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Turbo Group Training

Use accelerated group work to advance your leadership training.

By Randy Emelo and Laura Francis

Do you want to add a new tool to your leadership training repertoire? Try creating a “turbo group” during or after your next session. Turbo groups focus on practicing new skills and behaviors on the job, and can be a great follow-up to your normal training routine. They can also replace traditional training sessions because participants use a hands-on approach to develop particular skills and behaviors.

How they work

Turbo groups are networks of four to seven peers led by a more experienced

organizational veteran (“turbo leader”). They exchange ideas, analyze their development issues, and receive guidance and feedback from one another.

The trainer is the first turbo leader. He or she creates the first group to teach others to become turbo leaders. Once those new leaders are trained, they go out and conduct their own turbo groups. The trainer’s role then becomes to provide support to those leaders by being their mentor. He or she monitors group members on an ongoing basis, attends meetings, and provides feedback on how they

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led their groups. Trainers are also responsible for any additional training required by the group.

A turbo group typically meets once a month for a few hours. During that time, group members and their leader talk about a predetermined leadership-related topic and their developmental goals and progress. The leader randomly appoints a different group member to facilitate each meeting, so all members must be prepared for every discussion. At the end of each meeting, members give the facilitator feedback on his or her leadership effectiveness.

To stimulate conversation, participants use study guides, which are given to the group in advance. After the discussion session, the group determines how they can act on their new insights by creating personalized learning assignments. Those assignments are accomplished between monthly meetings and are based on current work projects and individual connections with the topic. The group then discusses their assignments with one another. At the next meeting, each member reports back on what he or she accomplished through the learning assignment, and the group moves on to a new topic.

Getting started

Now that you have a basic understanding of turbo groups, follow these steps to create your own.

Recruit. Targeting the right individuals as turbo leaders is key to the success of the group. Try approaching executives who have benefited from leadership training or who are recommended by mentees and colleagues. Subject matter experts, veteran employees, and new hires or graduates with creative ideas are also good investments.

If you are charged with selecting group members, try recruiting from these groups:

- current high-potential programs

- recommendations from the direct supervisors of potential group members
- pre-existing organization initiatives, such as diversity programs and skill development projects
- employees making career transitions
- newly hired employees.

Create study guides. Study guides are provided to the group to help them engage in conversation. As the trainer, you are responsible for creating them. Look at your organization's internal processes to see what is already being taught or what materials are already being used, and try to incorporate those teachings into your study guide. That will ensure consistent business practices across the organization. Books, articles, and Websites from professional associations are also good resources for research. You can connect with others in the field through discussion boards and communities of practice.

Set an agenda. Turbo leaders provide facilitators with a recommended meeting agenda, which they can either create or get from you. The agenda ensures that adequate time is focused on personal development and lessons learned from assignments. While meeting topics may vary, the following 90-minute timeline should remain relatively the same:

- Social gathering (10 minutes). Set aside time for participants to reconnect.
- Learning activity update (15 minutes). To close out discussion on the previous meeting's topic, group members share their learning activity experiences.
- Dialogue session on new topic (45 minutes). The turbo leader appoints a group member to facilitate the topical discussion for that meeting.
- Learning activity assignments (10 minutes). Group members create learning assignments for the new topic and receive feedback on those ideas from the group.
- Feedback to facilitator (10 minutes). Group members give the facilitator feedback on his or her performance.

Start your group(s). Invite the identified recruits to be part of your turbo group. Explain what it is, how it functions, what it accomplishes, and how participants will benefit from being involved in it. Be sure to emphasize that turbo groups act as catalysts for interpersonal development and are relevant to the jobs of emerging leaders. Participants will not only receive the benefit of networking with peers, but will also gain access to an organizational mentor. Turbo groups can be used to inspire focused learning at any strata in the organization, from individual contributors to selected high-potential employees who are being groomed for executive positions.

Investing in turbo groups provides a simple yet concrete method for accelerating the development and advancement of leaders, which in turn builds and strengthens the organization. Adding the process to your repertoire will prove to be invaluable.

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