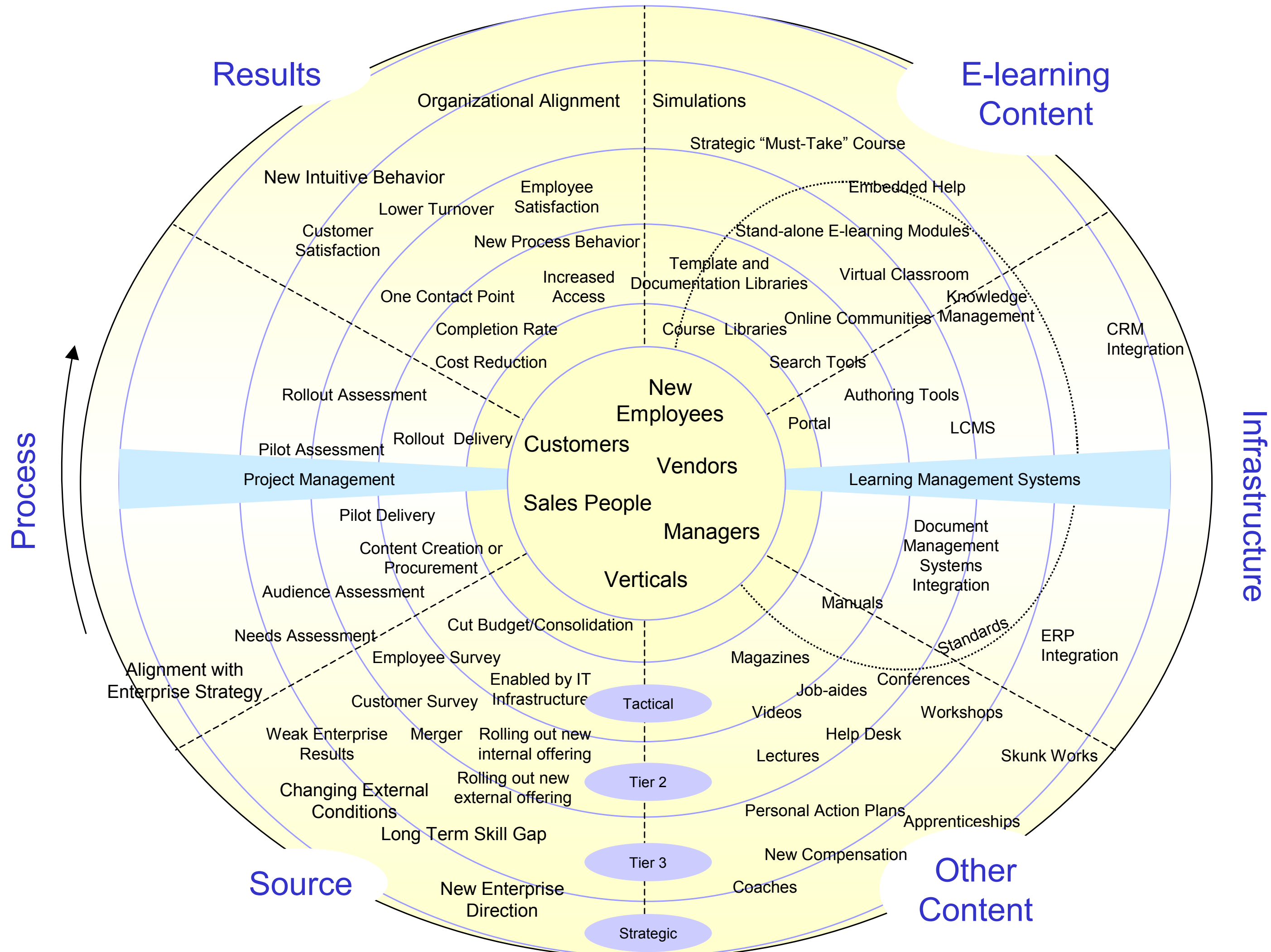
BY CLARK ALDRICH

Strong Medicine



When we take our children in for a check-up, the doctor gets heights and weights, and then plots them to find out if the two are in accord. Is a child too thin for the height, or too heavy, or about right? When I look at an e-learning implementation, the most important thing I look for is accord. Given the results desired, are the right processes, content, and infrastructure being involved?

For example, say an enterprise is rolling out a new internal offering; say a benefits enrollment application. Let's call this, relatively speaking, a tier-two level of training. The goal is to teach a new process-driven behavior, a tier-two result. Just putting out new templates and perhaps a chat room (tier-one e-learning content) would probably not be robust enough do the job. We would not expect to see the new process-driven behavior to catch-on.

On the other hand, doing a detailed needs assessment, and using simulations and coaches (tier three), would be overkill. It would both cost too much for what we wanted to accomplish, and take too long. A better response would be to use tier-two and below across the board: a pilot to practice, virtual classrooms and lectures for content, supported by tier-ones such as new templates and chat rooms.

Here's how you can use this chart to quickly test your own e-learning implementation. Look at the results you want. Also look at the source of the program – what happened to make you think about the results. If these two are from different tiers, worry a little bit. If the source is from a higher tier then the desired result, your sponsors and constituents may not be satisfied. If your results are from a higher tier then the source, you may find the support for your program erodes as invoices roll in.

After you have identified the right tier, look at the processes, e-learning content, and infrastructure in that tier and the lower tiers. A tier three problem will involve all processes from tiers one, two, and three. You may not want to waste your time on processes from higher tiers. The primary content (both e-learning and other) should be from the same tier as the results, but use lower tiers for support.

This level of precision is necessary if we want to avoid the knowledge management misalignment of the mid-90's. Back then, vendors would promise a top-tier result (having complete control of an enterprise's intellectual assets) with a bottom-tier offering (a new server). The backlash against the misalignment put the KM discipline in the corporate penalty box for five years, out of which it is just emerging.

E-learning can be strong medicine, but we have to get the dosages right. Said another way, we have to follow the macabre piece of advice: "don't bring a knife to a gunfight."

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