

# Creating a Company of Business People

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Imagine how your company would look if every single person at every level really understood how your business worked.

- What if every person in your organization really understood the big picture, including the economic, technological, competitive, and market realities of your business?
- What if all of your people had an understanding of your strategy far more focused and meaningful than murky visions and missions?
- What if they understood your organization's core competencies, knowing exactly what skills would be required to achieve your strategic goals?
- What if they realized how slim your margins are and how they could help them grow?
- What if they understood where you got your money from, how difficult it is to make, and what is really involved in financially growing your business?
- What if they understood the true cost of product development?
- What if they really understood the need for a shareholder return in a ferociously competitive world, where stockholders have many other investment alternatives?
- What if your organization went beyond the current rhetoric of customer service and deeply explored the hard realities of customer value?
- What if your people discovered that all customers are not alike?
- What if your organization went beyond today's "blue sky" rhetoric on reengineering and developed initiatives that really got results?

Many leaders would argue that lack of communication is one of the greatest obstacles to achieving change. But at **Root Learning,® Inc.**, we believe the real problem runs deeper.

In many organizations, mistrust and fear are the real culprits, the biggest impediments to moving forward. The antidote, we believe, is knowledge—knowledge about the core business realities that shape an organization's future.

At Root Learning, we fuse strategy with accelerated learning to reduce the cycle time of bringing knowledge, insight, and understanding to people at every level. We have created a process designed to build an entire company of business people. We do not train people. Our process assists in the deployment of strategy, leading people to come to an understanding on their own and increasing your capacity to make vital changes. These changes do not involve modifying behavior or developing lofty theories, but require implementing changes needed for your company to grow and prosper.

## **How We Got Started**

As former strategic planners, we spent a great deal of time with senior leaders of companies attempting to identify major environmental shifts that radically affected their business landscapes. We pointed out the threats and opportunities within specific

industries. We crafted masterful strategic plans in multicolored, three-ring binders. Then, when we returned a year later, we found that our binders were invariably on shelves, collecting dust. The strategic plans were not implemented after all, and precious opportunities were lost.

What began to emerge was a “Grand Canyon” between the *leaders* who could see what needed to be done, but who didn’t have their hands on the levers of change, and the *doers* who had their hands on the levers of change, but who simply couldn’t see the big picture. Leaders said, “This is our vision.” Doers replied, “What does this mean for me and my people?” We began to understand that the only way to bridge that canyon was to provide everyone with a comprehensive, board-level understanding of the most strategic business issues. We had to bridge the canyon by creating an organization of business people.

It became clear that competitive advantage was not determined by price, product, or even strategic thought, but by “change speed,” “adaptation speed,” and “learning speed.” And organizational learning speed is not determined by the speed of the brightest individuals, but by the average learning speed of the entire organization.

### **Bridging the Canyon**

We came to our first conclusion: People will tolerate the directives of leadership, but they will ultimately act on their own. This is a chilling statement for any company undergoing change. This means is that no leader can dictate, sell, or cajole people across the Grand Canyon. They must set the stage for people to *build* a bridge and cross it, to allow people to go on a journey of discovery and draw their own conclusions about critical business issues. Only when people change their conclusions will they change their actions.

Our second pivotal conclusion evolved: Everyone in the organization must see and understand the big picture. They must be allowed to understand the whys, not just the day-to-day whats.

### **Our Learning Map Technology**

When we started developing **RootMap**<sup>™</sup> visuals, we asked two basic questions: How do people learn, and how can large numbers of people quickly understand the most complex business issues? First, we determined that people learn visually. Aristotle said, “The soul never thinks without a picture.” Alan Kay took it one step further: “If a picture is worth a thousand words, a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures.”

We have learned that visualization is an accelerant tool. As learners absorb new information, it forms a picture in their minds. This picture emerges only when people can create links between their existing knowledge and new information. Learners tell us they have an “aha”—a moment when they think, “Now I understand”—when the picture is complete. Visualizing critical business issues allows individuals, teams, and organizations to think systematically, greatly speeding up the “aha” process. It also creates focused thinking, allowing everyone to build a shared understanding of the larger systems that determine the effectiveness of their individual actions.

If visualization is the first tenet of Root Learning, our second is dialogue—specifically, strategic-directed Socratic dialogue. Socrates knew that learning is a matter of asking the right questions, not simply giving the right answers. The great philosopher developed a system of asking his students questions to get to core truths. He avoided presenting his own conclusions; instead, he sought to immerse learners in exploration and inquiry.

Like Socrates, we believe there are few sustainable right or wrong answers; there are simply better questions, and the better the question, the more people will participate in engaged thinking. Dialogue demands that cherished assumptions be challenged, that long-held beliefs be explored. The Root Learning process uses strategic-directed dialogue to address business issues. This may sound like a simple exercise, but it is very hard to master. Most leaders lecture; most teachers preach. True dialogue seeks to minimize the leader/teacher talk and maximize the learner search.

The third tenet of Root Learning is that people learn best in small groups, guided by “questioner” or facilitator who nurtures a process of discovery. Not necessarily a business expert or leader, the facilitator encourages understanding through thought-provoking questions and what-if scenarios.

### **Our Core Competencies**

We at Root Learning have an extensive background in strategic planning and in executing strategic changes in Fortune 500 organizations. Additionally, we understand the front-line managerial, supervisory, economic, operational systems, and performance management issues that shape receptivity to learning initiatives and other interventions. We have a solid grip on the fundamental economic, cultural, and cost issues that must be addressed for large-scale organizational learning processes to be culturally accepted and practically implemented. Root Learning has a track record of delivering measurable results in hostile business environments—areas in which employee cynicism, suspicion, and distrust is extraordinarily high.

We have an in-depth comprehension of the principles and dynamics of group dialogue—a process which, we believe, is not simply the cornerstone of all large-scale organizational learning initiatives, but the very oxygen of change. We also understand how to successfully integrate learning with specific employee actions. For example, most of our learning processes produce laser-sharp customer value-driven actions designed to address strategic opportunities identified by corporate leadership.

### **The Golden Rules of Learning**

Successful leaders know that their first responsibility is to define the reality of the business. Therefore, the process of executing major improvements rests on a widespread employee understanding of the competitive, economic, technological, customer, market, and environmental realities that drive your business.

A person *without* such an understanding may not accept responsibility for the future of the organization. A person *with* this information cannot help but accept responsibility. By appealing to the highest level of thinking in people, leaders ensure the highest level of

actions, commitment, and organizational “alignment.” Business and financial literacy are essential to make people effective players in this effort and know how to keep score on the results. People must have a basic understanding of how a business operates and what it takes to win if they are to successfully participate in improving it.

Today, the Root Learning process is becoming widely recognized as an enabling technology that reduces learning time, encourages self-education, broadens the scope and depth of employee understanding on critical business systems, and, most important, directly impacts business results. Our methodology represents a proprietary determinant technology, creating a capability for large-scale interactive learning and strategic dialogue that was previously impossible.