



THE SIX DISCIPLINES OF BREAKTHROUGH LEARNING

How to Turn Training and
Development into Business Results

SECOND EDITION

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INTRODUCTION: THE SIX DS

The training you provide must contribute—visibly and substantially—to fulfillment of customers’ business strategies.

—VAN ADELSBERG AND TROLLEY

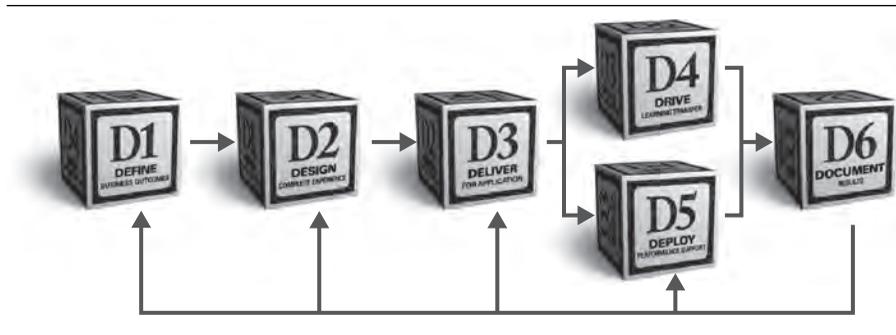
Throughout our careers, we have been convinced of the strategic importance of learning and the contribution that corporate training and development programs can and should make. But we have also been deeply concerned that their actual impact is frequently far less than their true potential.

Ten years ago, we started on a mission to understand—and to find ways to remove—the impediments to learning realizing its full potential and strategic contribution. We have worked with hundreds of organizations, large and small, and thousands of different programs. We have been privileged to be part of breakthrough learning programs—initiatives that helped propel their companies to a higher level of performance and that delivered results of undeniable value. But we have also observed programs that produced minimal or even negative impact, most often for the lack of learning transfer. New skills and knowledge were taught, but never applied to the actual work of the organization.

When we compared the differences between these two extremes, we found that breakthrough learning is the result of a disciplined and systematic approach, executed with passion, excellence, and a commitment to continuous improvement. There is no “magic bullet”—no one, simple fix that transforms corporate learning from the periphery to central strategic importance.

Seven years ago, we distilled the critical practices that characterize high impact initiatives into the 6Ds (Figure I.1), which we described in *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning* (2006).

FIGURE I.1. THE 6Ds THAT TURN LEARNING INTO BUSINESS RESULTS



Case in Point I.1 The 6Ds at GE

Jayne Johnson, director, Leadership Education, for GE Global Learning, Crotonville, introduced the Six Disciplines to GE. “Part of my role in leading the Global Learning Council is to share best practices among the group. I read the *Six Disciplines* book and fell in love with the methodology. It just makes so much sense to start with the outcome in mind and work backwards. The concepts really resonated with me, so I introduced the *Six Disciplines* to the Global Learning Council by having one of the authors come out to Crotonville and conduct a session for us. Looking back now, I’m very glad that I did, because the 6Ds lives on across GE Global Learning.

“GE is very much a metrics-driven organization, very results-oriented. The 6Ds gave us a common language to reinforce all our efforts and ensure that we are making an impact with the courses we run. Before we knew about the Six Disciplines, whenever somebody went to one of our classes, we had them put together an action plan based on all the things they had learned and wanted to implement upon their return home.

“Once they left our grounds here in Crotonville, we really had no idea what they did with it. Occasionally, we would check in, but there was no consistency. So, what the *Six Disciplines* did was give us a more consistent and thoughtful approach to ensuring that participants continue to think about what they committed to do in the class and as a result, we have a higher percentage of people following-through on them. The *Six Disciplines* gave us a common language and a common process that makes so much sense. It works very well in GE.”

Since the first edition of this book, learning organizations in many leading companies have adopted the 6Ds as the organizing principles for their training and development efforts. They have found them to be a powerful mnemonic and a common language to leverage best practices across their learning organizations (see Case in Point I.1).

This new edition of *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning* has been extensively revised. We have incorporated new research and examples of best practices from innovative companies on the leading edge of getting better results from learning. We have also incorporated many of the new tools and guides we developed in conjunction with the 6Ds Workshops.

What follows is a brief introduction to each of the Six Disciplines. Each begins with a “D” to make them easier to remember and apply. While implementing the principles of any one of the 6Ds individually will enhance results, the greatest improvement is achieved when all six are used together; there is synergy among them. In the remainder of the book, we dedicate a full chapter to each discipline, exploring it in depth and providing examples and tools to maximize its contribution.



Define Business Outcomes

A fundamental premise of this book is that human capital is the single most important source of competitive advantage in today’s increasingly knowledge-based economy. Competitive pressure requires organizations to continuously improve the quality of their products and services and the efficiency with which they are delivered. Maintaining competitive advantage through human capital requires ongoing investment in employees’ development, both so that they stay current in a rapidly changing world and so that they stay with the company. According to James K. Harter, Ph.D., Gallup’s chief scientist for workplace management, one of the best predictors of retention is whether an employee feels he or she has opportunities at work to learn and grow (Robison, 2008).

Corporate-sponsored learning represents an investment that companies make to enhance their human capital and so ensure their future. Companies expect that investment to pay dividends in terms of greater effectiveness, improved productivity, enhanced customer satisfaction, better commitment, higher retention, and so forth. That means that all company-funded learning opportunities—whether classroom-based training, e-learning, informal learning, executive coaches, tuition reimbursement, and the like—ultimately serve a business purpose.

We should say at this point that, throughout the book, we use “business” and “corporate” to refer to the larger organization that sponsors learning and development initiatives. These are meant to also include government agencies and not-for-profit enterprises. Although they are not “businesses” in the usual sense, continuous learning is nevertheless essential for these organizations to fulfill their missions, and it must be managed in a business-like manner to be effective. Whether or not the organization is expected to produce a profit, the fundamental

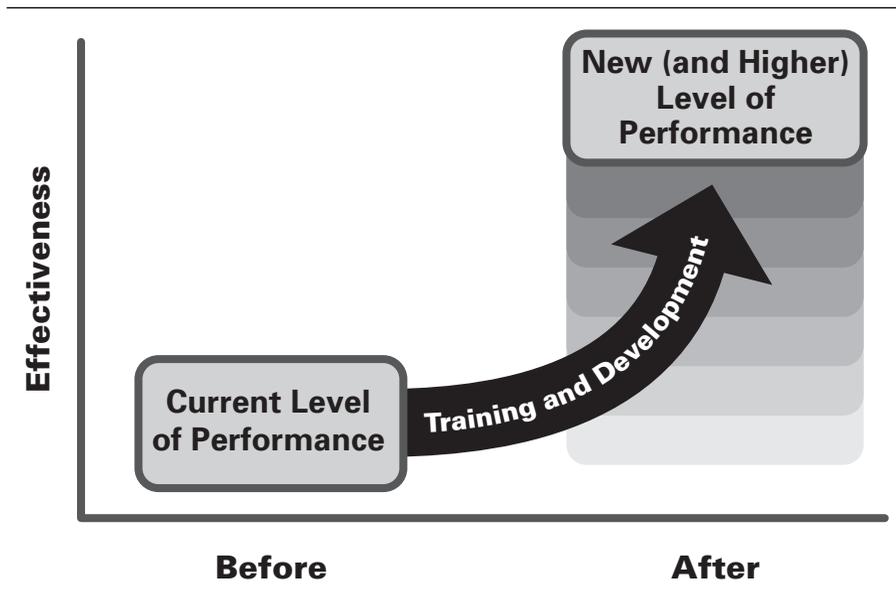
rationale—and management’s expectation—is that performance will in some way improve following a training and development program or other learning opportunity (see Figure I.2).

In other words, as workplace learning professionals, “We are not in the business of providing classes, learning tools, or even learning itself. We are in the business of facilitating improved business results” (Harburg, 2004, p. 21). The extent to which organizations are willing to fund learning, and the regard in which it is held, depend on the extent to which learning initiatives deliver on management’s expectations for improved performance.

Therefore, the First Discipline—and perhaps the most critical—is to clearly *define the business outcomes* expected from each and every learning initiative. We do not mean *learning* outcomes or *learning* objectives. Most programs already have well-defined learning objectives that articulate what participants will learn or what they will be able to do by the end of the program. Those are still necessary for designing the instruction, but they do not answer the fundamental questions that business leaders are interested in:

- How will this initiative benefit the business?
- How will we know?

FIGURE I.2. MANAGEMENT EXPECTS TRAINING TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE



Whereas learning objectives explain what participants will *know* or be *able to do* at the *end of the program*, business outcomes specify what they *will do on the job*, and the *benefits to the business*. Clearly defining the expected business outcomes has many advantages:

- It makes learning a more strategic function, since the relationship to the mission of the organization is clear.
- It increases the motivation to learn in adults by answering the “what’s in it for me?” question.
- It increases the likelihood of investment by making the business value explicit.
- It calls attention to the shared responsibility of learning and line managers; on-the-job results can only be obtained with their support and reinforcement.

Enterprises that have implemented D1 across their learning organizations have discovered that they achieve much greater buy-in, not only from management, but also from program participants themselves. Getting clear about D1—the desired business outcomes—makes designing a more effective intervention easier. It is also prerequisite to effectively documenting the results (D6). Finally, having clearly defined outcomes allows learning organizations to *win*: They can unambiguously demonstrate their value because they know what success means to the business.

In the chapter on D1 we underscore the importance of making sure that there is open, transparent, and readily apparent alignment between needs of the business and the goals of learning initiatives. We provide guidelines for distinguishing between learning and business outcomes and for distinguishing between performance problems that can, and cannot, be improved by training. We include tools and guidelines for having the dialogue with business leaders needed to ensure linkage. We underscore the benefits of understanding the value chain of learning, of mapping the intended impact, picking the right problems, and managing expectations.

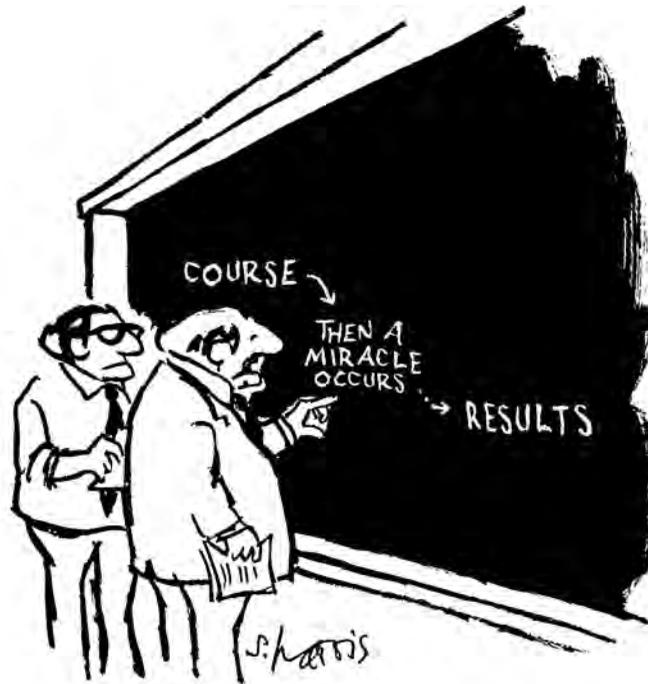


Design the Complete Experience

A second theme running through this book is that converting learning into business results is a *process*, not a one-off event. Learning organizations need to be much more explicit and deliberate about the process by which learning is transformed into results than has been the norm in the past (see Figure I.3).

Process improvement requires considering all of the factors that affect the outcome and singling out those that have the most profound influence for special

FIGURE I.3. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TO DESIGN THE COMPLETE EXPERIENCE



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

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attention. The Second Discipline of breakthrough learning, therefore, is to design the *complete* experience. The emphasis here is on *complete*, which means including what happens before and after the formal periods of instruction as part of the design.

Historically, instructional design systems and corporate learning organizations focused primarily on “the course”—the period and method of instruction—with relatively little attention paid to what happened before and, especially, after the instruction. The research results are clear, however. The program’s “surround”—what happens before and after training—is as important as the instruction itself in determining the outcome. The “transfer climate” in the participant’s workplace has a particularly profound impact; indeed, it can make or break the value of any learning program.

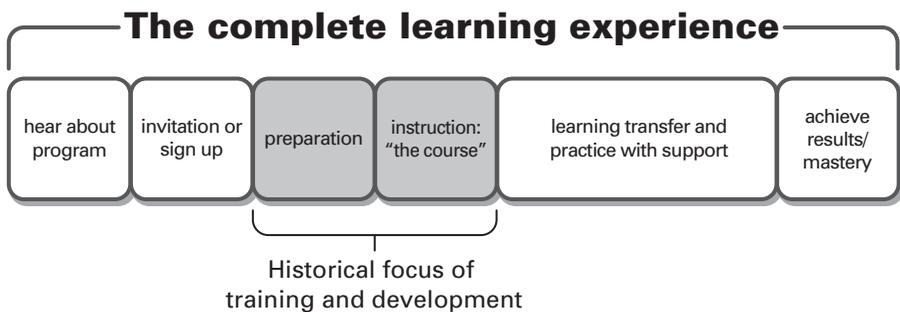
The Second Discipline—designing the *complete* experience—recognizes that, from the participants’ points of view, the learning experience begins long before the formal course. It ought also to continue long afterward, until they have improved their performance and produced results (see Figure I.4).

The Second Discipline demands a new paradigm: The learning organization is responsible for optimizing the learner’s total experience—not just what happens in the classroom (or its virtual, electronic, or informal equivalent). Maximally effective programs approach learning holistically and systemically; they pay special attention to the impact of the participant’s manager and the work environment on learning transfer and results. Designing learning initiatives that comprise all the factors that influence the results—including those outside the traditional scope of training and development—is more important now than ever; learning organizations are increasingly being funded on the basis of the business value they generate (or fail to generate).

In the chapter on D2, we examine what makes up the “complete experience” and which elements most impact learning transfer and the creation of business value. We suggest methods and tools to optimize outcomes, some of which challenge conventional thinking. We argue that learning organizations need to redefine what it means to “finish a course.” The participants’ work is not done when they reach the end of an online module or the last day of class; the real finish line for learning is the documented delivery of business results. We show that improving the transfer climate and providing post-instructional performance support are particularly rich opportunities for a breakthrough.

The real finish line for learning
is the delivery of business
results.

FIGURE I.4. THE COMPLETE LEARNING EXPERIENCE ENCOMPASSES MUCH MORE THAN THE PERIOD OF INSTRUCTION



Designing for the complete experience allows learning organizations to realize their full promise of delivering value to the organization. Since training and development programs take time and cost money, everyone benefits when they are planned and managed in a way that maximizes the likelihood of success.



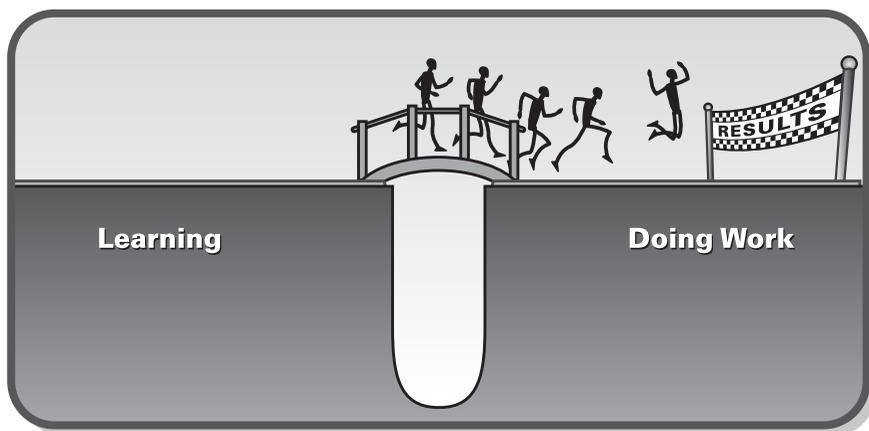
Deliver for Application

The Third Discipline that characterizes high-impact learning programs is that they are delivered to facilitate application. That is, their instructional designers begin with the end in mind—what participants are supposed to *do* differently and better—and then consciously select learning strategies that help participants bridge the learning-doing gap (see Figure I.5).

Delivering for application means selecting what to teach and how to deliver it most effectively based on the desired business outcomes and the behaviors needed to achieve them. It means using instructional approaches, technologies, and supporting strategies that accelerate learning transfer and application on the job. At the core of the Third Discipline is the principle that learning creates value only when it is applied; therefore, the way in which learning is delivered should reflect and facilitate the way in which it will be used.

In Chapter D3, we look at innovative ways that progressive learning organizations are bridging the learning-doing gap by making the relevance of the

FIGURE I.5. THERE IS ALWAYS A GAP BETWEEN LEARNING AND DOING; THE GOAL OF D3 IS TO BRIDGE THAT GAP



material clear; showing how each element is connected to real business issues; motivating application by answering the “what’s in it for me?” question; and helping participants prepare and plan for on-the-job application. We review insights into what makes learning memorable and provide tools to map the chain of value and monitor the perception of the program’s utility.



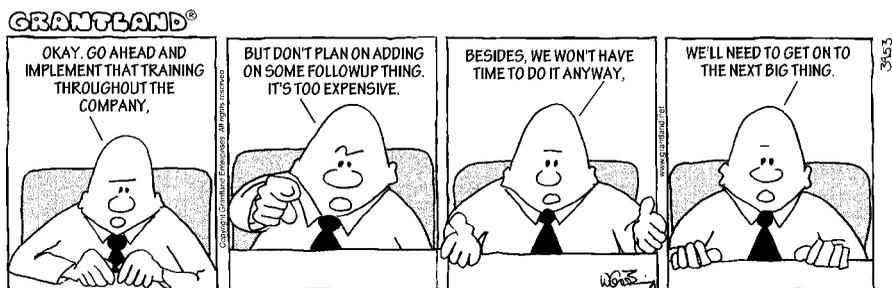
Drive Learning Transfer

Because companies invest in learning to address business needs and opportunities, learning objectives are, in effect, business objectives. They should be treated as such. In any well-managed company, systems are in place to set, measure, monitor, and reward achievement of business objectives. Historically, however, there have been no such mechanisms for learning-transfer objectives (see Figure I.6). Program participants were allowed to set them and forget them. Small wonder relatively few were achieved. “Talk to any group of laymen or professionals about what’s broken in the current learning and development process, and most will tell you it’s the lack of serious post-training follow-through” (Zenger, Folkman, & Sherwin, 2005, p. 30).

Learning objectives are, in effect, business objectives.

Learning transfer is the process of putting learning to work in a way that improves performance. The Fourth Discipline that characterizes high-impact learning organizations is that they drive the transfer of learning back to the work of the enterprise. They do not leave it to chance or individual initiative. Instead, they put in place systems and processes to actively encourage and manage the

FIGURE I.6. LEARNING TRANSFER IS THE WEAKEST LINK IN MOST TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS



transfer process. The Fourth Discipline includes making sure that participants set (or are assigned) the right objectives, that they transfer their learning to the work they do, and that their managers hold them accountable for doing so.

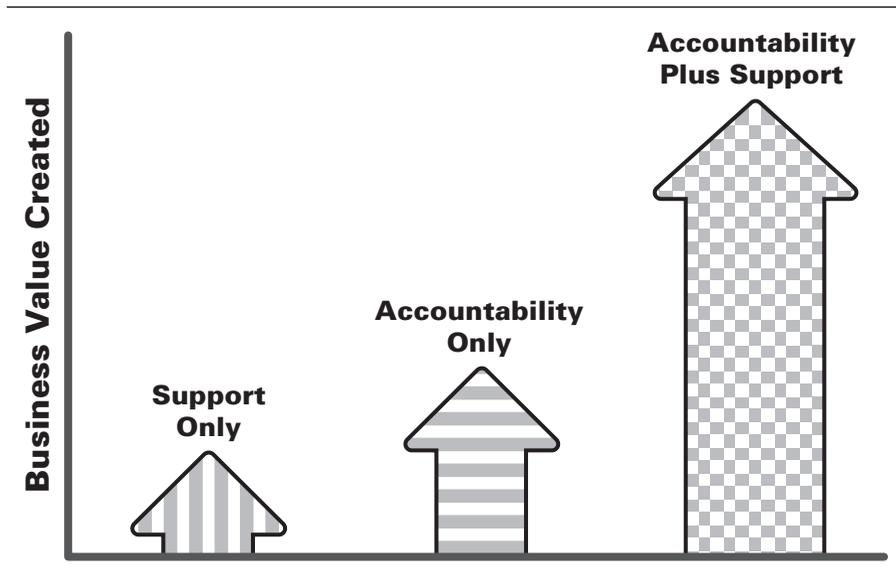
In the chapter on D4, we introduce the concept of learning scrap and the high cost of doing nothing to ensure learning transfer. We explain the elements that define the transfer climate and determine the results that training ultimately delivers. We review what it takes to improve performance and discuss breakthroughs in the management of the learning transfer process made possible by technology. Finally, we provide case examples of how supporting learning transfer enhances the value of already effective programs.



Deploy Performance Support

Companies that are serious about getting a return on their investment in learning and development understand that the job isn't finished until the new knowledge and skills are successfully applied in a way that improves performance. They recognize that getting better at anything requires practice and that when trying anything new, people need support and coaching (Figure I.7).

FIGURE I.7. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS CREATE GREATER VALUE WHEN THEY INCLUDE BOTH ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT



To maximize the probability of delivering meaningful business outcomes, highly effective learning organizations practice the Fifth Discipline: They deploy various forms of ongoing performance support after the instruction. They work with senior leaders to develop a culture in which managers understand that they have a responsibility to support learning. They “put their money where their mouths are” by reallocating some of their resources from pure instruction to instruction plus performance support for transfer and application.

In the chapter on D5, we make the analogy between product support and performance support for learning transfer. We explore the three sources of support—materials, systems, and people—and provide examples. We discuss the need to balance accountability and support and the new demands this places on the learning organization and line management. We focus special attention on the participant’s manager, because he or she has a profound impact on whether learning is applied or scrapped. We confront head-on the reasons that managers don’t coach more to support the use of training and we provide specific steps to make the transfer climate favorable for results.



Document Results

The bottom-line questions that must be answered about any learning and development initiative are these: Did it make a positive difference? Did it achieve the results for which it was designed? Was it worth it?

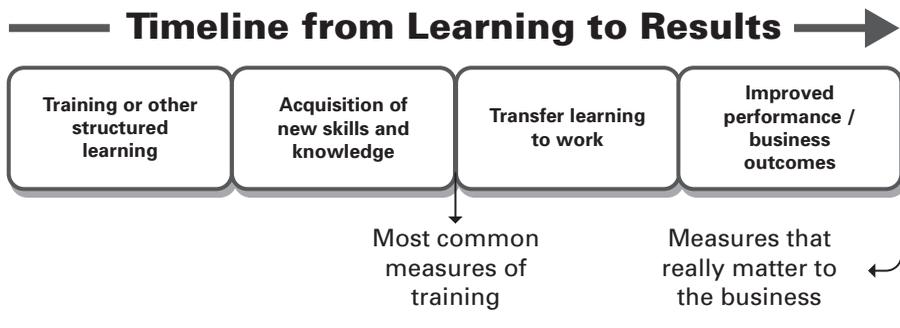
The Sixth Discipline is to document results in a relevant, credible, and compelling way that justifies further investment and supports continuous improvement. Evidence of results is needed to justify continued investment in any business initiative. Learning is not exempt from this requirement, especially in a time of financial exigencies. In today’s business climate, companies must continuously improve the effectiveness and efficiency of all their business processes to remain competitive. Learning organizations should be models of continuous improvement.

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But continuous improvement is possible, and continued investment is warranted, only when there is unequivocal evidence that the initiative generated value. The requisite data are those that document outcomes of importance to the business—not just activity (people trained, courses taught), learner satisfaction (reaction), or even the amount learned (see Figure I.8).

The Sixth Discipline—documenting results—is essential to support a cycle of continuous learning, innovation, adaptation, and improvement. The results of

FIGURE I.8. THE OUTCOMES OF INTEREST TO THE BUSINESS ARE ON-THE-JOB BEHAVIORS AND RESULTS



one program are the raw material for the next cycle of defining outcomes, designing experiences, delivering, driving, deploying, and documenting. A never-ending cycle of reinvention and renewal ensures that corporate education keeps pace with the changing competitive environment, workforce, and business needs.

In the chapter on D6, we discuss why learning organizations must document results. We differentiate between metrics needed to manage the learning organization and actual results that matter to the business. We provide guiding principles for program evaluation and advice on what to measure, how to collect and analyze the information, and, especially important, how to market the results.

Summary

Learning programs are investments that a company makes to enhance the value and effectiveness of its human capital. Management has a fiduciary and ethical responsibility to ensure that those investments produce a return: results that improve performance and competitiveness.

We have identified Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning—the 6Ds—that characterize high-value, breakthrough learning and development initiatives (see Figure I.9). Learning organizations that have adopted the 6Ds as their operating principles and that have practiced them diligently have increased the contribution that learning makes to their company’s success (see Case in Point I.2). As a result, 6Ds learning organizations have enjoyed a corresponding increase in the recognition and support they receive.