

Worth the effort

Management needs to understand the value of effective training

Question:

I'm a training manager who is trying to show management the impact of our function. It's an uphill battle because training is not seen as very important by many of the managers, especially those at the top. Any suggestions for how I can advance my cause?

Answer:

In my experience, this is an all too common occurrence. Training is seen as a drag on the bottom line, not a driver of business results. Historically, the kinds of metrics that have been used (i.e., training dollars spent, number of programs offered, number of attendees served, etc.) have not really done much to counter that perspective. In light of this, what is needed is a re-framing of the role of training within the larger business context.

Let me begin by noting that it is essential that training be used only for training issues. In other words, training should target those matters that are learning-related—deficits related to skill, knowledge, proficiency, etc. Training should not be used with other kinds of problems such as attitude problems.

So, presupposing that you are deploying your training programming at the right kinds of organizational issues, what are some things you can do to ensure that the impact for training is more evident? Here are some suggestions:

1. Link your programming with emerging organizational needs.

If you want to be a “player,” then you are going to have to make sure that your training addresses serious organizational issues. To move in that direction, seek to answer these (and related) questions: What are the goals the organization wishes to attain? What initiatives are underway? What key activities are taking place relative to work processes or customer satisfaction? From a “people practices” perspective, what needs to be done to acquire, retain, manage, and develop the organization’s human resources?

2. Specify evaluative criteria before you get started.

What will you measure to show how well the training program worked? Think in terms of specific questions you would like to be able to answer, the data sources you could access, and the criteria you could apply. Make use of both internal (within the training program) and external (outside of the training program) data sources. Make use of data sources relating to the classic four levels of training evaluation: Reaction (Did they like it?), Learning (Did they learn it?), Behavior Change (Did they apply it?), and Results (Did applying it make any difference?). Importantly, address the bottom line head-on by specifying the anticipated economic return of the training program.

3. Develop a performance-based focus.

To be maximally effective, your training program must draw upon established principles of adult learning (i.e., andragogy). Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed, goal-oriented, relevancy-oriented, practical, and motivated by respect-based exchanges. In light of these

findings, the performance-based training program is a participant-centered one, characterized by collegial interaction between the facilitator and the attendees.

Additionally, the performance-based learning program is a rigorous one in which goals, learning objectives, instructional delivery, and assessment are linked and aligned. Goals help to define the purpose of the instruction (i.e., “What are the outcomes that we seek?”). Objectives are smaller chunks that show how the outcome will be pursued (“How does this unit or module move us closer to the desired end?”).

Instructional delivery has to do with the methods and techniques that are used. Today, we are not lacking for ways to deliver training. Possible approaches include classroom training, case study, role playing, reading assignments, programmed instruction, branching programs, computer-based simulations, distance learning, CD-ROM and interactive media, Web-based instruction, intelligent tutoring systems, virtual reality systems, to list just a few. I like to say that these are “tools” or “design variables.” Knowing how, where, and why to use them separates the skillful from the not-so-skillful training practitioner.

Assessment has to do with answering the question, “How’s it going?” Ideally, multi-level assessment is used in which data are gathered from several key perspectives, (e.g., self, facilitator, peer, boss, etc.). Assessment data can be the basis for ongoing feedback in the form of coaching and mentoring to encourage mastery of the subject matter and transfer of training (e.g., application where it matters most—on-the-job).

4. Link and align training with the organizational system.

Make sure the training program has

explicit support from the powers that be. Seek top management's approval prior to getting started. Specify the various roles that will need to be filled and carried out for the program to succeed. Think beyond merely whom the participants will be. What role will their bosses have? What are executive sponsors supposed to do? Further, make sure that there are sufficient resources (e.g., physical, money, time, etc.) for the program to be successful. Finally, make sure an effective communication and feedback system has been established.

5. Make your case, making fine-tuning adjustments, and carry on.

Insist on and require a formal "after action" report for every piece of training that you deliver. Write and deliver a formal summary of the context for the training, the outcomes that were sought, the approach that was used, the results (empirically derived to the greatest extent possible) that accrued, and a discussion of why things turned out as they did. Include a conclusion with observations and recommendations. Pursue implementation of the recommendations. Do some more training and repeat the process. At end of the year, write and deliver an "SOT" (i.e., state of training) report to top management summarizing what has

been accomplished and what lies ahead.

By adopting the data-based, proactive reporting posture outlined above, you will raise your profile and have the opportunity to advance your cause.

Now, I can imagine you're thinking, "This is more than I bargained for when I asked my question."

Well, my take on it is, "To be taken seriously, you better get serious."

I know what I outline herein will require effort. But, I'm prodding you to aim high. Be bold. Push hard and see where it will lead you.

After all, as David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War I, observed, "Don't be afraid to take a big step if one is indicated. You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps."

So, my advice to you is, "Take a big step."



Daniel Schroeder, Ph.D., of Brookfield-based Organization Development Consultants Inc. (ODC) provides "HR Connection." Small Business Times readers who would like to see an issue addressed in an article may reach him at (262) 827-1901, via fax at (262) 827-8383, via e-mail at schroeder@odcons.com or via the internet at www.odcons.com