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## The Ideal Learning Organization



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If you were unconstrained by time, money or a lack of resources, what would your ideal learning organization look like? What processes and procedures would you implement if you had the juice to do exactly what you wanted to bring stellar learning and development opportunities to your workforce?

Sharon Adams, learning and performance manager for the City of Naperville (a suburb of Chicago, Ill.) has some realistic learning and development goals that are on the cusp of fruition, such as the implementation of balanced scorecards for all departments and employee performance scorecards that will become part of the organization's annual performance review process. Adams also hopes to implement a knowledge center in the next year or two. "It would be an online site where people can request information and share information and ideas," Adams explained. "Even in an organization like ours with only a little over 1,000 people, if somebody creates a new form or a new process or a new idea, we need to be able to get that out there quickly so others can use it. I really want to start a leadership development day where we have workshops, speakers, networking, community booths with our local colleges and other entities that we might partner with. I think that could be a very exciting thing, and that's down the road on my dream list."

But most of those projects are already in the pipeline. Her more fanciful learning wish list involves individual performance plans for each of the city's 1,000-plus employees and a learning retreat center in Lake Geneva, Wis. "If I had all the time in the world, I would love to create individual performance plans for every employee. Just sit down and ask them, 'What would you like to be? Where would you like to go in this organization? How can we help you get there?' The individual plan would also include coaching.



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That would take lots of time and staff, but I think that would be a wonderful thing to do,” Adams said. “If time, money and resources, if none of that counted, if I could just wave a magic wand, I would want a learning retreat center in Lake Geneva, Wis., and I actually have a picture of it because an organization that I used to work for actually had campgrounds. It was way up in the Upper Peninsula, and there was one in Lake Geneva with an adult retreat center with learning going on. I would have courses for trust and team building. Every leader, supervisor, manager and director here would come up for one week in groups of 10, and because it would be so far away and so set aside, they would know that they were there just for learning, team building and getting to know each other. They’d learn about our culture, how we get things done. We’d do planning, and work on their development issues and the development issues of their employees. It would be a place where leaders would come up once or twice a year just for strategy planning and dreaming for the next stages.”

This mythical retreat in Lake Geneva also would house department team-building activities and might include something called “open-space technology,” based on a book by Harrison Owen of the same name. “What he was trying to say was we shouldn’t just be communicating with our e-mail, computers and written reports,” Adams said. “We need to come together. He has a whole process, including a talking stick ceremony, and there’s all kinds of things that he goes through to allow people to really talk about what’s on their minds and all the ideas that come out of that.”

A talking stick is kind of like a symbol for a microphone. “You pass it around, and whoever has the stick talks,” Adams said. “I don’t know that I would do that part, but he has some pieces that were really good, and I’ve seen them work. It’s about forming communities to talk about issues that are important to the organization. Then the next step is, ‘What are you going to do about that? Is there something that can be done?’”

George Selix, former chief learning officer of Cendant Real Estate Franchise Group, said that during his time at Cendant he almost had his dream learning organization, but if he had his ideal, that learning organization would be housed in a facility like the Biltmore in Asheville, N.C., with a nine-hole golf course.



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I would want to blow out an entire group that did that kind of consulting and coaching with people. That's probably it. Unconstrained, I'd like to buy a place like the Biltmore and use it for a training facility with a nine-hole golf course on the side, but that's not going to help learning transfer so much as make it really pleasant to come to work each day!

"I believe that to be successful you need to own the content development, own your infrastructure, and you've got to have a way to make sure that all of the details get taken care of. The registrations, how do you send the course manuals out, how do you write the course manuals, who does the printing. The more of that you can own and control point to point, the easier it is to deliver a really seamless product to the end users, to the learners," Selix said.

"Five years ago, my dream was to have an employee university and to have certificate programs that connected with learning partners in the organization and that's come true," Adams said. "So it can happen, but it has to start with a dream. Then you talk about that dream, gather support for it and figure out how it can be done, or at least parts of it."

The result of that kind of specialized attention is simply people talking. But talking, listening and asking questions leads to sharing information, which some might say is the cornerstone of enterprise education. "I think we always have to be asking questions, listening to people and talking to each other. That's what I'm always striving for here," Adams said.



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