

Developing A Training Commitment That Makes Sense: Blending Old Structures With New Applications

The reason for this article is to discuss the reality of how we deliver training, why it is that way, and the necessity for rethinking our actions.

The Reality

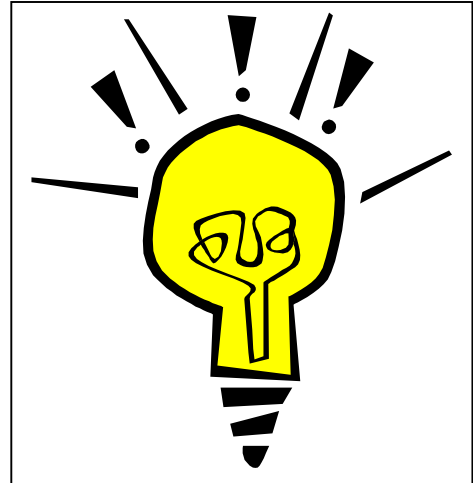
Another budget cycle and another round of cutting the “fat” has come and gone. All those projects and initiatives the council wanted to do won’t be accomplished next year. This budget year will have only a few of those new initiatives with the bulk of the budget eaten away by fixed costs and salaries. Training, or that more politically astute term, “professional development” also has felt the deep cut of the budget balancer’s knife. Too often the dollars we need most to develop the people we depend on to deliver quality services are cut from an already tight budget. **Unfortunately this is a legacy that will cripple the organizations of tomorrow.** To be the “service survivors” of the next millennium we will have to be able to attract, develop, and retain the best. To do that we had better start understanding the role training must play in our organizations.

Organizations still approach supervisory and employee training without a systematic plan. There is little analysis of the issues that need to be addressed to develop people. This lack of a well thought out plan exposes training dollars to early budget reductions.

Much that is done in the name of training is superficial and contributes little to an improvement in the productivity of the organization. In fact most organizations will point to initiatives that are no more than an attempt to say “we offered the training.” If you think these are harsh words how often have you seen organization’s deal with those critical “people” issues after a federal lawsuit surfaces. We use the “Band-Aid” approach at reacting to a crisis but are reluctant to implement processes that require commitment in developing our human resource over a number of years. A testament to this is the few organizational development initiatives that exist within our cities and counties today. Too often thought of as a luxury it is disturbing that more organizations do not realize that their very survival may depend on developing their people.

If this is the environment that has become too much of a reality then let’s look at some practical processes to make meaningful training a reality. ***Remember your work environment is the barometer to the kind of training and development your organization needs..***

The Reason



In labor relations there is an old adage, “an organization gets the union it deserves.” That is true of supervisors as well. Since an organization gets the supervisors it deserves, it is in its own interest to train them properly. Supervisory training is not a moral obligation to improve the lot of supervisors, it is a business decision that makes sense.

The cost of poor supervision is staggering. Not simply in dollars and cents, though you can break down turnover and court judgements and settlements that way, but rather in the turmoil and dissatisfaction felt by employees within the organization. The need for supervisory training initially stems from management’s recognition that they are uncomfortable with the way things are at present. Two issues take up the majority of the discussion surrounding a need for training. Fittingly, our first task should be to know the specific areas for remediation; while our second issue would be to assess what kind of commitment we are willing to make to the development of our people. If an organization is not sure about whether additional training is necessary, it can look at indicators of poor supervision to gain additional insight. Such indicators are as follows:

- Excessive Employment Law cases
- Limited Decision Making
- Poor Customer Service
- Complaints
- Accidents
- Grievances
- Delays
- Errors
- Breakdowns
- Poor Attendance
- Excessive Union Activity



If your organization has concerns in these areas, it is a sure bet that you need to improve the skills of your supervisors.

The Re-Thinking

So how does an organization go about creating a good developmental training program? It would be convenient if we could recommend a well thought out developmental approach to training that would fit all organizations regardless of size or economics. Unfortunately this is not the case. We can, however, arm ourselves with the basic questions that will need to be answered before putting any plan together. Review the questions below. These are starting points for organizations to use to plan out their program. The first set discusses the whole training commitment; while the second set revolves around specific issues and whether or not they are training related.

Knowing The Right Questions or Issues To Discuss?

The Big Picture

- ◆ Why have a training and development department or initiative?
- ◆ How can we identify our training needs?
- ◆ Can we develop quality initiatives with our limited funds?
- ◆ What are our learning objectives for each initiative?
- ◆ How do adults learn?
- ◆ What methods shall we use?
- ◆ How do we balance our training audience and our training offerings?
- ◆ How can we incorporate training with career objectives?
- ◆ How can we measure training and development?

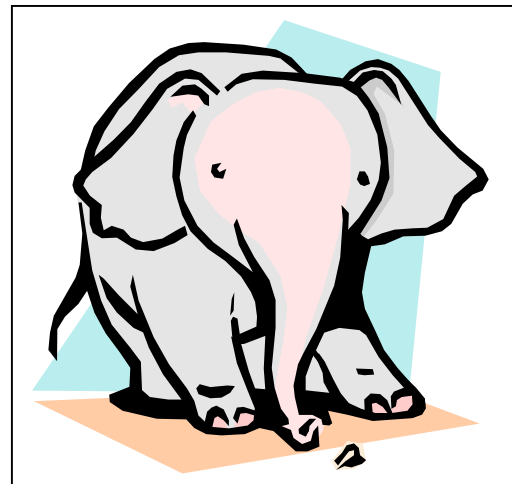
The Specific Situation

- ◆ Is it a training problem?
- ◆ Is the performance problem or deficiency in skills real, or merely perceived?
- ◆ Is the problem caused by lack of skill or knowledge, or can it be traced to a personnel or management issue?
- ◆ How urgent is the need to address the performance problem?
- ◆ How will training solve the problem?
- ◆ If training is likely to solve the problem, how should it be provided?

How Do You Eat An Elephant? -One Bite At A Time!

This is the appropriate approach for developing your training initiatives. Start with a multi-year approach that gets reduced to yearly action plans. Plan well and systematically address issues, using a variety of approaches, throughout each budget cycle.

In any organization there are two main categories of training: namely technical training and soft skills training. Technical training can be likened to training for survival. If an organization can not meet service standards, environmental regulations, and state and federal compliance, the very survival of the organization is in jeopardy. Soft skills training covers the other aspects of training that are not technical, such as communications, employee relations training, management and other supervisory training, customer service, and so on. The name “soft skills” is really a disservice to this type of training. Here is where the organization’s liability really escalates. A proactive focus on these areas will eliminate many of the employment and harassment charges.

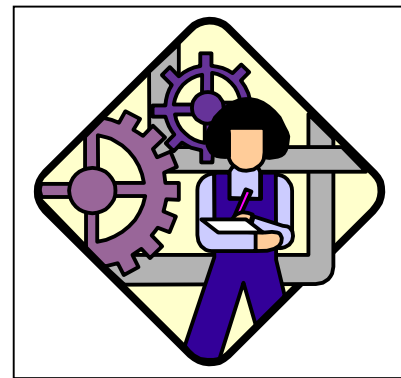


Specific training in areas of rules, regulations, standard operating procedures, environmental compliance, or statutes or law should be coordinated by the individual department. Technical training involving computer competencies needs to be coordinated centrally and is an area

where most government organizations are playing catch-up. This area has also become a stress point for MIS or IT departments in organizations that are trying to upgrade computer proficiencies. A dearth of budget dollars, the need for computer proficiency, and high turnover in the computer personnel exacerbate the situation. All too often is the new IS Director is hired and asked to bring the organization to a state of the art proficiency, only to find the funds to do this are lacking. The result is a stressed IS Director who feels pressure from different parts of the organization and is vulnerable to being lured away by another organization for a few more dollars. As an IS Director recently told me, “Who wants to stay in an organization that wants everything fixed, but is not willing to commit the resources. Why should I suffer the pain when I can sell myself to a higher bidder who is willing to make the commitment.” In order to be effective, an organization must commit both time and money to technical training. This training is designed to help the organization make better use of its human resources.

Gearing Up for Your Program

Teach a skill-and then practice that skill. A simple formula, but one that is often forgotten. There is more to the training of supervisors than conducting the occasional workshop on supervision. In fact, this approach to training does little to improve a supervisor's knowledge and skills. Short survey seminars covering dozens of topics in a short period of time act as a nothing more than a refresher. They do not teach skills and more importantly they don't allow for the practice of those skills. It is unfortunate that many of our organizations fail to recognize how people learn. Telling an adult learner something is only the beginning of the learning process. How many times have we been told to K.I.S.S-Keep it simple! Very good advice; perhaps; but rarely were you ever told how to simplify it. Shy of divine intervention, we get poor results when we offer many topics in a short timeframe with little time to practice skills.



The following is a list of suggestions for your training commitment. Match the reality you want with the commitment you can make to effect a new direction for training in your organization.

1. **Getting Started** - Get started by asking the right questions and conducting a needs analysis. Survey those who will be affected. Your plan need not address every need the first year. It can't! Set the structure of your initiative so it can be recognized. Training calendars, course descriptions, sign-up information, reminders, flyers, and certificates should all be part of the package. Make sure that those who are coordinating the training effort have sufficient training with computer and software support. You can track classes on simple spreadsheets or buy training modules that will do registration, rosters, and certificates. That is a matter of economics and can be phased in over the years. You can divide your training process into tracts, academies or any other type of structure you like. Remember the training commitment is like every other initiative that is worth pursuing. The purpose should always be clear.

2. **Voluntary/Mandatory** - There is a place for both voluntary and mandatory kinds of training. When individuals move into supervisory positions a mandatory “core” of classes should be completed within a specific time period. Dividing training into tracts, even subdividing this in large departments, allows a menu approach to soft skills and technical training. Inspectors, utility customer service clerks, permitting clerks, and/or wastewater operators would, in essence, have their own requirements. This can start very simply at first and grow into position specific criteria.
3. **Package & Design of Your Program** – Meet the needs of a diverse constituency by integrating full and half day seminars with executive briefings and skill workshops. Don’t hesitate to vary your approach by scheduling Supervisory Forums on topics, with a facilitator. “Brown Bag” training at lunch could be a possibility. How about a video series? The more variety the better since our adult learners are varied in their learning styles. Committing to a new name for “soft skills training” such as Supervision or Employee Relations Competencies, is also a helpful step in reinforcing the importance of these programs. Offering classes taught by supervisory staff, employees who demonstrate an interest, and outside vendors will vary methodologies and deliveries. Be wary of those who offer training but have little experience in relating to public sector employees. Just because a big company, college, or university offers the training does not mean it will meet your needs. All individuals who are instructing your employees should be interviewed extensively to ensure that what is being taught is desired. Sometimes paying others to develop specific materials for you and having your employees offer the training is actually more cost effective. When faced with periodically retraining on the same material, seek vendors who will custom design the training and then license it back to your organization to use. A few classes offered by the City Attorney, HR Director, or Assistant City Manager will allow you to “institutionalize” the competency within your organization. This also goes a long way in developing the credibility of the training program. Don’t underestimate the fact that many employees are flattered that they are being asked to train. If you keep the number of their classes to a minimum, it is manageable for them and you have increased your available training resources.
4. **Who Should Be Trained?** - The answer is simple--Everybody in something! A common division is to offer training opportunities in Executive Management, Supervision, Professional Development, Personal Development, and Technology tracts. Your training class eligibility should also reflect your career development commitment. Can non-supervisory personnel take supervision classes to “see what it is like?”
5. **Support From The Top** - The support of those who are leading the organization is critical to the success of any organizational training. “Lead by example” should be the slogan of the day; thus directors and managers can not be spectators on training. For this training to be successful, managers must act as mentors to their subordinates. In fact, supervisory training will only begin to pay off when the organization’s highest managers get involved. Commissioners and council members should also be encouraged to attend if they can. How often we have heard this! “This training was great. I wish my boss was here. He really needs it.” For supervisory training to get the results organizations want, the involvement of management must be firmly built

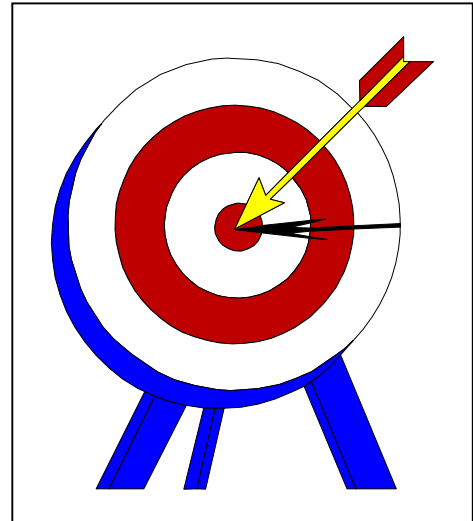
into the program. Managers must become as much a part of the training as their supervisors. If this level of commitment is not achieved, the results from the training will suffer. Successful supervision is more than just learning a set of skills. It is working alongside of management to help workers achieve their full potential. In this way, the manager, supervisor, and worker can understand what is happening in the organization.

6. Understanding The Trainer Equation

- ◆ What makes a good trainer?
- ◆ How much training can you expect one individual to do?
- ◆ What is the most cost-effective way to set up a training initiative?
- ◆ Should you rely on internal or external trainers?

All of these are important questions to ask when re-thinking your training initiative. Here are a few rules of thumb:

- ✓ Any trainer will eventually lose his or her uniqueness if exposed too frequently to the same group. Mix it up! If your program can afford a Training Coordinator and a staff trainer or two; then you possess a good in-house core to administer and present training programs.
- ✓ Look at your colleges, junior colleges, universities, school systems, neighboring cities, and independent training contractors as potential resources. Large corporations and the business community should not be overlooked. Trading resources with one of these organizations may help maximize your budget in meeting training needs during the year. Explore the possibility of joint initiatives or the creation of a training consortium where jurisdictions could share the resources and expenses. Creativity in this area will distinguish your training effort from others.
- ✓ Matching the potential audience to the trainer is important. Select only those trainers who have a knack for introducing concepts at the level of the targeted group. Relating to the trainer is a key for whether information is retained. The “human connection” of “I believe this person understands what I deal with every day,” should never be underestimated.
- ✓ Effective training is worth extra dollars but need it be expensive? Often the bid process works against organization’s securing the best training match in quality and cost. The all encompassing bid, RFP, or RFQ historically leaves out smaller training organizations. The larger organizations carry for the liability insurance required, are willing to fill out the thirty pages of forms, will bind six copies, attend a pre-bid conference, and pass that all along to you in a higher bid. Conversely while it is little more work for the organization, better results are obtained by bidding out the training piece in modules, where one or all the pieces could be bid. The advantage here is that the expert who does one thing can bid on just that and not escalate costs by partnering with others for the other pieces. Few organizations are great at everything or have the connections to provide the best-matched curriculum for all your needs. Be wary of the organization that touts that it is everything to everybody.



- ✓ Using a college or organization to coordinate and secure your training offerings may be viable for your organization. Understand the economic relationship you have with this group. Are you overseeing the selection of instructors so all relate to their targeted audience? Are a few good trainers getting away because there is not enough profit for the instructor and the organization?
- ✓ If you identify some local trainers who have the credentials and delivery that you seek, you might consider hiring them part-time. Hiring them as contract employees and guaranteeing them so many hours of training per month will invariably get you a low rate and develop that closer partner relationship. The benefit to the trainer is it is “at-home” and they know income will be coming in regularly. If you have the flexibility to work around the trainer’s schedule, filling in the trainer’s calendar, you can secure some top talent for a bargain.
- ✓ Never feel shy about contacting individuals whom you may think are out of your price range. Here is the opportunity for some creative negotiating. It is hard to resist Florida in the winter when you are negotiating with a trainer in Chicago. Ask for a discount to piggyback on a training session for a client whom they already have in your area. Fronting or backing that training will often produce substantial discounts.

Conclusion

Training is a process that should track the desire for competence and exemplary customer service within our organization. It starts with a commitment that is articulated in a strategic plan and is merged with the organization’s vision and mission. It is not an add-on to the budget. It is an integral part of the people equation in delivering our services to our citizens. Its importance must be embraced by those who realize that progress is not achieved by happenstance.

In talking to a frustrated city trainer, he related this concern. “How am I going to compete with our police, fire, and recreation departments and their strategies in getting new police officers, building a new fire station, or staffing a new recreation complex? By the time they are through, there is precious little left for our department. I responded this way “You need a little training in, PMA - Positive Mental Attitude. There are those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened! If you want to make a difference don’t relive the past. Start your strategy months before budget time. Progress was never found in the past. Anticipate success and work your strategy. You can show your organization’s need for training, and you can show the liability of not having it.” If you want to create something different, take a lesson from hockey great Wayne Gretsky. He said, when being asked about his success, “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.”