

Leading edge interview

Richard Brooke

Richard Brooke has had an accomplished and varied career in Learning and Development (L+D). Originally trained as a teacher, he moved on to adult education in health and fitness before developing a dual career path in commercial and L+D in the Pharmaceutical industry. Moving over to the FMCG sector with Nestle specializing in Leadership Development, he then joined Bacardi in 2017 as Talent Director (AMEA and APAC). He specializes in self-development and coaching strategies and has been the architect of many innovative and successful programs and development interventions through his career.

1. What first attracted you to working in this field?

"I originally trained as a PE teacher, and I have always had a passion for personal development and performance. Initially this was in sports; I had an eye for spotting gaps and finding ways to help people address these to take their performance to another level. To a greater or lesser extent all of my future roles have included some aspect of people development. I get a real sense of satisfaction from helping others push themselves to new levels and adding more value back to the business."

2. How has your experience with Bacardi informed you as a Learning and Development (L+D) professional?

"Throughout my career I have looked to achieve results. I am less interested in the so-called 'happy sheets' or whether delegates had a good time than I am focused on the difference that a great program or coaching has made for them and their performance. The unique culture of Bacardi, one that encourages you to be fearless, is grounded on family values and a founder's mentality, really resonated with my ambition to always make a difference and is part of what attracted me to the organization. As the world's largest privately-held spirits company, Bacardi has also given me the opportunity to travel and work with diverse markets and points of view. This opportunity to work with so many countries and people from different backgrounds has taught me to adapt and flex my approach in order to implement change in a way that works for each market and culture."

3. What is your leading L+D priority?

"It is quite simple: there are two types of priority.

Firstly, in the current business context, my number one priority as Talent Director is to help transform our Succession Planning process. We have to focus more on the accurate assessment of our talent, the realities of mobility and ensuring we have a global mindset where talent is not owned and only determined locally, rather it is accessible to the entire Bacardi network. Supporting transfers across markets, in particular to and from emerging markets, is a large part of how we focus on developing

talent, opening their minds to new ways of working, and creating life-long personal and professional learning experiences.

However, secondly, the overall priority for L+D is to equip and enable people to drive the business forward in line with the business strategy. As a global organization, operating in a volatile and uncertain world, a key enabler is to help people take charge of their own learning and to hold them accountable for the results. My job is to create and implement programs and tools that enable, encourage and accelerate that mindset shift and help them define the best version of themselves. You could call it a pull strategy rather than a push strategy. L+D is too often guilty of sticking to the latter 'push' methods, where too many 'courses' and other content-driven processes perpetuate a culture of dependency."

4. How do you align your L+D strategies to support the Bacardi culture?

"At Bacardi we have three pillars which describe our culture; family, fearless and a founder's mentality. As a family-owned business for more than 157 years, that family culture remains front and center in all we do. For example, we refer to our colleagues as 'primos' (Spanish for 'cousin') not employees because, in the end, we are all part of an extended family working together toward a common goal. Secondly, we encourage people to be fearless and feel comfortable to take calculated risks and push boundaries. Finally, we aim to maintain a 'founder's mentality'; to act as if Bacardi is our own business, to hold each other accountable and spend every dollar as if it were our own. These three pillars drive a culture that is fast and agile and all our L+D and OD strategies aim to mirror, underpin and support these three pillars."

5. What do you see as the biggest challenge in your current role?

"In a word, it's capacity – we set ambitious targets and often have multiple plates spinning at any one time. We have to be cognizant of which ones will give us the biggest win or return. We have clear business priorities, or Big Bets as we call them, and have a shared understanding of what we should be focused on in order to make the biggest impact."

6. What is your greatest achievement to date in the L+D field?

"There are many things I am proud of but two stand out that I would like to share.

Firstly, I introduced the Self-Managed Learning (SML) framework into Nestlé. With top level sponsorship, SML gave me the structures to create a content-free leadership development program where leaders set, achieved and accounted for the results of their own learning objectives. It is a hard-nosed approach but also takes a holistic perspective. SML requires leaders to take a strategic look at themselves both in their leadership roles in the context of the business, but also in the wider context of their lives overall. The impacts of the program were evident and it is still successfully running years after I left Nestlé. I am so proud to have left a legacy that is continuing to deliver real value to individuals and quantifiable improvements within the business.

Secondly, my work on the Bacardi Ready Advanced Leadership Development Programme. We bring together local leaders from all functions and geographies within our Emerging Markets. It is a fully immersive and experiential program covering a broad spectrum of disciplines through the use of case studies, business challenges, market-based activities and peer coaching sessions. All the interventions focus on real challenges. In this way, not only do our leaders gain knowledge and skills and build broader networks within the business, they bring fast and visible value back to their part of Bacardi. It is this combination, together with the fun of learning to make great

cocktails, that has made this program such a success and as a result it will now be rolled out Globally.

7. In your opinion what are the main obstacles to effective L+D in organizations? Are these issues attracting the attention they deserve in organizations today?

“The main barrier is when L+D attempts to either do too much or to simply do things because they are new or fashionable. If we are holding robust talent discussions and empowering and supporting people to own their own learning, then people see a tangible value in what we do. Barriers appear and we create our own obstacles when we attempt to peddle too many disparate interventions, that connect neither with the individual nor the challenges they have in the business.”

8. Do busy executives have time to develop? How do you tackle this at Bacardi?

“Yes, absolutely. A better question might be ‘Can busy executives survive and thrive if they don’t make time to develop?’.

“If people are not learning and keeping up with, or ahead of, the pace of change, they will not be successful. Particularly as leaders, saying we don’t have the time is no excuse. We need role-modelling of the importance of continual learning from the top. At Bacardi, we have a long-tenured and stable leadership team with a consistent and long-term view. This long-term view ensures they value development, theirs and that of their teams. They are invested in the growth because they truly believe we will all be on this ride together for many years to come.”

10. What trends do you see emerging in the L+D field and where do you see the profession heading over the next 5-10 years?

“The profession needs to deeply understand the need for personalization in the same way that businesses do. For example, many businesses sell products that you can fully personalize. L+D need to think of their audience as customers and recognize people need to be able to choose which learning they need, and how they wish to learn it.”

“Development methodologies are also now moving to more real-world challenges in a work environment. Where safe practice is required, technological developments are allowing gamification and virtual-reality full immersion; both will become more prevalent.”

“What will be interesting to see is how artificial intelligence (AI) will influence learning, alongside a better understanding of how we learn resulting from developments in neuroscience.”

12. What advice would you give people who are just coming in to the profession?

“There are four things:

1. Ensure you develop a broad understanding of all aspects of learning and development. Develop your expertise to back up your opinions and thinking. If you can gain commercial experience, then I would highly encourage this. It brings greater understanding of the ‘real world’ and an ability to offer greater value from an L+D perspective.
2. Find good mentors for yourself – and be clear on what they bring to widen your perspectives
3. Be a voracious learner yourself – read; follow people online; network and engage with experts.

4. Critical is to find a business with the right culture that supports continuous Learning and Development and then keep it real and focus on the impact of learning in terms of how it helps the business and the individual. Constantly ask yourself (and your customers) what value does this really bring you? If you don't get a pull then step back and reassess.

Ultimately, you gain professional respect by addressing problems/opportunities, providing solutions and then implementing them.”

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