Tips for Training

Key things to consider when beginning an employee training development program.

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Popular Developments

Depending upon the type of company, organizations may be required to conduct different types of specialized training, such as safety training or food handling training. But here are the most common focuses for employee development programs outside of training required for an industry.

- **Sales Effectiveness** – helping salespeople to be more successful even when the market is tough.
- **Technology** – due to its ever-changing nature.
- **Leadership** – huge leadership gap coming as Baby Boomers retire; preparing next generation of leaders.
- **Emotional Intelligence** – a self-perceived ability to identify, assess and control the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups. Effective for employee personal team development, and to help create a more productive work environment.
- **Change Management** – helping employees to cope as companies and industries change processes, technologies, and even people.

More and more companies are embracing the idea of ongoing professional development programs for employees. Whether it's a case of new employees who come to the job with outdated skills, or current workers whose skills aren't geared for foreseeable changes in the work environment, training and development is emerging as a key factor in keeping Indiana companies competitive.

"In today's economy, if your business isn't learning, then you're going to fall behind. And a business learns as its people learn," advised to Paul Sarvadi, CEO and co-founder of the leading professional employer organization Administaff, in an article he wrote for *Entrepreneur* magazine. "Your employees are the ones that produce, refine, protect, deliver and manage your products or services every day, year in, year out. With the rapid pace and international reach of the 21st century marketplace, continual learning is critical to your business's continued success."

Study after study shows that investing in training and development reaps huge benefits, including productivity gains, increased efficiency and reduced employee turnover. However, these benefits are amplified when a business owner or manager treats their employee training and development programs like other ventures in which the business is involved – strategically and methodically. Here are some critical things to consider before starting any employee development efforts.

Are you and your organization really committed to supporting training for employees?

Think of this as your corporate heart check. Training takes time, money and the patience of an organization

while its employees are learning. How does your organization check out?

Do the training and development programs under consideration align with your corporate objectives?

This is critical because the valuable resources you are about to invest in employee training and development must effectively contribute to achieving one or more of your objectives. Otherwise, it's money and time wasted. Even more so, employees can quickly lose interest when the linkage between the training and development – between their work and corporate mission – is murky. This is a sure recipe for derailing training initiatives and wounding employee morale.

Take inventory – what skills do your people need?

Once you've determined that your organization is fully committed to employee development and how it will support the organizational objectives, it's time to assess what skills and knowledge your employees will need to carry out the company's mission. This really is an exercise of taking an inventory of what skills your employees already possess and comparing it to what skills they'll need in order to carry out the strategic plan for growth. It all starts by assessing the skills and traits of your current workforce by using a reputable assessment instrument and possibly even a reputable consultant to oversee the project.

Once you have a clear understanding of your skill strengths, compare them to what skills you anticipate will be needed for the future. The difference between your company's current skill bank and anticipated skill needs is called a "skill gap." These identified gaps will help you to determine how to prioritize your training and development program so that the most important skills are developed first.

Let's take a look at how one example plays out using this approach. We'll assume that The Make-Believe Company is a well-run organization with a very experienced leadership team all nearing retirement in the next three to seven years. The assessment of the employees revealed that the company had a good group of managers at the level just below senior leadership, but they lacked significant leadership skills, abilities and experience that would position them to take on the responsibilities of a senior leader once the current ones retire. Additionally, this Make-Believe Company study determined that other workers at the company generally enjoy their work, but are concerned about what changes may be coming due to the impending retirements of the company's key leaders.

In many ways, this "make-believe" scenario is reality to many companies today as they prepare for mass exodus retirements of the Baby Boom Generation. However, after determining the skill gaps at the Make-Believe Company, it makes sense that its leadership team considers implementing training and development interventions focused on preparing its middle-level managers for leadership responsibility someday. Additionally, it would behoove the organization to implement change management training for all its employees in preparation for the inevitable changes on the horizon as the company's leaders retire.

Who do you call?

Numerous factors should be considered when determining which training or even training consultant to use. These include reputation of the consultant, quality of training and development services they offer, cost of products and services they offer, delivery methods, and follow-up after the training is complete. However, the most critical thing that needs to happen is ongoing evaluation to check the training's effectiveness. Don't wait until the end to evaluate whether the program is helping your employees to develop. Monitor the learning process and make adjustments as necessary.

Additionally, some companies build rewards into the process as a way of recognizing learning accomplishments. These certainly do not have to be extravagant, but they can range from such things as certificates of completion to lunch with the boss. Whatever you decide, just remember that employees need to know that they're meeting and exceeding the company's expectations for professional development. Catch them doing things right! This helps to assure their continued buy-in to the learning and development process.

Pragmatically speaking, training is not a cure-all for every challenge that companies face. Likewise, a single catch-all program does not exist. However, the self-worth of employees typically improves as companies invest in them and as they become more valuable to the organization. More times than not, these gains equate to gains for the organization by way of improved productivity, stronger employee engagement and increased employee retention. ◆

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