

The Case for External Peer Review

HRD's urge to get serious is a healthy offshoot of the field's growth and the importance placed on it in so many organizations. The external peer review of training operations holds promise for improving HRD practice and fortifying the field's credibility.

By WILLIAM J. ROTHWELL

Trainers worry incessantly about finding and solving performance deficiencies, whether or not the solutions they propose will be effective, if they'll be recognized for their efforts. They even worry about the performance and competence of their colleagues.

healthy urge of the HRD field to monitor and improve itself, offers important benefits on several levels. For practitioners, it affords the opportunity to interact meaningfully with colleagues and yields an independent, objective assessment of training operations and in-

Finally, a review benefits the HRD profession by suggesting that standards of practice do exist. One way to distinguish a profession from a field or discipline is the extent to which practitioners regulate their own activities. Three professions generally held in high esteem—medicine, law and accounting—do regulate member practices. Such reviews typically are the responsibility of the professional society and its committees or chapters.

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What is the external peer review?

These concerns contribute to the increasing interest in the training and development competencies of practitioners, trainer accreditation, internal training audits and formal standards for the practice of HRD.

External peer review, a relatively unexplored avenue toward satisfying the

traorganizational relationships. Peer review is at once a time to shine professionally and to gain fresh insights from colleagues who may have experienced similar problems.

For organizations, a peer review can stimulate dialogue on training issues as top management's attention is focused temporarily on the training department and its role. The opinions of outside experts may carry weight with senior management, and outside experts can identify achievements as well as deficiencies in the products of the department, or in adverse conditions under which the department is forced to function.

A peer review is a formal examination by a team of independent third-party evaluators. It determines whether the formal internal quality control programs of an organization are functioning as they should and whether professional standards of practice are being followed. In this context, "independent third-party evaluators" are experienced HRD practitioners from outside the organization being reviewed; "formal quality control programs" are uniform methods for monitoring the quality of training activities as communicated to others in the organization; and "standards" are broad statements of desirable professional practices.

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An external peer review measures how well internal quality control programs work. Examples of internal quality control programs include:

■ *Self-review checklists.* As work is performed, trainers complete a standard checklist to assure that it conforms with established organizational policies and procedures.

■ *Colleague reviews.* Other trainers in the organization review the work of their colleagues to assure that it is well conceived and executed.

■ *Supervisory reviews.* Professional superiors review the work to determine its consistency with established standards. The information is used for employee performance appraisals and for identifying training needs of HRD staff.

■ *Expert reviews.* If the trainer is not an expert in the subject matter, a trainer who is an expert in the area reviews instructional materials and methods prior to their use.

■ *Participant reviews.* The trainer tests instructional materials and methods on an experimental group prior to large-scale delivery and adjusts them according to outcomes and participants' comments.

■ *Management reviews.* The trainer encourages the supervisors of the targeted trainees to review instructional materials before, during and immediately after their use. In addition, supervisors are surveyed long after the instructional experience regarding the transfer of training back to the job.

■ *Quality inspection reviews.* A team of HRD professionals reviews every detail of the work performed by a colleague. A random sample of projects completed during the year is reviewed intensively.

■ *Self-initiated training department audits.* The entire training department is evaluated by its staff and by others outside the training department. Such audits help answer questions about the department's strengths and weaknesses, and how others perceive the department's role and performance in that role.

An external peer review merely measures how well existing internal quality control programs function. It may reveal the need for programs that do not exist or indicate ways to improve the effectiveness of existing measures.

Getting ready

Preparing for a peer review is relatively easy: trainers get their house in order and keep it that way. They also build sup-

port for the review by explaining the benefits to higher level management.

Determining how the review team will assess the training department's performance can be approached in two ways. Training effectiveness might be assessed according to the training department's own standards and criteria, or some other set of standards and criteria might be used to evaluate effectiveness.

The next step is to take stock of how well the department is likely to measure up to the evaluation standards. Such self-assessment requires a complete inventory of existing quality control programs. How does the organization assess training effectiveness and efficiency? Are policies and procedures documented? If not, how well are they understood by individuals? Identifying needed programs, monitoring them and modifying programs as appropriate are part of the self-assessment step. When these preparations are complete, the training department is ready for peer review.

The process

The peer review process is fairly predictable and begins with the selection of the review team. Teams of five to seven members from outside the organizations are selected, usually by the professional society sponsoring the review. Each member remains on salary with his or her own employer, and all travel and other expenses are paid for by the organization under review.

Once final criteria are established, the team examines documentation on quality control programs and collects information from the organization to determine how well the programs are working. Reviewers interview key personnel inside and outside of the training department, conduct surveys and document reviews. The results are then compared to criteria on the checklist.

Next, team members draft a short report of their findings, emphasizing both significant achievements and departures from professional standards. After the training director's responses are incorporated, the final report is prepared. The team votes to give the training department a pass, fail or provisional pass status. If the department passes, the director or the department receives a certificate; if the department fails, the director is given specific recommendations for corrective action; and if the department receives a provisional pass, corrective actions must be taken within a given time.

The last step of a peer review is placing the report on file with the professional society and distributing copies to all senior managers in the reviewed organization. Each training department is reviewed periodically, usually once every five years. In addition, training directors from passing organizations serve on at least one peer review outside their organization during the five-year period.

HRD is emerging as a profession in its own right. Numerous colleges and universities now offer degree programs in HRD; ASTD's *Models for Excellence* identifies key roles and competencies of practitioners; and detailed standards and criteria for evaluating training departments exist.

Technically correct responses to HRD problems frequently are not apparent—one solution rarely is the only correct one. Although the nature of HRD practice makes establishing strict professional standards less than clear-cut, the field does possess a body of knowledge built expressly for the purpose of improving practitioners' understanding and practice of HRD. This knowledge is at least enough for establishing minimum acceptable standards of practice. Especially in light of the people-oriented, often political nature of HRD practice, objective peer review from outside professionals seems a particularly well suited method for maintaining standards.

Bibliography

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