

This is the time of year when many of my clients are starting new initiatives designed to support the achievement of business objectives. Developing employees by expanding their knowledge base, getting them to use new skills and operating in different ways may be what it takes to position your organization to meet and exceed its goals. For this reason, organizations spend millions of dollars each year on employee training. The more effectively employees perform their jobs the more likely the organization is going to meet its objectives.

Often organizations get too focused on the training event. Employees are expected to miraculously transform; instantly changing their ways after just a few short days in a workshop. Much to the disappointment of executives, the instant make-over approach rarely comes to fruition and never as quickly as desired. Important factors that move training to learning and ultimately to real world application are frequently overlooked. Whether your training is provided by internal or external sources, here are a few tips I share with clients on how to make training more valuable in improving organizational effectiveness and increasing your return on investment.

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BEWARE OF THE TRAINING INSTANT MAKE-OVER

By Carol Bergeron

1. *Assess and define your learning needs*

Take time up front to assess and define your learning needs and insist that they link directly to organizational objectives. Assessment can be accomplished by interacting with individuals through one-on-one interviews, focus groups or even surveys. Broaden your definition of stakeholders to include not just your leadership team but the employees expected to learn. Consider including customers, suppliers and other people with whom the employees work. Document the learning needs and reconfirm them with those interviewed to ensure accuracy. Be specific about what you expect of employees. Express this to them in terms of what you want them to know, do and how to operate on the job. The effectiveness of all your training investments hinge on how accurately you assess what you expect from employees.



2. *Customize learning materials*

There are many instances where starting with generic training materials can be appropriate. Customizing materials starts by integrating your organization's core values, vision, goals and environment with the generic materials. Case studies and simulations should be tailored to address the unique requirements of your organization. Like the assessment, gather a wealth of information and ideas for case studies from stakeholders. Be sure to include the daily challenges cited by the employees expected to participate in the learning. Tailor your materials regardless of the training venue you choose such as: computer based training, webinars, audio seminars, on-site interactive workshops or a blend of these and other approaches. The benefit of customization is that learners are more likely to apply new techniques if they can relate simulations to their real world.

3. *Enable learning and change*

Many organizations stop short once learning needs have been identified and the training delivered. They do not implement approaches that are known to enable learning and lasting change. Perhaps it has to do with the skepticism that these changes would be worth the cost and the time necessary to implement them. The organizations that benefit from learning and sustained change provide training and enable people long after completion of the training event. Make the most of training investments by:

Setting the Example – This approach is inexpensive and carries a lot of weight with employees. In fact one of the quickest ways to undermine training investments is for leaders to espouse behaviors expected of employees and not hold themselves accountable for doing the same. 360 feedback is helpful in identifying how you come across to others. If you walk the talk then you can legitimately hold others accountable for doing so too.

Coaching – Develop your own internal cadre or engage external coaches. Coaching is a collaborative process that equips people with the right environment, tools, feedback and opportunities to develop themselves and become more effective. What could be more desirable than employees empowered to develop themselves with the help of others? This approach is based on the principles of self-development, learning by doing and continual reflection.

Facilitating learning group discussions – To continue employee development host a series of brown bag lunches on pertinent topics with plenty of opportunity to address on-the-job challenges. Perhaps add a book club like dimension by encouraging attendees to read a relevant article or book that will be discussed. Over time the group may take ownership for future topics important to them.

4. Plan for employee development

Development planning includes setting long-term goals, determining the best avenues for learning and creating on-the-job opportunities to apply new knowledge, skills and behavior. It is an approach frequently institutionalized and provides a basis from which to hold people accountable. My September 2003 newsletter contains an article entitled "Developing Employees with Organizational Purpose" written by Nancy Oliver. It is full of practical ideas on how to implement development planning with employees.

Organizations develop employees to support achievement of business objectives. Appropriate development will contribute to the organization's ability to attract and retain the right talent. Don't fall for the training instant make-over approach. Improve your return on investment by specifying your learning needs, customizing materials that reflect the daily challenges encountered by employees, coupling training with enablers of change and escalating the importance of development planning within your organization.

RESOURCES

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