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NOTES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ASTD CONFERENCE 2003

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One of the best ways to learn about success stories, new methodologies and professional and business challenges for managers and HR/OD practitioners from organizations all over the world is by attending the annual international conference hosted by ASTD, the American Society for Training and Development. This year's conference took place in San Diego, California, between May 18 and 22. There were approximately 8,000 attendants from 58 countries. In addition, there were exhibits from over 350 companies specialized in products and services for the training and development industry. What follows are some of the highlights of the conference as experienced by one of LIM's consultants who attended an international ASTD conference for the second year in a row.

Tina Sung, president and CEO of ASTD, summed it all up from the start of the conference. According to her, there are five trends that practitioners must pay attention to when dealing with training and development issues nowadays:

1. Linking learning to business strategy
2. Performance consulting
3. E-learning
4. Leadership development and coaching
5. Diversity

Rob Maple, chair of the ASTD Board of Directors, added that "the driving force of our profession right now is getting results".

These trends were indeed reflected in the content of the more than 300 sessions, grouped within ten tracks, that were offered in the conference. Additionally, there were eight "conferences-within-a-conference" that allowed participants to go in depth into subjects like coaching, consulting, innovation, creative training techniques, human resource development in government agencies, leadership, and ROI (Return on Investment) of training & development programs.

A new feature at the San Diego Conference was the "Legends" series. Four renowned authors who have influenced significantly the profession of workplace learning presented the evolution of their ideas and some practical applications to the public: Donald

Kirkpatrick on evaluation of training, Peter Block on social architecture as a new role for leadership, Margaret Wheatley on new ways of organizing, and Ken Blanchard on effective leadership.

The three keynote speakers in the general sessions, Malcolm Gladwell, Frances Hesselbein and Jim Loehr made presentations around the social power, leadership and “full engagement” issues addressed in their best selling books.

“Get Inspired - Get Connected – Get Results” was the conference’s motto. In all fairness, the organizers and presenters were quite successful at inspiring and connecting participants with one another. There were both networking opportunities and special sessions devoted to promoting learning exchanges, such as the so-called dialogue café and the regional forums (around issues relevant to European, Asian and Ibero-American participants).

Regarding the “results” theme, there were plenty of sessions where the protagonists of change initiatives shared their experiences. For example, one of those sessions included presentations by the managers of executive coaching programs in three leading global firms and the vendor who supported and staffed the programs. Another session dealt with the management of organizational culture challenges in a merger amongst three companies, and both the external consultant and the manager in charge of the process told their story and demonstrated some of the tools that were applied to promote integration and alignment.

Drawing on Peter Block’s ideas, one of the challenges ahead for managers that was stressed in the ASTD Conference over and over again is the need to develop new skills: those of a social architect who goes beyond the mindset of the engineer and the economist, and builds the mindset of the artist on top of them. What this entails is valuing surprise and discovery, emotion and creativity, intimacy and relationship, vision of a larger possibility, passion, and commitment for its own sake, while balancing productivity and profitability goals. On this journey, the ability to initiate new types of conversations is fundamental.

From another angle, Kevin Liu and Vidula Bal from the Center for Creative Leadership, stressed in one of the leadership conference-within-a-conference sessions the need to move from “leader” (as an individual) to “leadership” (as a collective capacity). According to them, leadership capacity is developed by helping individuals, groups and organizations change the forms of their relating. This view, as well as Block’s, presents managers and HR/OD specialists with new challenges and suggests ways for them to redefine the nature of the work they do and make it more geared to systemic results. It also reinforces the learning (as opposed to training) focus of management and professional development initiatives. Along with a number of the other sessions conducted at the ASTD Conference, the ones briefly referenced here made it a worthwhile opportunity to attend this annual event.



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