



LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING:

PEER EXCHANGE FORUM

On Wednesday 1st April, CRF hosted members in a virtual peer-sharing event for Heads of L&D. We discussed how L&D is responding to the Coronavirus crisis, and the priorities L&D needs to focus on in the short, medium and long term. This note sets out the key points of the discussion.



Refocusing L&D



Rethinking leadership development



Repositioning leadership



Refocusing L&D

Since the start of the crisis, there have been a number of phases that L&D has begun to go through and will continue as the situation progresses:

1. Panic – ‘We need to shut all our training down’.

The knee-jerk response has been to postpone or cancel planned activities. We will have to be realistic about when we will be able to run face-to-face again, and indeed how many programmes will no longer be relevant in financially tightened times, or will have to be delivered using a much more cost effective delivery method.

2. Short term – ‘How can we add value?’

The initial reaction has been ‘let’s get all our content online’, but this has led to people being overwhelmed with more content than they can possibly consume. The actual need is not just about content. People are going through variations of the Kübler Ross grieving curve, and need support through this. What people want is to connect with each other and work through their challenges – how to manage virtually, how to use MS Teams, how to stay connected. People are struggling and we need to support them with empathy and compassion. How leaders respond to their teams is critical, as team members will remember good and (more especially) bad behaviour well after the crisis has abated. L&D needs to think through how to support this, both virtually and in-person with key managers and leaders. It’s also an opportunity for L&D to demonstrate value, as some people will have downtime that they can use to learn new things.

Some practical examples of short-term actions from our discussion:

- providing 1-2-1 coaching and counselling support to leaders
- creating virtual spaces for leaders to talk and share their concerns and challenges with peers
- tailoring content to specific current challenges e.g. producing a video on how to use MS Teams



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- reminding employees of the support provided by EAP programmes for those struggling to cope psychologically and financially – but beware these may soon be overwhelmed with requests.

3. Medium term – ‘How do we rethink what we do and how we do it?’

There will be no return to the way we worked before. In this new norm budgets will be cut. We will be forced to go back to our business model and identify what is important. If we don't respond with relevant solutions, at best our budgets will be cut further or at worst, people will question why L&D exists. (Think about what you can cut that is not relevant at the moment – traditional formal performance management was one candidate in our debate). We need to pivot and reposition HR and L&D. We will have to stop doing loads of ‘stuff’ that doesn't focus on critical business issues or build the capability of the organisation to thrive in the future. Business models will change so we need to invest time in having conversations that respond, but at times prompt thinking about resetting the strategy. We will have to translate that into critical future skills and how we source or develop them.



Rethinking leadership development

The crisis presents an opportunity to test whether our models of ‘effective’ leadership actually work in practice. We will need to take time once the crisis is over to consider if our views have changed. CRF research shows leadership is best developed through experience, but leaders need to reflect on and consolidate what they are learning. One action we can take as L&D professionals is to prompt leaders to reflect on what they are learning from this experience. L&D and HRBPs need to refocus our roles from running development to providing coaching and counselling. The challenge is how many people in our teams can do this.



Repositioning leadership

This is not just responding but about getting ahead of the curve. Some people are seeing leaders reverting to command and control or internal politics (it is an interesting measure of the success of our existing leadership development programmes to see how many leaders have learnt and are leading in a different way). We need to support and coach them to lead their people, not just manage the business. Many of their teams are overwhelmed and isolated (and so are they): working from home; being asked to do their job and home-school their children; worrying about seriously ill relatives they can't visit. We need to equip our leaders to deal with the impact of this on people's mental health.

Above all we need to help them see that their role is to care for their people, because if they do, then their people will care for the business. If they don't, people will remember it and the best people will have a choice when we come out the other side. We need to remind them to ask ‘are you OK?’ not just ‘have you delivered what I asked yesterday?’. We need to prompt leaders to speak through the lens of kindness, compassion and empathy.

Further Reading

Strategic Learning from Crises. 2017. Matt Nixon, CRF Event Slides. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/strategic-learning-crises/>