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## IN PERSON May 2011

### Passion, Drive, and Commitment: An Interview with Lisa Toenniges

By Patricia S. Radakovich



**Lisa Toenniges**, CPT, is owner and CEO of Innovative Learning Group, a company that provides custom learning and performance support services to Fortune 1000 companies. A dynamic and respected leader, Toenniges has more than 20 years of experience in the performance improvement industry and has consulted with numerous national and international companies about learning strategies and solutions. Toenniges' entrepreneurial spirit, positive outlook, and hands-on leadership style are the drivers behind ILG's growth and success. As a result of her efforts, Toenniges was named one of the 2010 Top 10 Michigan Business Women and Rainmaker of the Year by the National Association of Women Business Owners of Greater Detroit.

#### **Q. Please tell readers a little about your company, Innovative Learning Group, and how you integrate performance improvement with training and development to benefit your clients.**

A. We help employees of our clients perform better by creating powerful, practical training and performance support solutions that are smart, engaging, and designed to significantly improve business results.

Our client service offerings cover the entire learning and performance landscape—learning and e-learning strategies, consulting to the learning function, curriculum design, needs analysis, learning and performance support design and development (all delivery methods, including mobile), implementation support, training evaluation, and LMS consulting. In delivering these services, we apply our expertise in performance improvement, instructional design, e-learning technology, project management, and information design and architecture.

In our engagements with midsized and large organizations, we marry performance improvement and training by first understanding the performance pain point. By that I mean, what's not happening from a performance standpoint that needs to happen. Once that's determined, we select the best solution and that solution may be a training or nontraining solution, or a blend.

#### **Q. Congratulations on winning ISPI's Award of Excellence for an Outstanding Human Performance Intervention! Can you tell us a bit about your winning project?**

A. Thank you. It was a real honor to receive it, especially since the award has such rigorous criteria. Valerie Brown, a performance consultant and expert in creating curriculum architecture, was the lead on this project. She partnered with our Amway client to create a truly performance-focused solution.

This project was initiated because Amway identified a need to drive consistent, strategic performance of its 3 million distributors globally. The immediate goal was to define a distributor curriculum that enabled success-critical distributor behaviors. Amway and ILG conducted extensive interviews, analyzed existing materials, and reviewed external best practices to identify those critical behaviors and the skills, knowledge, and attitudes the behaviors required. We used performance modeling and impact mapping to ensure the identified behaviors supported organizational goals. We created a logical course flow and high-level course designs based on the critical behaviors. We also identified nonlearning impacts on performance. We communicated and collaborated across all organizational levels from the start.

The resulting curriculum was defined so each Amway region could implement or adapt it based on market-specific needs. The outcome of this initiative has been a readily adopted solution that is producing measurable results.

**Q. You have also received numerous awards yourself as the CEO of ILG. What makes you a distinctive leader in the eyes of your employees and your clients?**

A. Two of my most prominent characteristics are drive and discipline. I'm always looking ahead and "driving" to what's next. It's very natural for me to set a goal, determine the steps I need to get there, and then work the plan every day. When I was growing up, I played instruments and sports. I learned you can't start the recital piece the day before the concert or get in shape the day before the big game. You have to show up and practice every day with intense focus on the task at hand.

With ILG, I have my own laboratory for practicing performance improvement. I can apply the principles and observe the results. If they work, great, and if not, I can tweak the solutions and watch again. I can set expectations, provide feedback, provide tools and other resources, align rewards and recognition with desired behavior, ensure employees have the necessary knowledge and skills, hire the right employees, and then see if this leads to desired business results.

It's very important to me to create an environment where employees, freelancers, and clients want to come every day, have fun, and do great work together.

**Q. What are you most passionate about in your business and how do you translate that passion into success?**

A. I'm most passionate about running a company that lives its mission statement. ILG's mission is to serve our clients with practical learning solutions that meet their project needs, exceed their personal expectations, and support the business goals of their organizations. We deliver excellent quality at a fair price and set ourselves apart from our competition through the way we work with our clients. We are creative, energetic, and fun to work with, and we direct our every effort toward complete client satisfaction.

**What advice do you have for emerging talent in the field?**

In anything that you do, you have to love it. But in today's environment, you also have to be ready to commit to continued education, being professional, and being dedicated to improving performance and designing learning that's instructionally sound as well as innovative and creative.

Being professional means always being prepared, doing what you promise, and being responsive. To continue your education, you have to get involved in the learning and performance community. Join a professional association, get on a board, or meet a learning colleague from another organization for lunch. Volunteer for a field-related project at a not-for-profit or community organization, or volunteer to conduct a cracker barrel or write an article for a professional association's publication. You also have to go beyond training industry publications and read general business publications. And you need to get involved with online discussion groups, such as those in LinkedIn.



ASTD Field Editor Patricia S. Radakovich, CPLP, CPT, is the owner of SHARK Consulting Group, a performance consultancy in Trenton, Michigan. She has an MA in performance improvement and instructional design and an MBA. Her professional interests include work culture and employee morale. She is also the chairman and founder of Basil's Buddies, a not-for-profit animal welfare organization. She recently was named Trenton's 2010 Outstanding Young Woman of the Year; radakovp@umich.edu.

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