Executive Interview

with **Anna Sargsyan,**
Chief Learning Officer
AllenComm

Transforming Leadership Development:
AllenComm's Innovative Approach
to Driving Business Outcomes

About AllenComm

For 40 years, AllenComm has partnered with Fortune 1000 companies, professional associations, and educational institutions to create and scale transformative learning. Extensive instructional design experience, innovative tech expertise, and agency-quality creative media differentiate AllenComm in the corporate learning marketplace. Today's AllenComm has four practice areas: Design, which includes our learning design and development services; Tech, which supports the learning tech ecosystem; Talent, including staffing, outsourcing, and placement services; and Advisory, a consulting practice focused on change, learner performance, and enabling tech.
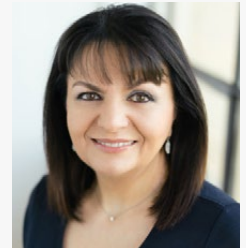
Recognition

AllenComm is also a Brandon Hall Group™ Bronze Smartchoice® Preferred Provider.

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About Anna Sargsyan

Anna Sargsyan has been with AllenComm for more than 25 years, working in many different capacities and becoming Chief Learning Officer in 2018. Anna has led and guided the company's instructional design and development processes, ensuring that they are based on sound learning science and emerging technologies. She has also nurtured the expertise and abilities of her team. In her current role, she provides thought leadership and strategic direction for the organization, but she also works directly with clients while leading AllenComm's performance consultants and instructional designers. Her work has contributed to more than 500 industry awards.

About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is the Chief Operating Officer and Principal Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™, a leading research and advisory firm in Human Capital Management (HCM). With 20 years of experience in the HCM research industry, Rachel plays a pivotal role in driving the company's business operations. As the COO, Rachel oversees client and member advisory services, design strategies, annual awards programs, conferences, and project management functions. Her expertise and leadership ensure seamless operations and exceptional client experiences. In addition to her operational responsibilities, Rachel spearheads Brandon Hall Group's Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. She leads research efforts and organizes events focused on promoting gender equality, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and empowering underrepresented groups in the workforce.

Q RACHEL

What is AllenComm's approach to leadership training?

A ANNA

We've noticed that a lot of our clients coming to us in the last year for leadership development journeys. And I call them journeys because, and I'm so glad we're not calling it journey program or journey training, because I usually use the word learning.

Let's start with a framework like who, why, where and how. I know this is not new by any means, but I think it's just easy to visualize who our leaders are, who is the audience. We start by really working with our clients to understand the change that is happening in your organization and the business strategy, because a leadership strategy should be aligned with the business strategy.

We start by understanding the today and tomorrow, who they are and where they need to be tomorrow and how they're ready for this change. Starting with alignment, we want to understand and define the business and leadership strategy.

Then we produce a leadership capabilities matrix. There are different levels in the organization, levels of leadership, meaning first-time leaders, existing leaders, leaders of self, leaders of leaders, leaders of enterprise. We talk about managers, supervisors, and so forth, about their roles. We want to create a leader profile for each level.

Then we align the capabilities. And by the way, I'm not using the word competencies because for us capabilities is more actionable. It's the performance. Any learning program is meant to improve performance, so capabilities is the empowerment. Under capabilities, we map the top skills that the leaders need to achieve the capabilities.

Number two is change readiness. We want to plan that readiness early on. We don't want to do it after we develop the journey. We want to plan that readiness, meaning why the change and why it's happening and how people can benefit from that change.

Then we talk about number three, which is experience design — how we learn about our audience and how we personalize the leader experience. We talk about different learning paths and how we personalize this journey for them. This is not learning for just one-time learning, but it's a process.

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We talk about learning paths. That's part of personalization because our leaders are coming to this journey with different needs. We have people who are here to take the entire program journey in the sequence that is recommended. That's one user story or learning path. Other leaders are coming here to prioritize what they want to learn.

The third one will be a leader who comes here to take something and go back and apply right away. For example, you're getting ready for your team meeting and you need to look up a tool or you need a strategy. You come to this learning journey and we have search engine we have restructured in a way that it's easy to find. You can find, remember, refresh your memory, take the tool and go back and apply that right away.

Obviously, we have assessments, which are our next component — impact. What is impact? It's, okay, people start by identifying their gaps.

We have different kinds of assessments. We have strength calculator, profile calculator, impact calculator, where they can see their strengths and also identify their opportunities for learning. That's when we can recommend different learning paths for them. That's in the beginning. But what happens when they go through the learning path, they go through the learning, now they want to know how we're doing. Did I make a progress?

We can also offer post-diagnostic where they can see the results of their impact, and this is for our analytics to see what's next for them. So we can offer dashboards, portfolio tools, leader profile tools, and people can actually see their profits.

Q RACHEL

What do you think are some of the biggest derailers right now for leaders?

A ANNA

The first is time. That's what we hear from our clients, especially for our experienced or existing leaders. Why? Because they take risks to relearn things, to reestablish their confidence level. And this is why we started with the readiness because we need to involve them earlier in the process. The second one is accessibility, meaning access to learning and also the size of learning, the seat time.

People don't have time, again, bringing an example of a program we developed for new nurse leaders. The program was called Leading in Crisis. One thing we learned from our client is they don't have any time. So we need to be very careful how long the learning modules are, because we'll lose them. They need to come quickly learn and go. We applied this bite-size; we even called it nano-learning. Some modules are 1 minute in length. That resonated with a lot of them.

RACHEL

What is more important for a leader, the capabilities or the skills that they have?

ANNA

I can't separate them because capability is the action. We want people to communicate effectively, timely and show empathy when they're providing feedback; for example, to their team members. What kind of skills do they need to have for them to be empowered and be capable of providing that kind of feedback?

Imagine this, if we have capability of providing effective, timely feedback to our team members, what kind of skills do they need to have for them to be successful? The skills can be listening skills or asking good questions, open-ended questions, and so on. That's a series of skills that will help you build that capability.

But the caveat here is sometimes the clients map too many skills — it's hard to deal with 75-something skills. There's no way you can produce this kind of learning so they can master every single skill. That's why through our analysis, we prioritize and identify skills for each capability. And by the way, you can space out the learning as well, and these skills can be at different levels. Skills can be you can have a beginner skill, intermediate or advanced. They may have a skill, but they don't know how to apply it. They need more practice how to apply the skill to achieve results.

RACHEL

I'm seeing also more and more ways to understand emotional psyche or well-being for leaders. How we can measure that or understand where they are and how they're showing up?

ANNA

It's being aware and able to assess themselves and know what they're lacking, because sometimes you can tell them that they have the skill, but they're not acting as expected.

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For one of our clients, we developed this leadership training for executives. Obviously, we have different assessment tools. But there was a huge change readiness aspect to it. We put the learner in the so-called "cult case" simulation where we didn't provide any ongoing feedback. They were just thrown in this problem to solve the problem. They were new leaders in the context of their work — new leaders with three team members. They had to go through this workflow and see how they could achieve the results that were expected. They could see like through that simulation that they weren't achieving those results. That was very powerful for them — to check their own kind of skill application and their own skills and see what where the gaps are.

We have so many different variety of methodologies and strategies we use to identified to cater to each type of leader depending on who we have as a learner and what kind of gaps they have and not just the lack of skills. Sometimes it's not lack of skills, but the level of proficiency and the application. There are so many nuances and we are trying to determine this when we start architecting and designing our journey, and making it practical and relevant for them. Otherwise, it's, yeah, we'll lose them.

Q **RACHEL**

What else is on your agenda for 2024?

A **ANNA**

We launched our new service last year, a staffing service, and it should be on our website. We can augment development teams by providing different expertise for their teams. We also started working on advisory services. One of them is a performance consulting advisory service where we can provide that readiness I talked about or even help our organizations to establish the type of leadership they need, even style or model. Our approach is style- and model-agnostic. We can work with any style the client can determine or we can help the clients determine the style, and we can help them with the capability matrices and the design.

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The second part is our technological or technical advisory services, because, in current world, it's hard to provide this journey and keep track of everything, especially if you have global audience and thousands of leaders. Technology helps bring everything together and automate things that make it easy, especially the measurement evaluation. Advisory services will help us determine and understand the client and our client technical infrastructure, and work with their existing platforms, as well to make the learning journey more effective.

We also started implementing AI in our own work with our internal teams. AI can do the creative work that we're doing, but it can also help us take some of our tedious work and use AI as our virtual assistant to get things moving and have a starting jumpstart on some of our tasks. We know our client's time is very valuable, so if we can be ahead and understand their culture and some of the specifics of the audience and their industry, that helps us with a jumpstart.

With our clients as far as products, I know a lot of our clients are also experimenting with some AI-type activities and we can also help them. We have some ideas. We also partner and bring some tools in. We can also create some interactions using AI.

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EXCELLENCE
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About Brandon Hall Group™

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