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Involve, Promote, Tailor: Putting the Meaning Back Into Training Programs

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By Katharine Giacalone

Offering training programs these days is dicey. Although many employers understand the importance of a well-trained workforce, employees are feeling the pressure of doing more with less. When training interrupts their workday, they find themselves thinking of all the things they could be getting done back at their office!

This puts an extra level of responsibility and burden on corporate trainers to make sure the training programs they sponsor are timely and valid, and will satisfactorily answer participants' question, "Was this training class time well-spent?"

Training programs have to be organized and connected to the work employees do. They can't fall into the category of "Flavor of the Month." Once rumors start in an organization about "Flavor of the Month" training, you might as well just have one flavor, vanilla, and call it a day! Employees need to see the value in training topics. They need to be excited about the content, and know when they get back to their office, facility, or lab, they'll be able to immediately apply the new skills or ideas they've learned, which will make their work life more pleasant and productive.

It's important to make an impact on your audience at the start of every training session you administer. Think back to when you were in school and your teacher would offer a story, game, or something that would allow you to relate to the lesson. Successful teachers learn to connect with students on a level they can understand; they break things down into their simplest terms. They give students a chance to practice and learn hands-on. Remember when you dissected your first frog in science? The best teachers don't read from a textbook, lecture without a point, or keep learners in their seats for the duration of the class. Executing this idea with adults is no easy feat, but attainable with the right strategy.

Keeping the attention of adult learners is difficult. Elementary and secondary teachers know maintaining students' attention through a long school day is a challenge, but a necessity. Many times trainers only have one shot at delivering a program before it gets labeled "time well-spent" or "time wasted." Adults can be brutal when it comes to giving feedback about a program or facilitator, but they also can be the biggest advocates if the training is a hit. Corporate trainers only have a small window of opportunity to offer a meaningful and focused training program.

How can corporate trainers change the way they develop learning programs? How can they get participants involved and show them the immediate application of the skills they've learned? How can they make participants feel attending the class was time well spent? Here are seven best practices corporate trainers should try before their next training program "goes live:"



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1. Get buy-in from leadership, upfront. It is important to work collaboratively with senior management to understand current issues and determine how the training program can help. Getting support from management early in the process is the key. Perhaps a management representative would even be willing to attend a class and "kick-off" the new training with some opening remarks.

2. Involve future participants in the creation of the program. Business development folks are not the only ones who conduct "due diligence" exercises. Put a small focus group together of future participants to answer some of these questions:

- Why is this training program being developed and offered to employees?
- Is the content relevant to what's happening in the organization or industry?
- Is the timing right?
- Will it be time well-spent?

Don't try and answer these questions in a vacuum. The story won't end well.

3. Write learning objectives that are real, not esoteric. Hopefully some of the "so what?" or "so why?" questions were answered in the focus group. Now it's time to turn them into learning objectives that can be easily translated by participants into how the training is going to improve their work life. After all, that's the bottom line. What new skill or technique are they going to learn? How is it different from what they currently are doing or using? Why is it important to build on an existing or new skill?

4. Create "buzz" around the training program. Too many times after all the hard work is done, the curriculum is written, and program materials have been printed, an e-mail blast invitation gets sent to staff. It gets stuck in the e-mail trails of the workday, and the power of the invitation (and program) gets lost. So, in addition to the e-mail invite, talk up the program at an "all hands" meeting, do a Webcast, and/or conduct a preview of the program during lunch (and bring in pizza!). Do whatever you can to increase awareness of the program.

5. Tailor certain parts of the training program to the audience. It is true certain parts of the training are the "meat and potatoes" of the program. But does every audience need the same level of content? For example, if the program is giving basic survival skills to new supervisors, is it really necessary to teach them how to create a fish bone diagram if they are trying to solve a problem? No, what is important is that they have the communication and relationship skills to figure out how to solve problems on the fly! Save the "fish bone" for the next program.

6. Use warm-ups sparingly and make them powerful. Would corporate trainers use the same warm-up exercise with elementary school teachers, research scientists, and law enforcement participants? You'd be surprised how many would. Make the warm-up real, and facilitate the learning so participants will get a preview of the program upfront. They will be curious and engaged in the curriculum if you catch their attention early in the program.

7. Follow-up with management to see if there's been a change in behavior. Don't spend countless time and money on paper program evaluations. Of course, there is an advantage to getting feedback on the program itself, but the success of the program depends on the changes participants make in their daily work habits or operation. Is there a change in the way people are interacting with a new system? Are people happier and more productive at work? Is it easier for the supervisor to get cooperation from his/her staff? These are the nuggets of feedback a written evaluation will never capture.

In today's economy, it's more important than ever for training programs to be purposeful and dynamic. They must capture participants' attention upfront, provide timely and vital information, and be designed to make the employee more productive, which will impact the company's bottom line. Programs must be promoted heavily in advance, and participants as well as management queried afterward to take note of observable behavior or work habit changes to confirm the program's effectiveness. Now, more than ever, training programs must be able to prove their value so when management asks themselves if it's worth the time and money to send employees to your program, the answer will be a clear and resounding "YES!"

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