

The Emperor's New Clothes

Address to impress • BY JOEL GENDELMAN

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Let's say you've finally arrived in the C-suite as a chief learning officer or vice president. Now you are sitting at the big table, and your fellow organizational leaders will take you seriously. You are officially a part of the heart and soul of your corporation.

Not so fast. To be viewed as an effective business partner, here are a few things that you may wish to avoid:

1. Relying on the fear factor: "If you think training is expensive, try not training."
2. Justifying projects with possibly irrelevant data: "Our competition provides 40 hours of training for all new hires."
3. Counting on management's benevolence: "Employees rate professional development as a key indicator of job satisfaction."
4. Employing tired phrases to provide you with the allure of being a critical business function: These include "stakeholders," "organizational alignment," "process development" and "dialoguing." You also should limit use of HR terms such as "human capital" and "talent management" unless you plan to explain them thoroughly.
5. Taking the technical route and reciting the specifics of LMS data-warehousing capabilities, learning portals, knowledge-sharing systems, podcasts, wikis, blended learning and Web 2.0.
6. Peppering your conversation with overly "impactful" terms, such as "in a big way," "skyrocket" and "amazing."

You did not spend all this time climbing the ladder of success just to stand naked in the town square. Now that you have arrived, you should start asking hard questions about the learning function and the business it resides in. Here are a few:

1. What does the corporation value? How is that measured?
2. How will you know that you have been successful? What yardstick will executives employ to measure your success?
3. What are your corporate goals and the roadblocks to achieving those goals?
4. What strategies will the corporation use to cope in difficult economic times? Do they expect to get along with less, or are they looking to do something different (e.g., expand higher-margin products and services)?

5. In 30 words or less, what is the corporate strategy or "big idea?" What can learning do specifically to move it forward?
6. Where does the company's leadership expect learning to be in six months, one year and three years? What will you need to get there?

Also, to win friends and influence people, you'll need to develop and refine a new set of skills. Below is a partial list:

- **Don't oversell or overpromote yourself or the learning function:** People in the C-suite know the difference between sizzle and steak, and they have little time to waste listening to you blow your own horn.
- **Continually practice and refine clear communication:** Speak their language — that is, the language of business and finance. Senior executives typically are not interested in the technologies you use to do what you do. They simply want to make sure it gets done.
- **Know their world:** Learning is what you do best, so immerse yourself in your fellow executives' thoughts, ideas, values and approaches. Morph yourself into one of them.

To operate as an effective CLO, you'll also need to shift your attitude in several areas, including the following:

- **Adjust your focus:** Now that you are in the C-suite, your focus should be squarely on the business, not learning.
- **Know your boss better than your resources:** Since you have risen to the rank of CLO, you must have done a great job being intimately aware of the courses your department offers, as well as the tasks, resources and tools necessary to create and deliver those courses. Now is the time to leave that to someone else and spend more time and energy understanding and interacting with the other members of the C-suite than with your own people.
- **Never confuse selling with installing:** This is a tough one. It means you need to pledge to do what needs to be done without knowing the details of how you are going to do it. You will need to commit in order to maintain your seat at the big table. It is a leap of faith you simply must take. Don't worry, they invited you to the table because they knew you could do the job — and you can. One way or another. **CLO**