

# **Innovative Business Education Methods for Leaders and Managers**

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*In today's fast paced and ever-changing business world, leaders have less time to learn more about business and leadership. We will examine popular techniques to teach emerging leaders to be adaptive. Adaptive leadership encourages leaders to target individual styles based on age, education, cultural origin, and style. Instead of accepting the dominant style of the leader, the leader varies his or her approach to engage employees on their terms. "Adaptive teaching" is an extension of the same idea. Understanding how to appeal to learners based upon their generation and style can help engage them in the learning process.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

One author of this paper spent early years in her career as a dean of business. She became equipped with experiences both in graduate business at Northeastern University when it was recognized for innovation such as co-op, executive, and high technology MBA programs, and in business at Pikes Peak Community College when it merged both traditional business education with a highly active corporate training venture. She went on to spend several decades in corporate learning and training providing solutions to countless companies and executives. The second author spent his careers as a professor at Northeastern University and then Colorado State University – Pueblo. Since he was dedicated to effective teaching to both undergraduate and graduate students (winning multiple teaching awards along the way), these two authors often compared notes and challenged each other to “push the envelope” and continuously improve how to teach more effectively. This paper captures this moment in time (2010) and the current state of executive learning. In the spirit of the two authors’ history, readers and conference participants will be able to compare, contrast, and discuss the teaching methods and the effectiveness in both executive education and college teaching settings.

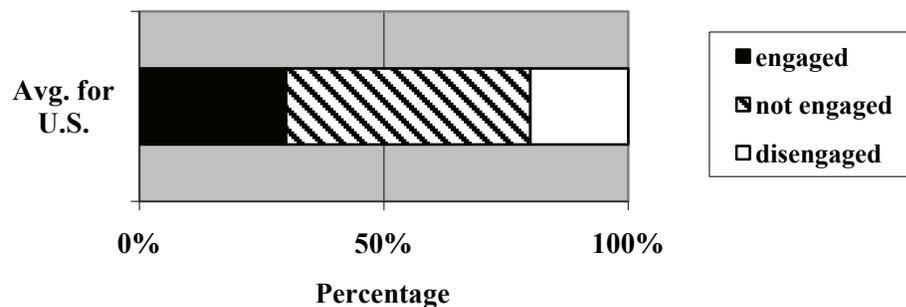
## **THE CASE FOR ADAPTABILITY**

In 2003, “Training/Learning: What Fits Your Company?” was published in CLO Magazine (Billington, 2003). Early in this decade, we recognized that “organizations are mass consumers of both training and learning.” The billions of dollars spent on learning was spent on “technology, outsourcing options, type of instructional method, topic or content, format and delivery strategy for training and learning services that can be chosen to help an organization achieve its goals [that] vary tremendously by

industry and company.” In the early 1990’s, Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* promoted systemic education that promoted education design that is ongoing and spans all the needs of the company and individual learners (Senge, 1990).

We are inundated with information that points to great change in our emerging workforce. Headlines in professional publications and daily newspapers announce the declining numbers of skilled workers and devastatingly low levels of worker engagement. A recent Gallup Poll suggests that 20% of workers are truly disengaged in their work, while 50% are not engaged, and only 30% are engaged (Gallup Consulting, 2008). See Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
**ENGAGEMENT LEVELS**  
**(Gallup 2008)**



Since engaged workers are more likely to be productive, companies are more concerned about reaching their workers. There is constant speculation about changing work ethics and skills shifts in the younger population as well as the “brain drain” as increasing numbers of older workers look to retirement. “The fact that, within 10 years, for the first time in human history there will be more people 65 and older than children under 5 in the world underlines the extent of this change.” (Suzman, 2009) The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that:

“The labor force will continue to age, with the annual growth rate of the 55-and-older group projected to be 4.1 percent, nearly 4 times the rate of growth of the overall labor force. It is anticipated that, in 2012, youths will constitute 15 percent of the labor force, and prime-age workers--those between the ages of 25 and 54--will make up about 66 percent of the labor force. The share of the 55-and-older age group will increase from 14.3 percent to 19.1 percent of the labor force.” (Toossi, 2004)

Rather than debate the validity of the data and forecasts or postulate that “workers will come around,” let’s assume that leaders are indeed facing one of the most profound shifts in workforce dynamics. Let’s take to heart the faltering engagement of workers. Let’s acknowledge that our younger workforces’ skills and attitudes are to be reckoned with. Let’s assume that the supply of older skilled workers is vanishing. Our corporate leaders will have no choice but to prepare to focus on managing the current and available workforce, not the ideal recruited and selected workforce that is a “fit” to the work and culture.

For the purpose of our look at adaptive leadership and adaptive learning, we will consider our audience varying by age (millennial, gen-x, boomers), cultures (region, politics, religion, family, and community influenced), and style, or the intuitive way by which someone thinks and learns (traditional/hierarchical, entrepreneurial, focused, distracted, and dissatisfied).

Companies who once said “this is soft stuff” have found that how they engage people pays off at the bottom line. Of those who have truly engaged their employees, 50 percent report increases in employee retention and customer satisfaction; 34 percent show increases in productivity and higher levels of

discretionary behavior, and 27 percent have validated higher productivity. Below are some common tendencies that describe engagement style characteristics based on the author’s feedback from client employees (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1  
ENGAGEMENT STYLE CHARACTERISTICS**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Distracted/Stressed</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is a source of livelihood; not satisfying</li> <li>• Youngest segment</li> <li>• Stressed out from obligations</li> <li>• Looking for employers who can be flexible</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Discontent/Demanding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is frustrating and annoying</li> <li>• Least committed and engaged</li> <li>• Many feel dead-ended and expect a lot</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Entrepreneurial/Self-Motivating</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love work</li> <li>• Creative</li> <li>• Hard working &amp; Self empowered</li> <li>• Motivated by Work that stimulates &amp; enables</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Drivers/Goal Oriented</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capable &amp; contributors to success</li> <li>• Value work that is stimulating and worthwhile</li> <li>• Value group &amp; prefer congenial work environments</li> <li>• Loyal, hard-working, reliable</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Morphers/Innovative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is about excitement, growth &amp; opportunity</li> <li>• Often young</li> <li>• Responsible &amp; independent</li> <li>• Well-educated</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Traditionalists/Rule Followers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly reliable, loyal, hard-working</li> <li>• Stable, secure &amp; fair work environments</li> <li>• Successful</li> <li>• Traditional</li> </ul>

### **ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP**

A hunger for new approaches for leaders and managers has surfaced. Leadership development is gravitating from crafting a well-honed leadership style to developing a style that successfully sways with workforce circumstances. Let’s examine some of the characteristics of the emerging workforce that underlie the need to be adaptable as a leader. These are just a few of the trends and speculated changes in our workforce that challenge leaders:

- There is a declining population of younger and middle-aged workers in developed nations that make sourcing future talent a challenge; even developing nations, often a supply for outsourced workers, are beginning to see signs that the population growth pace is slowing.
- Corporations will find it more difficult to obtain skilled workers (domestic or immigrant) because there are few of them and more competition for them
- Increasing global competition for employees and customers complicate corporate strategy.
- Educated immigrants are returning to their nations of origin (China and India) more so than in the past.
- Young Americans are less interested in scientific and harder skills.
- There is a shift in work ethic from “work first” to valuing a balanced life style.
- Shifts in aspirations from achievement and income to quality of life have become more evident.
- Burned out mid-aged workers are difficult to engage.
- An aging workforce is accompanied by an increasing number of baby boomers seeking retirement.
- There appears to be a wider divergence of interests, aspirations, learning styles across workers

(young to old, across socioeconomic strata, etc.).

- There are subtle gender shifts in the workplace.
- There is a gap in technology savvy skills among workers.
- A rapid pace of thought and process characterizes the workplace.
- Younger workers are particularly skilled in multi-tasking.
- There is a need for stimulation and entertainment to address short attention spans.
- Needs of workers reflect individuality.
- The isolation of technology has surfaced a need for structured networks and communities.

How do leaders navigate this complex workforce? Opinions abound about how to define the challenge. Mayo Clinic reports in a July 2005 newsletter that workplace tensions often arise when people of different generations—working side by side—don't understand each other. (Mayo Clinic, 2005) They define today's workplace generations as Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials, and Cuspers. Leaders are urged to avoid stereotyping and to seek to bridge the gaps by being aware of differences, appreciating strengths, and managing the differences effectively. Easier said than done.

Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipezak, in *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, urge that generational mixing provides for a much richer and different workforce (Zemke, et.al., 2000). Walker Smith and Ann Clurman in *Rocking the Ages* state that new generational differences are causing business upheavals and bringing new categories and ways of work into being at warp speed (Smith and Clurman, 1997). Given this as the context, there are some key implications for the workplace. Leaders will need to embrace and adopt a course of action that requires them to:

- Be prepared for shifts from established beliefs and patterns; keep an open mind toward new ideas.
- Be willing to move into uncharted territory and abandon the comfort of predictability.
- Look for ways to pioneer new practices—there is little to learn from existing methods, so adopt an approach that embraces new things.
- Shift paradigms—what worked in the past may not work now.
- Focus on behaviors and attitudes, not processes; look to behaviors both for performance of others as well as for how you lead.
- Embrace the “heart” of leadership—seek balance between the emotional quotient for what you feel and the science of leadership (the processes, metrics, etc.).
- Allow for more options and viewpoints and rely less on any single or trusted advisor.
- With increased variability in approach, expect and manage “diverging groups” rather than try to assimilate diversity into “oneness.”
- Shift from managing results *only*, to managing people—and let the people manage the results.
- Open views and minds—accept and do not refute new workforce characteristics.
- Become acutely aware of different needs and do not try to “fit” everyone into the policy box.
- Instead of recruiting and developing employees to comply with your style, seek to adapt your style to employees.
- Understand worker profiles and triggers.
- Determine how best to establish and sustain adaptable leadership.
- Create tools and techniques that enhance adaptable leadership styles, e.g. employ more individualized techniques like coaching.
- “Group together” to solve problems; seek 360° input so all perspectives are represented and not hidden by a blind spot.
- Speak openly and take chances with people.
- Consider leadership partners with synergistic talents.

In the *Manifesto for the New Agile Workplace*, Tony Di Romualdo and Jonathan Winter seek to identify a workplace “deal” that appeals to talented knowledge workers (DiRomualdo and Winter, 2005). They raise questions for leaders like:

- Why is work defined in jobs?
- Why work is divided in to 40 hours chunks?
- Why can't workers be employed by more than one company?
- Why can't workers retire at 40 and resume work at 60?
- Why is hire-and-fire the dominant employment model?
- Why do we have to go to the office to work?

For many of us already working with cross-generation teams, these questions really resonate. How we as leaders choose to respond to any number of them will determine how effectively our cross-generation workforces perform. Fortunately there are a number of interesting and positive approaches already being implemented. For example:

The solution in many firms is to create an agile and dynamic workplace. This concept is applied, in part, by companies like W.L. Gore which describes work in terms of roles and commitments. Oxfam is pasting contract workers together to form rapid response teams. Virtual Consultancy LLP allows workers freedom to perform non-competing work for other companies. Rather than hiring and firing, Bell Canada built a long-term relationship with its employees and experienced a 600% return on its investment in educating people. Tesco, in the UK, organizes human resources around “lifestyles.” These shifts in leadership practices “entail nothing short of a campaign or revolution in work practices and employment relationships.” Companies need to be encouraged to hire for attitude and reward behavior.

Examples of how you can mold leadership tactics to engage a variety of different employees are provided in this framework for further development (see Tables 2 and 3).

**TABLE 2  
ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP CONSTELLATION**

<b>Composition of the Workforce by age *</b>	<b>Work Style and Needs</b>	<b>Productivity and Strength</b>	<b>Leadership Tactic</b>
<b>Retirement Track</b>	Confident Seeks own pace Desires commitment	Experience, purpose, and drive	Seek input, set independence and accountability, establish as advisor
<b>Boomer</b>	Life balanced Personal achievement	Experience, perspective, will to achieve	Freedom to function, recognize effort
<b>Mid-Career Gen X</b>	Educated and wise Varied perspectives Conflicting demands in life Stretched	Motivation, desire to do well, and commitment in exchange for flexibility	Project work, partnerships at work; work by project and not clock
<b>Younger workers Millennials</b>	Independent Energetic Seek quality of life	Smart, fast, and technically talented	Mentor, balance of work-life, opportunity to explore

\* Just a sample of characteristics that could define a particular workforce. Consider gender, education, geographic culture, work function, etc.

**TABLE 3**  
**ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP CONSTELLATION**

<b>Composition of the Workface by Style</b>	<b>Work Style</b>	<b>Productivity/ Strengths</b>	<b>Leadership Tactic</b>
<b>Focused</b>	Eager, energetic, self-driven	Innovative, reliable, dedicated	Offer opportunity to lead, new challenges, rewards by status and more important work
<b>Traditional</b>	Uncompromising, structured, measured	Stable, reinforce standards, predictable	Defined rules, processes, expectations
<b>Entrepreneurial</b>	Innovative, free-spirited, unstructured	Creative, rally to the cause, get it done	Spot challenges, success by project, variability, independence
<b>Distracted</b>	Spread thin, demands on life and time	Grateful for flexibility so dedicated, focused on time	Flexibility, credit for work accomplished, strong partnerships
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	Unaligned, needs attention, self-reflective	Scrutinizing, different perspective	Specific boundaries, personal attention

### DEMAND FOR ADAPTIVE LEARNING

Research in academe and corporate learning over the last 10 years describes the variety in learning styles across generations and cultures. There is a need to address this variety is accentuated by demographics, globalization, and engagement and the resulting need to prepare leaders and managers for fast-paced change across cultures and industries.

Both universities and corporate educators report challenges to convey knowledge in traditional ways (classroom, lecture, memorization, etc.)

#### Challenges for Learning Leaders:

- Emerging **workforce** composition
- Work stage, life stage, generation, and life **style** influences
- **Creative** and entertaining learning – the **experience!**
- Knowledge **transfer** – the Baby Boom retirement “brain drain”
- **Rapid** skilling employees to overcome shortages
- Strengthening employee **engagement**
- **Multi-channel** learning strategy – different strokes for different folks
- Technology, technology, **technology**
- Innovative **sourcing**
- **Differentiated** learning

#### Teaching and Facilitating Styles:

- Catalyst -Help someone succeed on their own. Risk: The learner doesn’t know what’s good for them.
- Mentor -Act as a model and guide. Risk: Keeps the learner in the “mentor’s box”
- Accountant -Hold accountable. Risk: Need more time to process and really learn.
- Coach - Offer sidelines perspective. Risk: Sometimes miss real learning in the action.

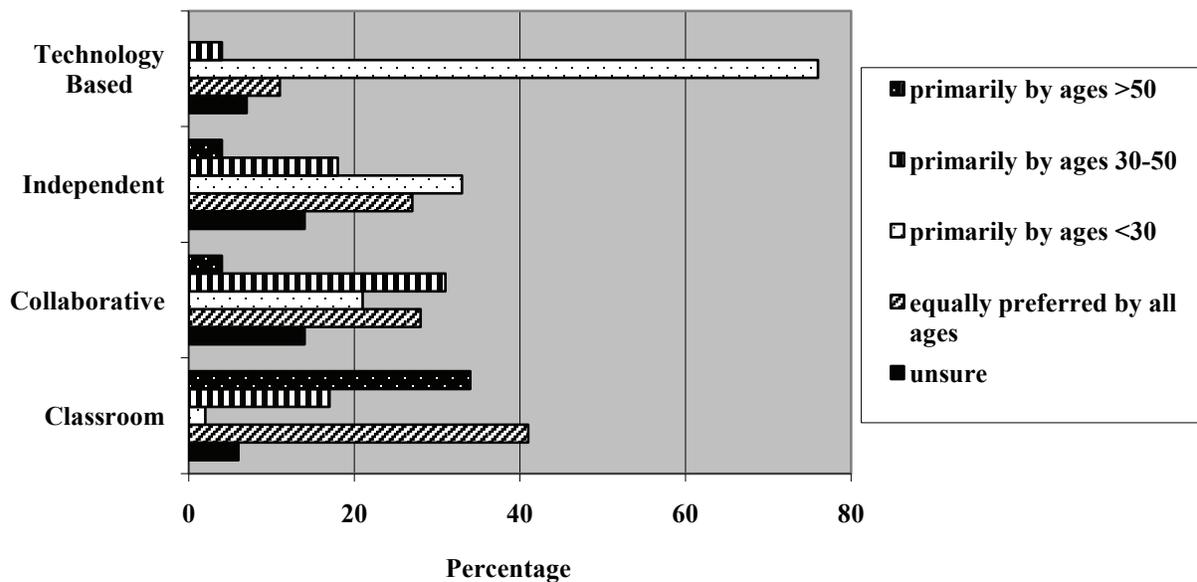
- Counselor -Cultivate and help. Risk: Learner may need some “hard” learning for action.
- Benevolent Dictator -Set expectations and demand. Risk: Learning may react rather than learn.
- Parent - Nurture and take personal interest. Risk: Obedience may preclude individual learning.

**TABLE 4  
LEARNING PREFERENCES BY GENERATION**

	<b>Millennial</b>	<b>Mid-Career</b>	<b>Boomers</b>
<b>Preferred setting</b>	Self-directed	Classroom	Small group
<b>Role of technology</b>	Integrated, visual	Solve problems	Gather information
<b>Attention span</b>	Short segments	Scan	Read
<b>Interaction</b>	Role play, experiment, question	Peer-to-peer discussion	Teach and learn
<b>Short-term goal</b>	Have fun	Good grades	Satisfaction
<b>Long-term goal</b>	Be marketable	Succeed at work	Remain visible
<b>Insists upon</b>	Relevance	Relevance	Relevance
<b>Myth</b>	Not motivated	Know enough already	Slow learners

**FIGURE 2  
ASTD/IBM SURVEY ON WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHICS**

**To what extent do you think the following learning methods are preferred by workers of different generations in your organization? (Select one category per learning Method.)**



Source: Figure 4 in ASTD/IBM Learning and Changing Demographics Workforce Study (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2006)

A cursory look at learning styles by generations has produced the following table in executive education. Could it be refined to look at the targeted learners in higher education as well to “adapt” to the learning audience? See the Table 4 below. IBM studied the results of alternative learning methods by generation. See Figure 2.

Table 5 summarizes the points of view in executive education about reaching the generations with effective learning, while Figure 3 looks at preferences by engagement style:

**TABLE 5  
TACTICS FOR EACH GENERATION**

<b>Tactics for Adaptively Teaching Each Generation</b>		
<b>Millenials</b>	<b>Mid-Career</b>	<b>Boomers</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Think, work, and communicate at a rapid pace</li> <li>2. Work well with complexity – multitask and multiprocess</li> <li>3. Tinker to come up with solutions</li> <li>4. Play (games)</li> <li>5. Rely on social information networks rather than physical proximity or relationships</li> <li>6. Are NOT bureaucratic</li> <li>7. Connect globally</li> <li>8. Absorb streaming ... audio, video, information, news</li> <li>9. Acknowledge expertise not authority</li> <li>10. Breathe digital as “oxygen”</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Connect me to what I need</li> <li>– Multi-tasker</li> <li>– Freedom of expression/ experimentation</li> <li>– Hands-on learning</li> <li>– Feedback</li> <li>– Technology masters/ <b>digital natives</b></li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Span learning styles</li> <li>2. Are career driven</li> <li>3. May be technology savvy</li> <li>4. Strive for career status</li> <li>5. Are work and performance driven</li> <li>6. Play and learn competitively</li> <li>7. Seek a balance in life and work</li> <li>8. Too busy to learn</li> <li>9. Have multiple sources of stimuli at once</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– On the job</li> <li>– Self-study</li> <li>– Technology OK – means to an end</li> <li>– Personal impact – “me”</li> <li>– Technology savvy</li> <li>– Learn on the fly</li> <li>– Task juggler</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Are linear thinkers</li> <li>2. Draw from a wealth of experience</li> <li>3. Need to unlearn as well as learn</li> <li>4. Are likely to be technology immigrants</li> <li>5. Can be in various cycles of learning</li> <li>6. Are motivated to learn just what they need</li> <li>7. Acknowledge authority</li> <li>8. Learn best by doing rather than seeing or hearing</li> <li>9. May be <i>anxious</i> about multi-generational learning activities</li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Show me what to do</li> <li>– Formal learners</li> <li>– Unlearn as well as learn</li> <li>– “What do I need the technology for? Confusing?”</li> <li>– <b>Technology immigrants</b></li> </ul>

**FIGURE 3**  
**DOMINANT LEARNING DIFFERENCES BY STYLE**  
 (See Tables 1 & 4 for Styles) Based on Observations by Authors

Learning Style	←————→		Learning Style
<i>In teams</i>	Entrepreneurial Boomers		Innovators <i>Alone</i>
<i>By others</i>	Stressed		Self Motivators <i>Self</i> Mid-Career
<i>Formal</i>	Goal Oriented Boomers		Innovators <i>Casual</i> Millennial
<i>Rigid</i>	Traditionalists		Stressed <i>Flexible</i> Millennial
<i>Expert</i>	Traditionalists		Self Motivators <i>Participate</i>
<i>Required</i>	Demanding		Entrepreneurial <i>Voluntary</i> Mid-Career

**A CALL TO ACTION FOR LEARNING LEADERS AND FACULTY**

Faculty charged with helping their students learn and executives in an organization charged with learning and human development are especially burdened with the responsibility to prepare for this new world order. They are challenged to be original and truly discover how best to incorporate change in their organization, given culture, available workforce, business needs, urgency, and history. Learning and development officers and faculty everywhere can undertake well orchestrated efforts to surface ideas that shake up tradition. Some ways to begin this cross-generational development process can include providing:

1. Value “learning” and not only the act of “teaching” so the plan is not to train someone to act and not think.
2. Strive for individualized learning by coaching, cohort learning, and partnerships.
3. Generate a lifelong learning policy that makes it easy and desirable to learn.
4. Create a supportive and dynamic culture that invites change.
5. Hire faculty, learning team members, graduate assistants, and third-party development providers who are dramatic and innovative.
6. Think and work fast, with a glance at the “thin slice,” or the ability to find patterns in situations and behaviors. (Gladwell, 2005)
7. Eliminate ineffective learning. “Discover what you don’t like doing and stop doing it.” (Buckingham, 2005)

8. Integrate “purely academic” views of learning into a larger plan with research and development that taps into the research of third parties, consortia, and universities.
9. Create a change lifeline or “help desk” that personalizes, sustains, coaches, and navigates reality.

**TABLE 6**  
**SCORECARD – SURVEY OF COMPARATIVE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS IN COLLEGE**  
**CLASSROOM AND EXECUTIVE EDUCATION**

Technique	Have you used it? <b>Yes, No.</b> College (C) or Exec Ed (E)?	Was it effective? <b>Yes, No,</b> DN	Why? Why not?	Would you use it / recommend it? <b>Yes, No,</b> DN	How engaged were learners (scale <b>1 – 10</b> with <i>1 =not at all</i> , and <i>10 =extremely</i> )
<b>Lecture (example entries)</b>	<b>Y C and E</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Did not hold interest for 1 hour</b>	<b>Y but for only part of the class</b>	<b>3</b>
Informal learning (unstructured – need or outcome focus)					
Social networking (Twitter, Yammer, Facebook, Blogs, Wikis)					
Do It Yourself learning (self- generated and monitored)					
Reality learning / Simulations					
Just in time learning (learn as you go or need)					
Virtual learning (not “live” setting)					
Technology enabled learning (what any technology is called)					
Metaphoric learning (non-discipline example)					
Action learning (experiential, labs, etc.)					
Movie – based learning (clips, make your own)					

The compelling story is the creation of engaged learners—ones who learn, work, and manage differently and yet achieve great results. What these examples show—and what this research has found—is that adaptive learning and leadership can achieve profoundly better results.

This means we will need to create new frameworks to the way we teach and what we teach. That is a complex undertaking—and these new-style learners and leaders will require support systems, processes, and learning that permeates the organization in support of the new order. The outcome of such change is uncertain, but the performance of teaching organizations and corporate learning that do *not* change will most certainly be dismal.

Google search reveals 2,070,000 hits on learning methods. We can look further for ideas. Jeffrey Cantor, in *Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community*, proclaimed (Cantor, 1997):

- A need for educated workers and citizens who can meet the challenges of a new world economy and order;
- An increased understanding of learning theories and cognitive development;
- More non-traditional learners with multitudes of learning styles and needs;
- A changing American workplace which requires people to effectively interface with each other and understand their roles as team players;
- An economic necessity for higher education to more closely interface with business and community; and
- Administrative and faculty concerns about their roles in selection and control and evaluation of the learning process.

Do your own inventory with the scorecard shown in Table 6.

However you undertake it, embrace the opportunity to build vitality and dynamic learning into your programs and learning initiatives!

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