



Published: July 1, 2009

Help Wanted: Leader to Promote a Culture of Learning

PERSPECTIVE

By Kirsten Olson

If you were asked about the learning culture of your school, how would you respond to the following questions:

- Is it a place that welcomes innovation and contributions about teaching and learning from everyone in the building?
- Do people talk about teaching, and can you rely on in-house discussions with colleagues to explore new developments in practice?
- Is it easy for you to develop a wiki, blog, or collaborative learning tool for your students, your colleagues, and yourself in order to share learning and explore interesting teaching and learning questions?
- Do school leaders encourage reflection, even on mistakes?
- Do you talk openly about your own screw-ups with your students and colleagues?
- Can you work across departmental, grade-level, or classroom boundaries and collaborate on important problems in your practice?
- Are there expert practitioners in your building and is it easy for you to learn from them?
- Are you growing in your work, learning new things, and passing on that growth and vitality to your colleagues and students?

I am adapting these questions from a **recent article** in the magazine, *Chief Learning Officer*, and a related **blog post** by school consultant Will Richardson. They got me thinking. Wouldn't it be great to work in a school where the answer to all of these questions was a "yes"?

Gardens and Plazas

Wouldn't it be wonderful, if your school resembled a vibrant garden, a learning ecosphere, with lots of different, productive, and expertly crafted microclimates—but with one grand, encompassing design? Or maybe your school would be like a dynamic city plaza, with individuals of different expertise and backgrounds holding forth at podiums and soapboxes, with an information center nearby where students could research what they'd just heard, or discuss it with learning partners and learning coaches.

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Unfortunately, most of the schools I'm in every week aren't much like this. Many students and teachers struggle in undernourished and unwatered soil pots, trapped in dark, old-fashioned industrial school facilities where they are performing tasks that involve little choice, little real challenge, and little meaning. Although the core business of schools is learning, and improving learning performance for everyone in the building is supposed to be central, the rigid instructional climate of schools more often resembles General Motors than intensive, well-organized organic gardening.

Do You Need Chief Learning Officer?

So how do we begin to move education from the old-fashioned industrial model with assembly-line learning to the dynamic ecosphere or city plaza model? What would the new learning organization look and feel like? How can we create and support it within our own schools? In addition to rethinking the actual look of our schools? One advancement, as a number of commentators have recently suggested, would be for every school to have a chief learning officer. This person's sole job would be to support and cultivate a vibrant learning atmosphere throughout the building, one that would help all learners.

Sound like a fluff position? In his blog post, Richardson contends that, on the contrary, creating a CLO position could help realign our schools' focus.

"Many schools and districts have full-time positions for testing coordinators and college counselors and data-driven decision makers," he writes. "We put a great deal of emphasis on outcomes with our kids, but I keep wondering how much more we could do in emphasizing the process of learning as well, not just for students but for everyone in the school."

In a recent article about the role of CLOs in leading school transformation, Ruth Ash, Dean of Samford University in Arkansas, emphasizes the need for a change agent. "All organizations, and individuals resist change," Ash says. "In order to overcome the natural barriers to the change process, leaders should concentrate on creating a culture that reduces the fear of change and designing the organizational processes that promote innovative practice."

The CLO's Job

The role of the chief learning officer emerged in the corporate world of the mid-1990s in response to dynamic, new online-learning environments. The job of the chief learning officer is to optimize learning in the organization both because it is good for employees and because it can dramatically boost the bottom line.

The responsibility of CLOs are to observe how people share information. Do colleagues impart important knowledge freely or jealously guard it? CLOs notice the tools people use to do their jobs and how those people generate information. CLOs focus on informal learning and networks of knowing—those off-the-org-chart connections that can inform how people work.

CLOs notice out loud and celebrate acts of learning in the organization. They work to foster a culture where people take risks openly, make mistakes, and where managers can be candid about what they are learning and what they don't know. CLOs are the public troubadours of learning. They invite everyone to come out and play. Their job is to ensure that risk-taking is at the center of everyone's work. Because if it isn't, the bottom line will be affected. Learning delivered efficiently is the new powerful engine for corporate growth. (For more background on the CLO idea, see the 2007 book *The Chief Learning Officer: Driving Value Within a Changing Organization Through Learning and Development*, by Tamar Elkeles and Jack

Phillips, Elsevier Publishing.)

Who Is Responsible for the Well Being of Learning At Your School?

I'm not a fan of the heroic, role-based models of school transformation, but right now in most schools, it's important to ask: Who is responsible for the well-being of learning? Who is nurturing learning day-to-day? And if it's not a priority, why isn't it? A CLO's job in a school would be to represent and advance a new culture of learning. We know that the way we are learning now is changing, but we lack the models and the people to help us figure it out and lead the way.

So what exactly would a school-based CLO do? Here are few ideas, based on my research of the corporate role:

- *Recognize what powerful, engaged high-level learning is and promote it.* That means knowing that the students working on the cover graphics and mixing their band's CD on the school's computer might be as powerful a learning experience as an analysis of the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims that takes place in an international relations class. We want to celebrate them both.
- *Help connect people (students, teachers, administrators) around the building in talking about their practice as learners.* Many of us are too isolated and lonely in our work in schools.
- *Remind school leaders that the business of the organization is learning and to foster that growth with every decision and every meeting.* CLOs could emphasize that learning is collaborative, dynamic, and interconnected, and that schools build their own learning cultures.

Could you be your school's next CLO?

I'm not saying that finding this person would be easy, because CLOs have to have an unusual set of skills. They are highly knowledgeable about their field (in this case, they would be expert teachers). They are non-hierarchical people who have a sibling orientation towards learning, as opposed to favoring a top-down, patriarchal approach. They are highly curious and routinely read and explore outside their normal range of values and interests. They are deeply interested in other people's ideas. They have advanced listening skills; in fact, they listen more than they talk. They are able to put disparate pieces of information together and see patterns where someone else might see disorganization. They think learning is really fun and get charged by other people learning.

Expert teachers out there: Could you be your school's next CLO?

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