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The Learning Organization in Practice

New principles for effective training

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Application: Training should address real organizational problems and emphasize personal development.

To survive and grow in the current business environment, organizations increasingly are required to be learning systems. Success, even survival, may be dependent on the extent to which the organization is able to learn, adapt and change. Rapid changes in the business environment necessitate that organizations create training and development programs that enhance their employee's adaptive abilities. Technological advances require the development of new skills. Corporate restructuring places greater responsibility on fewer workers, and decision making is pushed to lower levels - often to self-managed teams. Cross-functional teams may be necessary for problem solving across functional boundaries. Empowered employees who are accomplished problem solvers are needed.

The question for Human Resources (HR), and particularly for Training and Development departments, is how to design a training program that will facilitate a firm's becoming a learning organization. A team-based, self-managed training (SMT) design is one model for doing this. SMT is a method for improving the delivery of training and development and can be applied to existing training content. It enhances collaborative skills, develops effective team members, emphasizes taking initiative, encourages information sharing, and produces long-term, rather than short-term, behavior changes.

Limitations of Traditional Training

As organizations commit more resources to the development of employees, cost/benefit analyses become critical. Value-added training designs must respond to the needs of a rapidly changing business environment. Traditional training methods do not pass this test for several reasons. They stress individual skills development rather than collaborative problem solving. The emphasis of most training programs is individual skill development (e.g., leadership, negotiation and communication).

Although people may learn useful techniques and tools, they don't learn to work collaboratively. Passive listening rather than active involvement. Participants are often relegated to asking questions or engaging in an occasional experiential exercise. They are seldom actively involved throughout the training experience. Theoretical problem solving rather than "real" organizational problem solving. They frequently rely on examples and cases that do not represent the culture or structure of the organization. Having participants focus on real, on-going organizational problems is likely to be a more valuable learning tool.

Short Term Learning Versus Long Term Change

Without reinforcement, skills learned in training sessions are short-lived. The opportunity to practice and receive feedback on a continual basis is necessary for skills to "stick." Skill training rather than personal and professional development. Unless participants recognize the extent to which their personal styles may limit or augment their ability to use the techniques, the skills learned are not likely to be applied effectively.

Responding to the following questions will help in assessing your organization's return on investment in training and development.

1. To what extent do the lessons taught in training have long-term benefit? Frequently skill loss occurs because the training lab cannot recreate the conditions managers encounter when they leave that environment and reenter their work environment. The realities of the workplace and the lack of opportunity to reinforce the tools learned in training result in a return to old patterns of behavior.
2. To what extent is your organization a collaborative, cross-functional problem solving entity? Building a learning community where members take the initiative to share information, transfer knowledge, and work together to solve cross-functional problems. This requires training sessions to be learning opportunities for participants to actually work collaboratively.
3. After completion of the training program do employees place their training notebooks on the office shelf, never to be revisited? Many training interventions include creatively designed materials that raise participant interest, but when the session is completed, these notebooks become additions to the bookcase and ignored.
4. To what extent are lessons learned in the training process reinforced in the workplace? Without the opportunity to practice, on a continuing basis, the skills developed during the training intervention, the likelihood that employees will maintain those skills is greatly diminished.

Self-Managed Training

SMT is designed for organizations that want to become a learning organization and have a strategic commitment to training and development. Our consulting work demonstrates that collaboration is enhanced when members trust one another, are secure with their skill level, comfortable with the skills of others they work with, and establish a commitment to learning and continuous improvement. This attitude is reinforced when participants take an active rather than passive role in the training process, solve "real" organizational challenges rather than theoretical problems, are provided the opportunity to apply group maintenance skills, and when the organization establishes an environment that encourages developmental feedback.

Active vs. passive responsibility-solving real problems.

Passively sitting through a training session may allow the learner to be able to define terms, but it does little to help the participant integrate the knowledge that is necessary and to make the concepts real. The SMT model not only encourages active learning, it supports collaboration through the use of team interaction and the teaching of collaborative problem solving. In so doing, it leads to high levels of skill development as well.

The results of an SMT program in a Business Unit of a large manufacturing organization on the West Coast are instructive. Participants were initially reluctant to embrace the training model. The company had a history of introducing interventions that were promoted as the "ultimate training experience" only to have people disappointed by the short term benefits that emerged. However, as participants began to recognize the impact created by the model and observed measurable results associated with the training, their reaction shifted toward optimism. Although a number of troublesome situations occurred, improvements in productivity and quality were experienced.

At the beginning of the training session participants were placed in teams of four or five managers who had differing task responsibilities. These teams met throughout the formal training period. As an incentive to continue the working relationship after formal training was terminated, participants were given increases in their department training budgets if they demonstrated progress on the projects selected by their team. As they dealt with each other over time, the heterogeneity of their perspectives provided multiple perspectives in analyzing and working through issues. It enhanced the generation of alternative voices and, in so doing, improved the decision quality. The experience also allowed members the opportunity to observe colleagues and provide feedback regarding leadership style and effectiveness.

The role of the SMT trainer shifted from lecturer to resource manager. The facilitator started a session with an introduction of the module, then discussed the relevant conceptual framework

that supported the topic. However, the majority of time in the training session was devoted to discussing cases, experiential exercises, and then solving real Business Unit problems.

Group interaction within teams was followed by dialogue between teams. The degree of interaction allowed for the expression of differing viewpoints and suggestions, which, in turn, led to more collaborative decision making both within and across teams.

Real Problems

Parts shortages were a nagging problem for the Business Unit. The ordering of parts was not the issue; rather it was the storage, retrieval and coordination between departments. So, the training teams took on the challenge of solving the parts shortage enigma. The use of cross-functional teams provided a way for participants to understand underlying difficulties and, at the same time, develop creative solutions that would integrate the work of the departments.

Initially there was a considerable amount of finger pointing. Blame was placed anywhere that avoided ownership by the team member's department. The skills developed in the conflict management module, however, helped team members sort out issues. Internal customer/supplier relationships were nurtured and improvements in the dialogue between departments were made. Although the part shortage problem was not completely resolved by the end of training, the dialogue that came out of training did result in recommendations that improved quality. Equally important, six months after the intervention, there were still reports of greater responsiveness to requests for information and greater accuracy of paper work, leading to improvements in productivity and quality.

Training does not operate in a vacuum. Organizational actions can both facilitate or hinder the process. In this case, a management decision to reduce the amount of refreshments offered during training sessions resulted in a perception among participants that management's action to cut back the refreshment budget was a reflection of the low value they placed on the training. After some conversations with senior Business Unit managers, we were able to restore the quantity of refreshments offered during breaks. Commitment to be a learning system should be reinforced by both symbolic and structural messages that say that management supports the goals and the training.

Group Maintenance

Reinforcing Collaborative Skills. The teamwork that is required in SMT encourages collaboration, and processing issues that arise during training further reinforces collaboration. In this

case, as the managers worked together on real business issues, control issues appeared. Providing time for the group to process these dynamics helped strengthen the skills necessary for collaborative problem solving.

Early on, competitive actions created conflict and got in the way of collaborative problem solving. Dominant personalities tried to gain control, and aggressive behaviors by some caused others to shy away and reduce their contribution to group discussion. On numerous occasions during the training cycle, the facilitator used feedback exercises that incorporated communication and leadership skills learned in earlier modules. Using these exercises allowed the team to examine the behavior of members and develop action plans for change. Our experience suggests that heterogeneous teams are able to deal with these issues effectively after they have finished training because the managers have "lived" together throughout the training cycle. The development of a community within the team is likely to result in a commitment to resolve internal problems.

Personal Development. To be able to implement collaborative skills, people must be aware of their own behaviors and how well they interact with others. SMT training is a valuable tool in helping them analyze how they communicate, handle conflict, and express leadership. Continuous improvement in these areas is required, and the use of assessment tools that require participants to give feedback to team members is part of SMT.

With respect to the training intervention in the Business Unit, information was received more readily when participants had developed trust through the emergence of collaborative relationships. They were less defensive when receiving data that were confirmed by others. In these cases, quality feedback generally resulted in information that was meaningful and honored.

SMT: Value Added Training and Development

The rapid change occurring in most industries is likely to continue or even increase. To maintain a competitive advantage, organizations must be concerned about creating a learning environment where members can engage in collective thinking. SMT responds to the demands of the turbulent business environment by emphasizing development of collaborative skills, encouraging teaming, promoting the value of information sharing, and reinforcing effective problem solving techniques. Because of active involvement and team learning, skills mastered in SMT are more likely to have long lasting effect than is the case with traditional training. But, for long term benefits, the organization must institutionalize the process and make it a part of the culture.

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