Toyota. Apple. Wal-Mart. These names evoke images of world-class quality, innovation and supply chain management, respectively. The often-overused term “world-class,” by definition, means that only a few companies can actually achieve this status. However, simply by setting the aspirational goal of creating a world-class training organization, companies can take advantage of the tangible and valuable benefits that come with world-class designation.

First, let’s define world-class training as being industry-leading, looked to as an example from other industries and known to be a significant strength for a company. A training organization can be world-class, and a world-class training organization can have a tremendous impact on a company’s performance. Beyond the impact on employee morale, retention and recruitment, a study conducted by The American Society for Training and Development has shown that having a world-class training organization correlates with a higher total shareholder return. Finally and importantly, by effectively training employees and diligently tracking the training, a world-class training organization can also reduce risk, which is critical in today’s compliance environment.

Best Practices for World-Class Training Organizations

The first best practice for creating a world-class training organization is to establish a formal link into the business at all levels, with the intent of becoming a strategic partner. Without a clear understanding of the business objectives, the training organization may place its focus on more general training and skills that will not add significant value to the company. When deciding how to use scarce resources, it is better to focus on specific training that will help people perform the critical aspects of their jobs in support of strategic business objectives than to focus on more general, unrelated training.

Second, it is necessary for the training organization to come to an agreement with company leaders as to what success looks like in order to create metrics and accountability to drive that success. Return on investment in training is very difficult to prove, but aligning measurement of training outcomes to business objectives is a useful way to put a yardstick to the activities of the training department.

At a practical level, applying Kirkpatrick’s Four-Level Training Evaluation Model—reaction, learning, behavior, and result—is a tried-and-true method of evaluation. The key is to get buy-in from the company leaders upfront, so that when they see the results, there is a mutual understanding of what “good” looks like.

A third best practice for enabling world-class training is to use assessments as the basis of learning paths. This lays the foundation for individualized learning. Training organizations need to begin by measuring the knowledge, skill
level and capability of team members to establish what they are good at and where the focus of training and development needs to be. Otherwise, the training organization will make assumptions about needs that will not always match reality. Assessments also need to be ongoing, as knowledge and skills can fade over time, and role-specific requirements may shift.

On-the-job training from peers can often be more valuable than formalized training initiatives because the lessons are coming from the individuals who live the business situations day to day. As a result, another best practice for enabling world-class training is to use informal learning and collaboration. This type of less-structured activity enables the 70 percent of learning that is experiential/on-the-job. An infrastructure is needed to allow informal learning and collaboration to take place, whether it is through social media, intranet message boards or time set aside in district-level and team meetings for the sharing of ideas. It does not matter where interaction and collaboration happens, as long as the company creates a culture that encourages coaching and the sharing of expertise by rewarding such behavior.

Finally, the path toward developing a world-class training organization requires the ability to deliver blended learning that matches the right modality to the desired outcome and optimal effectiveness for the learner. A blended solution across a learning continuum is nearly always more effective than any single event. It may make sense to design a curriculum that includes more knowledge-based interactive eCourses on the front end to establish core concepts prior to a more immersive live training event. After the event, mobile technology can be introduced to provide additional reinforcement. It is also then important to assess, pull through and coach to ensure the lessons have been learned and that behavior change persists.

**The Transformation Timeline**

Achieving world-class status requires commitment to excellence from all levels of the organization, from the C-suite to the individual contributor. It can easily take multiple years of committed effort to transform into a world-class organization.

The first year should be dedicated to setting the vision and objectives for the organization. This includes understanding the current state of affairs and identifying the knowledge gaps in key areas that need to be addressed. From there it is possible to develop a strategy and implementation plan for the training organization. During this first year, the training organization should take the time to discuss its vision with other stakeholders and gain buy-in from management.

Year two is the transformative year. The training organization can begin executing on priorities and monitoring success against pre-defined and specific metrics. Successes should be shared throughout the organization, while plans are modified to overcome challenges.

In the third year, the training organization may actually begin to achieve world-class status. During this period, it is important to continue to execute priorities, share successes and build sustainability into the programs. The organization should also benchmark against other identified industry-leading and world-class organizations to see how it compares.

**Conclusion**

While only a few companies can actually build and sustain a world-class training organization, there are still steps that companies can take to drive effective training, even if they don’t have the buy-in and investment required to attain an elusive “world-class” designation.

By applying a laser focus on identifying business-critical priorities, aligning stakeholders and executing on priorities, a training organization can deliver tangible wins that help drive the business and measure and share metrics that demonstrate value. In working to overcome challenges, the training group will establish organizational excellence and become a trusted business partner to the broader company. Finally, by incorporating company leadership into programs, the training organization can establish a culture of leader-led training. While it may not be “world-class,” it can certainly be a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive industry.