who should be more change process specialists than management discipline experts. It will also mean for those outside professionals collaborating with these new kind of corporate universities different types of missions, other intervention methods with better real pedagogical efficiency and organisational development added value.

Conclusion

From the results of a survey of several corporate universities experiences, we have spotted some very interesting trends which are conveying an enlargement of their potential roles to facilitate the changes required by their companies' strategies. They seem to be a very promising way to explore how these changing and future roles of corporate universities could lead in the future to new concepts of corporate universities which should more actively and efficiently contribute to learning organisation development processes. Such an evolution would require new professional competencies, both internal and external, but also new organisational modes and new learning methods with other priority objectives for HRD and corporate strategy.

What would only be derived from a new top management vision of such a corporate educational organisation which could be called a "learning company university".

We believe in the future of new approaches and of the expansion of the corporate university concept to respond more efficiently to the people and the economic corporate challenges that are lying ahead, especially for the large western organisations and companies facing various forms of hierarchical

bureaucracies. More reflections, more corporate experiences and tools like the corporate universities seem to be necessary to progress towards new types of leadership and new kind of organisations which will feature the real "learning companies". It should more and more appear as the only adequate management paradigm to achieve sustainable corporate success in an increasingly changing and competitive world.

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