Trouble with training

*Competitive pressures are increasing demand for training and pushing more money into it. **Jo Oliver** and **Tony Scott** explore how wisely the money's being spent, and suggest some principles to guide future investment.*

Over the past few years, we have worked with many organisations in the private and public sectors. We've seen training and development initiatives that have delivered results - and continue to do so. We've also seen reactive, ill-considered and piecemeal initiatives that soak up time, money and effort to no purpose.

This article looks at four principles that seem to make the difference. Observing the principles alone won't guarantee effective training. But ignoring them will guarantee ineffective training.

1. Inject reality

Much of what bedevils organisations in a time of great change and unrelenting cost pressure can be summed up in two linked habits: a reluctance or inability to focus; and short-termism.

Both are entirely understandable. Neither is helpful.

FOCUS   Take the focus problem, for instance. Some Boards have agendas of high-priority issues that run to several pages. Trying to deal with all the issues simply diffuses management effort to the point where none gets cleared. As a result, the agenda gets only longer over time - and managers feel increasingly frustrated.

Choosing the top one, two or three priorities takes courage and steadfast attention from directors. But it conveys an invaluable sense of direction to the whole organisation - with the result that it becomes possible to make visible forward progress. Staff who see the movement then develop confidence in their leaders and, in time, themselves - which generates a willingness to move on to other issues and an excitement about the possibilities of change.

SHORT-TERMISM   Among managers and staff, short-termism commonly takes the form of a helpless shrug and a belief that, no matter how hard they work, it'll be for nothing because the corporate goalposts will be moved again soon. The habit is not helped by streams of new head-office initiatives and minutely prescriptive guidelines, all of which line the shelves of managers and most of which are used only as sticks to beat staff with.

But it is possible to discern and address longer-term issues: the need to develop faster, cheaper ways of doing things; the importance of sorting out relationships (between one department and another, one level and another, or between the business and its customers); and the need to sell change to staff at all levels so that new ideas move smoothly from Board papers and staff seminars to daily reality.

Business leaders who concentrate on these larger issues - and on using their training budget to persuade their people to tackle them - find, sometimes to their own surprise, that they can take advantage of the moving goalposts instead of being threatened by them.

The fire-fighting mind-set that tends to go with short-term thinking can lead to curious blind spots:

- In one Board secretariat, a roomful of word-processing staff put sticky labels on window envelopes and type every name and address twice - on the envelope as well as the document - because, they say, they can't spare the time to learn how to position a name and address so that it shows through the window.
- Or take the large hospital where nurses and junior doctors spend hours on the phone every day, ringing round the wards to find out where beds are available for new admissions. The salary cost alone of using highly qualified staff in this way adds up to tens of thousands of pounds a year. But the hospital Trust has yet to find the couple of thousand it would take to put a single PC on the admissions desk with a simple log of vacancies.

Practical issues like these abound in organisations. All are known to staff, and all can be readily fixed once people believe that sensible ideas will be listened to and acted on. The trick is to inject such realities into training courses and awaydays, so that every event becomes a forum where issues can be openly discussed and addressed. In that way, confidence grows alongside a willingness to change.

The same rule applies even more acutely to Boards themselves. On one occasion, a Board wanted training for itself on internal communication skills, so that directors could motivate staff to embrace change.

It turned out that the real problems had to do with the division of operational responsibilities between directors, and the fact that the tensions thus created were being swept under the carpet. That was why staff hadn't responded to management messages; they were well aware of the tensions and didn't want to get caught in the crossfire. Surfacing the real problems in the training course allowed the Board as a whole to face them, fix them, and, as a result, communicate better on other issues as well.

2. Use the 80:20 principle
The 18th-century Italian mathematician Wilfredo Pareto came up with the analytical weapon now known most widely as the 80:20 principle. It suggests that in any situation, 80 per cent of the results come from 20 per cent of the causes.

So in a service business, 80 per cent of the revenue comes from 20 per cent of the clients (and departments), and 80 per cent of the problems come from 20 per cent of the staff (and clients).

The same principle can be applied to training investment decisions. A personnel director, for example, concerned about the quality of recruits and the time taken over their selection, decided to run a series of courses in interviewing skills.

The course was aimed at personnel staff and junior managers in other departments, and it duly coached them - to avoid hypothetical questions (because the answers tell you only whether the candidate has read the textbooks, not whether he or she is any good)... to listen instead of talk... and to dig for evidence of skills and aptitude instead of relying on snap personal judgments.

The course made a little difference. But not much. The real causes of the trouble lay elsewhere. The company had a staff turnover of around 25 per cent a year - more in some departments - and a clumsy selection process.

The turnover was largely a function of a management culture that ran on fear (the managers' and staff's). Fixing that would have been a long and delicate process. But the time and money spent on selection could have been cut much more simply. Selection took so long because so little thought had gone into it. Consider:

- Every vacancy was advertised in all the local papers, which guaranteed as many as 1000 replies (a single ad or merely an internal one would have been cheaper and faster).
- Each reply was logged and responded to with a hefty pack of information and an application form (almost all the information could have been distributed at a later stage, saving a sizeable sum in postage alone).
- The forms were sifted by juniors who were nervous of making a wrong decision, so upwards of 50 candidates would be brought in for interviews (a tougher paper selection could have cut that number in half, saving several man-days of time).
- Finally, when a candidate was chosen, all the other applications were thrown away and the whole process was repeated for the next vacancy (since most of the jobs were clerical posts, and since those were being filled at the rate of 10-15 a week, it would have been easy to keep a file of the most promising runners-up and thus cut the selection workload by more than 90 per cent).

By demanding a training solution which addressed only a fraction of the problems - rather than contemplating a rethink of departmental procedures which would have addressed the bulk of them - the personnel director ensured that the investment could yield only a marginal payback.

3. Insist on senior backing

One of the commonest reactions to any training message is: 'I'd love to try it, but they would never let me.' They usually means the person's manager, departmental executive or Board director.

The only way to counter the reaction is to insist that one or more key authority figures get involved - the more senior the better. The most powerful and far-reaching events usually require a director or two, including the chief executive. The sponsors' role can take any of three main forms; ideally it takes all of them:

- **Clear** barriers ahead of the event, so that staff and managers don't find excuses to duck out.
- **Join** some or all of the event and make clear their unequivocal support for it. Use some of the time to convey, informally, the Board's thinking on relevant current issues.
- **Monitor** changes in performance afterwards - and reward noisily and publicly those who experiment with the new ideas.

Post-event support is most powerful when it applauds courageous failure as well as success. If only successes win recognition, participants will assume that failure attracts blame - and they'll learn to keep their heads down for safety. That can only diminish and slow down the course's payback.

4. Tie in to long-term strategy

Any training course worth the name is a change programme in miniature. If not, it can have only a questionable value. But if it is to help change behaviour at work, it has to be linked firmly with three things: the core purposes of the workplace; what's important to the jobs people actually do; and what's important to the individuals in those jobs.

Looked at from this perspective, it is curious how many courses on assertiveness, equal opportunities and other sorts of awareness, and loosely defined personal development have sprouted across organisations. Even training in such apparently useful areas as consultancy and communication skills can fall into this semi-detached trap.

The courses can be well-meaning attempts by in-house trainers to respond to staff requests. Sometimes, too, the courses are a token attempt to placate the disaffected. In our experience, though, they rarely have even that effect. And they rarely change behaviour in any significant fashion.

Why this is so seems to have to do with three characteristics shared by many, perhaps most, such courses:

- They are commonly used as a sort of gift - a 'magic dust' that will somehow on their own lift staff morale and performance, and demonstrate management's good faith. Once they're on offer, everybody else wants some, too, just so they don't feel left out. But because the courses have no hard-edged relevance to work, they can serve inadvertently to increase frustration and aggravate cynicism.
- They are usually targeted only at junior and middle-level staff, instead of the movers and shakers without whose backing nothing will change in the organisation. Customer-care programmes often fail to deliver change for the same reason.
- The courses take place in isolation from the practical daily realities of the business. Their effect, if any, is social; their value, if any, is public relations. Cut off in this way from the purposes of the organisation that funds them, they make no material difference to it.

By contrast, personal development courses which are tied explicitly to long-term strategy can make a very significant difference - with appropriate reinforcement via such mechanisms as promotion and pay rises. Two examples may serve to make the point:

- A two-day conference aimed at building the confidence of managers to take commercial decisions became the launchpad in one business for a staff-backed change process that cut the number of senior managers from 20-plus to six and pushed management costs down to 5 per cent - a third less than the national average for its sector.
- A series of three-day courses persuaded an inwardly focused specialist technical department to take more care of its external customers and stakeholders. The courses transformed the mood of the staff, which in turn is now helping the department to grow its reputation and its revenue.

Conclusion

Jungle Book author Rudyard Kipling once wrote of the 'six honest serving-men' who'd guided him in his early career as a journalist. Their names, he said, were Who and What and When, and Where and Why and How.

The biggest single trap in planning a training and development initiative, it seems to us, is to consider only what it should cover and how, who it should be aimed at, and where and when it should be held.

The biggest and hardest single factor in designing events which add real value to a business is to work out why.

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