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10-31-96

XBS Learns to Grow

Chris Turner is the 'Learning Person' for Xerox Business Services — and the impresario of a dazzling array of events that offer XBSers the learning skills they need to keep the organization growing at 40% a year.

BY ALAN M. WEBBER LONG READ

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Xerox Business Services (XBS) isn't a young company. (In fact, it's 40 years old.) It isn't a flashy, high-tech company. (It'll manage your documents and do your copying.) But it's a fast company.

XBS is rocking the Document Company: it is the fastest-growing, fastest-moving part of Xerox — going global, growing at 40% per year, hitting the $1 billion mark, carving out a corporate culture that's full of energy, imagination, and learning. What makes XBS a fast-company-inside-an-old-company is its three-year-old change strategy — an ambitious, unorthodox menu of events and experiences designed to transform a 15,000-person, widely dispersed organization into a cohesive learning organization.

XBS's approach to change is dramatically different from most others. There's no senior change team, no formal change program, no big-budget activities, no specific performance goals. Instead, the mind-set is experimental, inclusive, organic, almost playful. Through a seemingly endless series of simulations, seminars, events, and experiences — all carefully designed to reinforce a simple message to employees about the value of learning — XBS has created an environment that not only produces business results but also supports personal growth.

All this in a company that's growing like gangbusters. XBS is the world leader in document outsourcing; it has more than 4,000 customers in 36 countries — customers like Intel, Microsoft, General Electric, Motorola, Lufthansa, and Texas Instruments — and it provides services to as many as 4 million businesspeople per day. XBS uses so much paper (it rivals the U.S. government as the most prodigious user in the country) that it could paper over the Grand Canyon once a month with the documents it produces, handles, and distributes. Its services run the gamut from managing documents for customers to taking over whole mailrooms, from designing a company's overall document-processing strategy to meeting the unanticipated document needs that arise at a convention or sporting event.

The leader of this unusual — and unusually effective — change effort is Chris Turner, XBS's Learning Person, a 15-year

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XBS veteran who started her career as a sales representative, then worked as a sales manager and a general manager before moving to the unit's Rochester headquarters four years ago. This year she won the prestigious Xerox President's Award for contributions to the corporation. Turner's experimental approach to change intentionally involves a menu of thinking, from Peter Senge to Stephen Covey, designed to let XBSers choose and use the learning style that works for them.

Two of Turner's most visible innovations involve selecting three XBS centers as "learning laboratories" (profiled in "Seattle Walks the Talk") and a company summer-camp-like experience (described in "Camp Diary").

In her Texas twang — and with a down-to-earth manner — Turner describes the XBS change strategy as "creating a community of inquirers and learners. A change strategy doesn't have to be about changing people," she insists, "because everything is already there. It's about creating conditions where it can all come out." Fast Company interviewed Turner in her Rochester office.

For most companies, change is part of a downsizing or reengineering. What's driving the change strategy at XBS?

Our rate of growth. When I started with XBS in 1981, we had maybe 3,000 people. Today we have almost 15,000 people. By the end of this century, we'll have between 30,000 and 40,000 people. It took us 40 years to get to $1 billion. It'll take us two years to get to $2 billion, and two more years to get to $5 billion.

On top of that, XBS is essentially a virtual organization. You have to understand our business to understand our challenges. More than 80% of our people work at customer sites rather than XBS facilities. And those sites vary from customers where we've got one operator with just one copying machine to 200 operators with 2,000 machines.

Why does growth — success — require you to change?

When you're growing this fast, the most important issue you have to contend with is organizational knowledge. We're bringing in tons of new people, and the people we already have are constantly changing jobs to keep up with growth. That creates three big issues. First, we've got business context issues. What kind of business do we have? Second, we've got community issues. How can our people participate in this large, unwieldy thing we call XBS? And third, we've got skills issues. What are the knowledge and infrastructure systems we need to develop?

And all of this translates into teaching people to learn?

People issues are at the core of our change strategy — why we have to learn. Ultimately, this strategy is all about creating an organization of 15,000 effective businesspeople, where everybody thinks about the future, everybody amazes customers, everybody manages the bottom line. It's the ultimate accountability strategy.

Think about it. There are other companies in the outsourcing business who can offer equipment, supplies, and people. Our only differentiator is the kind of community we are. It comes down to three questions: If you were a customer, who would you rather work with — someone who's doing business like it was done 15 years ago, or someone who's using cutting-edge thinking? If you were a talented person looking for a job, where would you rather work? And if you were president of the company, would you rather try to achieve success with a small group of top managers doing all the thinking, or with all 15,000 people contributing to the business?

It's self-evident. That's why we've got to create an organization where everyone has a lot of knowledge of the business.

What does it take to have an organization with that kind of knowledge?

You start by changing how you think about the organization. We've grown up in an old-fashioned corporation that's organized functionally. People think of that kind of a company as a machine. That's how they talk about it: "We're a well-oiled machine." It's mechanistic, reductionistic language. It tells people they're just cogs in the machine.

I think of our organization as a dynamic, living system, like an environment. You can't treat a natural system like a machine. All you can do is create experiences that disturb a natural system, and then it decides how to respond.

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My job is to disturb the system. I give people new ways to think. It's more a matter of offering people different perspectives and influencing their thinking than trying to drive them.

It sounds strangely indirect. Why not adopt a more top-down approach?

In 1993 when I got this job, my assignment was to create an empowerment strategy. It turns out you can't "empower" anyone. This is not the freeing of the slaves.

I've heard two different definitions of empowerment, and neither one makes any sense. One is "pushing decision making down to the lowest level." My question is, would you want to be told that you're at the lowest level and about to be pushed down on? I wouldn't. The other is that empowerment is some sort of fairy dust. You sprinkle it on folks and they suddenly know exactly what to do.

The only thing that makes sense to me is to think of empowerment as an outcome of organizational conditions. You create an environment for learning, with empowerment as an outcome. When you start to think like that, you go from an empowerment strategy to a change strategy to where we are now — it's just our business strategy.

What are the core principles of the change program?

Let's be clear: it's never been a "program." And unlike most other companies, we've never had a big change team. We just had some things we wanted to try.

We knew the first piece of our change strategy — to create a shared vision. But I never thought of it as a written vision statement. To me, a vision is an ongoing conversation. It's the way we think, individually and collectively, about the community we're creating. It's the principles of the people in the organization. What's important to us. How we want to be with each other. It's never frozen, it's never set. It's energy — or spirit.

So how did you go about creating a shared vision?

We did "visioning exercises" and learned how to have conversations with each other. We got a group of 120 people together and did a composite mind map of their visions. Then we held a learning conference in Orlando, where we had a visioning exercise with 400 people. Our vision became a living thing, not a plastic card to carry in your pocket. Ask the people who participated, "What's a shared vision?" They'll tell you, "A shared vision is the way we talked with each other when we got together in Orlando."

What came after creating a shared vision?

Trust. To me, trust is one of the essentials for learning. Wherever you have a trusting environment, you have a much more productive, much more humane organization. Lots of our people attended sessions on Principle-Centered Leadership, based on Stephen Covey's ideas. I was attracted to Covey's organization because it didn't just talk about trust, it gave people a way to do trust.

Covey's idea is that people have emotional bank accounts. You create trust through deposits. I think when we started we were probably running a deficit. We simply hadn't done much for the people in the organization to build trust, to make deposits in an emotional account.

We ended up with 1,000 people participating in Principle-Centered Leadership. I can see the results today. When the policy committee is considering a decision, you'll hear someone ask, "Will the people in our organization see this as a deposit or a withdrawal? Will it build trust or diminish trust?" On a personal level, people found it a moving experience. They wrote their own mission statements. It was an experience in self-discovery. I had spouses come up to me after their husbands or wives had been to a session and say, "This has changed my life because it changed our family."

Early on you picked three XBS facilities — Seattle, Denver, and San Antonio — as "learning laboratories." Why?

We wanted to find out what was viable and what wasn't. It gave us three little practice fields. We could try out different experiments with the attitude, "We're just playing with this right now."

As things worked in these three laboratories, the ideas spread. We'd hear from people in other offices, asking for the stuff.

What's an experiment you tried?

We did lots of things, some large, some small. For instance, we gave each of the learning centers $1,000 to use over the course of a year to improve their offices. We learned that people didn't want to spend that $1,000, but they did think creatively about how they could improve their centers. For example, in both Seattle and San Antonio they told us they needed new computers. We told them, you've got your $1,000, maybe that can pay for part of it. The next thing we knew, they had shiny new computers. It turned out, they'd gone to their customers and explained how new computers would improve the service they could provide — and the customers got them the computers.

These are sales reps who'll do anything to avoid having to ask customers for something because they don't want to upset the relationship. But they showed the customers how a computer could help, and it was a no-brainer.

And they never did spend their $1,000.

Lots of companies need "big change fast." How did you create bigger ways for people to participate?

We staged a Worldwide Learning Conference in 1995, kind of a "learning Woodstock." Originally it was going to be just a typical kickoff for the new year — the usual business conference where senior managers talk about their functional areas. Every company does them, and they're awful. There's always a speech about empowerment — but everyone's forced to sit in meetings from 7 in the morning until 7 at night, having data dumped on them. It's like being held hostage.

We decided to do it completely differently. The vision was to create an event for a few days that would let people experience a learning organization — what it feels like, and how much fun it can be.

How was it different?

Picture this: you walk into the hotel on the first day, and instead of the usual corporate meeting there's a huge ballroom with globes and stars and moons hanging from the ceiling, music from all over the world playing, life-size cardboard cutouts. It immediately says to people : This is different.

There was no individual recognition, no speeches by corporate officers. We had outside speakers, simulations, seminars. Then at the end of the first day, we opened Xpo, with more than two dozen booths displaying all the different kinds of XBS tools and applications. We even had a booth where we sold "learning clothes" — items with our change strategy logo and graphics — and we ended up selling $90,000 worth in just two days. We were afraid nobody would want to go to Xpo, that they'd just want to go play golf. We couldn't get them to leave!

The four-and-a-half days became a metaphor for forever: "Would you like to feel this way after every day of work? Let us help you! It can be this way all the time!"

Do you rely on big events all the time? Or have you found other approaches?

After the learning conference, we were struggling with what to do to spread these ideas. We needed to create a community within a community, an alliance of people who would share information laterally throughout the organization. So in May of 1995 we gathered 30 people in Chicago to help us think through how to do it. They helped create the idea of Camp Lur'ning. We wanted to make it fun, have it be like summer camp, with teepees, campers, and counselors. The first year we had 220 people and 30 counselors for four-and-a-half days. We created a place where people could get involved, and then they created the event.

Did Camp Lur'ning have any immediate results?

People who attended went back to their centers and held their own version of camp. From that initial group of 220 people who attended Camp Lur'ning, over 1,000 more people become involved in some sort of learning experience. This year, we did the second Camp Lur'ning and almost doubled the attendance. We went from 220 to 375, and we scaled up the kinds of sessions we offered and the guest speakers we brought in.

You've been at this for three years. Can you document how your change strategy is working?

I'm more interested in anecdotal evidence than hard data. If you get 1,000 anecdotes and they all begin to fit together, then you've got a pattern that makes sense.

For example, a year ago a group of our general managers and I went to a law firm in San Francisco. They were choosing a supplier for all their West Coast offices. It was a significant piece of business.

I started talking about our change strategy. Their office administrator sat up and said, "That's your competitive advantage. Everybody can do everything else, but nobody else is doing this. Can we learn with you?" I told him, "You can if you're our customer. I don't think we'll share much with you if you go with a competitor." We got the business.

What we're learning is a different way of doing business, a different way of engaging people. How do you measure it? Every piece of common sense tells you that if you have a place where people come to work and have fun and find meaning and feel as if they're making a difference, that's a place where the profits will be better.

What have you learned about learning?

Learning is like anything else. The more we do it, the better and quicker people get. People make connections very fast. Learning enables the organization to have a fighting chance to keep up with change.

Also, once you create a culture where learning and inquiry are okay, then you learn from experiments. And you share the information throughout the organization. Information is the food of this natural system.

Where do you see this going in the future?

I believe that a revolution is under way in the world of business and in the world. Just look at what's happened in the last five years — the barriers that have come down, the new thinking that has come out. The business model hasn't changed this dramatically in 70 years.

If you look around at business, at government, schools, and colleges, isn't it clear that it's time to think very differently? I say to people, "You have a choice. You can be the last of the old generation of managers or you can be the first of a new generation." The revolution is going to happen. It's just a matter of whether you're with it or you're behind it.

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A version of this article appeared in the October/November 1996 issue of Fast Company *magazine.*

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