

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF TRAINING AND TEAM BUILDING

Are you preparing your organization and your people for the future? Are you helping them develop the skills they will need to keep your company competitive? Among US organizations alone, over tens of billions of dollars are spent on employee training and development each year. Studies of hundreds of corporations conducted by the American Society of Training and Development showed a distinct correlation between training expenditures per employee and bottom-line profits. Companies that spend the most on training generally have the highest sales per employee and the highest net profits.

In this age of the knowledge worker, the need for ongoing learning and training will only increase. Yet, many investments in training will fail to produce desired returns for employers. Many employees will not take what they covered in training back to their jobs. Studies have shown that often as little as 10% of what was learned is actually transferred to the workplace. This is particularly true when dealing with training in management, leadership, and interpersonal skills. It also applies to team building that many managers have conducted for their people. Why is this so?

Factors Affecting Transfer of Training and Team Building

Any one of several factors can result in disappointing outcomes from training or team building:

- Inaccurate needs assessment;
- Ineffective training design or presentation;
- Unmotivated participants;
- Organizational culture that blocks implementation of lessons learned; and
- Failure to measure and reinforce progress.

Inaccurate Needs Assessment

A manager might use a training or team building solution to address a problem that actually calls for a non-training, non-team building intervention. Perhaps the manager is uncomfortable about confronting the party or parties involved and working through a resolution to the issue. By sending people to training, he hopes that they will “get it” and learn how to deal with the problem themselves. This approach is merely wishful thinking!

Example: Two supervisors had developed problems in their dealings with one another. Their clash was having an adverse effect on their work and that of their people. Their manager sent them to some training that would help them improve their people skills. But guess what? They still had problems between the two of them after the training. The only way to get over the problems was to structure an intervention that allowed them to address the issues and negotiate new behaviors between them, while having their manager set and follow up on expectations.

Even if training is the answer to a problem, managers should take care to see that the training selected is appropriate for the situation. Does it fit with the trainees’ backgrounds and experience levels? Does it build on organizational values, vision, policies and procedures?

Ineffective Training Design or Presentation

Adult learners usually have some specific objectives in mind when they attend training. They may want some very specific skills or outcomes from the session, and they want the session to be focused on practical application. Theory is OK, but only if the training quickly flows to practical application. Effective training sessions require participants to plan out how they will apply the information they learned back on the job.

Example: Our suggested design for a two-day continuing education session for a state society of CPAs included a facilitated session at the end of each day that helped participants identify practical implementation plans for the information they had covered during the day.

Prioritizing issues for implementation helps participants focus on quick, high-impact changes they can make. Publicizing their plans by sharing them with others at the session helps assure that they will commit to implementation.

Unmotivated Participants

This is not the easiest issue for managers to address, but address it they must. Obviously, the more motivated the individual is, the more likely there will be a transfer of training to work. Managers must know their people, their likes and dislikes. Motivation may be easier if managers have a unifying vision for the organization, and can help individuals understand how what they do fits in with the vision. Of course, a *manager's* actions speak volumes.

Example: We were asked to conduct some communications training for the top managers from a client organization. The participants showed up for the training with a definite (bad) attitude. As we discussed their concerns and expectations with them, we learned that they had expected to be harangued, and possibly upbraided publicly by us in this session. We learned that when their manager conducted in-house “training” for them, it usually ended up in haranguing and public criticism. Their motivation for our session was nonexistent until we dealt with this issue.

Organizational Culture That Blocks Implementation of Lessons Learned

Organizational culture embodies the beliefs, symbols and assumptions that represent “how we do things around here.” Does management actually believe in and support what the participants are learning in the training or team building session? Does management model the behaviors that the participants are learning about? Or, is management just sending the participants to training to “fix” them, and wash their (management’s) hands of it? All the training in the world will not yield appropriate teamwork behaviors if the organization does not support it. If supervisors and managers see teams as a threat, if pay and evaluation systems measure and reward only individual effort, training in team skills will not result in effective teams.

Example: Our client asked us to conduct some interpersonal skills training for his managers, to help them deal with the stresses caused by the recent growth at the corporation. Unfortunately, the corporate culture, due to the manager’s style, puts up with, and actually supports, dysfunctional behaviors. The first person to try out any newly learned behaviors is as likely to be smacked for it as he is to be rewarded for it. Training will produce only limited benefit until underlying cultural changes occur.

Failure to Measure and Reinforce Progress

Managers and supervisors should develop and encourage a supportive environment for the application of newly learned skills and behaviors. This environment requires a feedback system to let the trainees know how they are doing. It requires that performance be measured and rewarded. It also requires positive reinforcement and recognition for making changes indicated by training.

Example: A manager should meet with employees after they attend training to debrief them on the session. During the debriefing, in addition to determining the overall value of the program, the manager can learn the employee's action plans resulting from the training. The manager can then help counsel the employee and suggest ways to help overcome any obstacles that might arise. Efforts to change can be recognized and reinforced. In fact, efforts to change **MUST** be recognized and reinforced if you really want change to occur.

What Managers Can Do

If managers want to avoid the problems noted above, they should consider the following action steps:

- Get objective input to be sure that training and development, including team building needs are diagnosed appropriately.
- Get involved in the screening and selection of training programs to be sure that practical application is a part of any training.
- Use leadership skills and a vision of the future to motivate employees for training success.
- Understand their firm's culture and what it will and will not support in terms of training outcomes.
- Use performance appraisal and compensation systems that support training efforts.
- Walk the talk—set an example of the kind of behaviors you are asking from your people.

Managers need to set reasonable expectations for training and development, including team building. An off-site training or team building session will not result in significant changes without support and follow up back at work. A “shake and bake” approach to training can never have the impact that managers would like to see. There are no “silver bullets” or quick fixes to interpersonal skill problems. It takes time and practice under the tutelage of a wise manager for a person to learn to apply new skills and behaviors effectively.

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