A GREAT DEAL OF PROGRESS CAN BE MADE BY FOLLOWING FOUR PRACTICAL STEPS . . .

BUILDING TRAINING DEPARTMENT CREDIBILITY

BY JOHN H. DOBBS

As he closed the door to his boss's office and began walking down the hall, Roger could hardly believe what he had just been told. "Things are tight," isn't much justificiation for being asked to cut two people from your staff and chop 30 percent from next year's budget, he thought.

"Heck, we've made some real progress in the training department in the past year," Roger attempted to point out to his boss. "You've seen some of the feedback questionnaires from people who've gone through the new middle-management program we designed. Wasn't that considered?"

"Sure it was," his boss retorded, "and I know you've made some real progress this year. But, these cutbacks aren't affecting just the training department, you know. Other parts of the company will be cutting back too. The decision's been made — my hands are tied."

Roger stopped at the drinking fountain, not really wanting to go back to his office. He just stood there for a moment mulling over again and again the meeting with his boss. "Oh, I can understand the need to tighten our belt," he thought, "but what really burns me is that I wasn't consulted on how all this would affect my department. I didn't even have a chance to make a case for what I think should be done. I guess it's too late to worry about that now. I wonder how I'm going to tell the people I decide to let go?"

The situation Roger found himself in did not happen all of a sudden. It evolved over a considerable period of time, and Roger is right. The fact that he did not know what was going on is probably more significant than the cutback he was asked to make. In short, Roger was feeling the effects of a lack of credibility.

Credibility is not something we spend a great deal of time thinking about. First of all, it's hard to decide when you have it and when you don't. When you need it the most, it's probably too late to start building it. It's elusive, too. Having credibility today does not necessarily mean it will be there a year from now.

The dictionary defines a "credible" person as one who is capable of being believed or one who is worthy of confidence; "trustworthy" is also a word attached to the term credibility. What the dictionary doesn't say is that credibility can't be demanded, bought or even given. It must be earned! The purpose of this article is to offer a few practical suggestions for increasing the credibility of training managers and their departments.

Spotting the Symptoms

Like many other ills, lack of credibility is often manifested by various symptoms which, when properly diagnosed, can give the training manager some important clues as to what kinds of credibility problems exist and how severe the problems really are. Check your training department for these symptoms (Figure 1) of low training department credibility.

While none of the listed symptoms by itself is a clear indication of sagging credibility, a combination of several may indicate a serious problem. If your depart-

ment's score on the exercise totals 15 points or more, some serious soul-searching may be in order.

If lack of credibility does appear to be a problem, there are two critical points to keep in mind. First, the ultimate source of credibility is *line management*. It matters little how well instructors are doing in the classroom or how positive the participant evaluations are of your training programs, if line managers do not have generally positive feelings toward the training department. (Your answers to symptom numbers 3, 5, 6, 7, 14, 18, and 23 will give you an indication of where you stand in this respect.)

Secondly, you needn't look very far outside of the training department to identify most causes of insufficient credibility. Much of the damage is self-inflicted. In fact, almost all the credibility symptoms pointed out thus far are well within the capability of the training department's management to rectify.

It is true that many training managers are quick to adopt the latest fads in training. Programs come and go without leaving behind any hard evidence that they have really helped supervisors, managers, or other employees become more skillful or have contributed in any meaningful way to the effectiveness of the organization. A 1976 survey of more than 3,000 ASTD members revealed that less than 25 percent of the respondents attempt to measure on-the-job performance change resulting from the management training they conduct — this, in spite of the fact that as few as one percent of the training professionals surveyed felt that on-the-job performance change could not be measured. The ability of the training department to improve on-the-job performance of supervisors and managers will be suspect as long as this trend continues. The issue is not so much being able to prove that the bottom line was affected by the training effort, as it is to demonstrate that *something* changed as a result of the training.

Zemke and Isachsen have identified 10 ways to blunt human-resource-development effectiveness.[1] Nine of the 10 problems described in their article are directly or indirectly controllable by the training department.

Figure 1.

Symptoms	Points
1. There are many no-shows or last-minute cancellations for in-house training programs.	1_____
2. Participants express dissatisfaction with training sessions.	3_____
3. Insufficient budget is approved to conduct training properly.	3_____
4. Training programs are frequently interrupted by trainees popping in and out of sessions.	1_____
5. Training department budgets are seldom approved as submitted.	2_____
6. Insufficient training time is permitted to accomplish stated objectives.	3_____
7. The training department plays no role in the organization's long-range planning.	2_____
8. Training activities not involving the training department are taking place in the organization.	1_____
9. The training manager and his/her superior occupy low positions in the organization's reporting structure.	3_____
10. Training clients (line managers) dictate the content of programs to the training department.	2_____
11. The training manager is excluded from most high-level meetings.	1_____
12. Training department staff members are infrequently used as internal consultants.	2_____
13. Management insists that all training programs be developed internally.	1_____
14. High-level managers seldom participate in internal training programs.	2_____
15. Training delivered is primarily theoretical and conceptual rather than skill-oriented.	2_____
16. Activity in the training department has frequent lulls.	1_____
17. Instructor morale is low.	2_____
18. Training manager has little access to top management.	2_____
19. Training programs are not accomplishing stated objectives.	3_____
20. Training department budget is first to be cut.	2_____
21. Evaluation of training consists of participant feedback only.	2_____
22. Department is usually first or last to adopt new training techniques and methodology.	1_____
23. Training department can't respond to special requests for training from key managers.	1_____
TOTAL POINTS	_____

The fact of the matter is that the training department has earned the reputation it has by virtue of the activities it has engaged in, the relationships it has established within the organization, and by the results (as opposed to the number of training sessions) it has been able to deliver.

Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. This is fortunately not the case when it comes to the actions required to build training department credibility. It can be a healthy, exciting and rewarding experience once you've set your mind to it and go about it in a systematic manner. A great deal of progress can be made by following four practical steps. Let's discuss each of them in turn.

Find Out Where You Are

Assessing the current level of credibility of your training department can be an enlightening, but not necessarily painless experience. It is akin to a needs analysis and can be accomplished in two phases through the creation and administration of relatively simple patterned interviews. The two phases are:

1. *Survey training department*

staff. It is vital to determine how training department staff members feel about themselves, their jobs and the training department. The responsibilities of a training professional can be difficult and frustrating at times. It is important to acknowledge and consider these frustrations as you attempt to uncover reasons for low credibility. Staff members might be asked to give their thoughts on:

- Their ability to get management cooperation;
- Whether or not training department objectives are being met;
- Whether they have earned the respect they need from management to do their jobs effectively;
- Their department's ability to get the funds it needs to produce results expected by management;
- What percentage of requests for training made by management the department is able to fulfill;
- The criteria used to determine which training requests will be fulfilled;
- Whether their efforts are producing tangible results;
- The "quality of education" being offered by the department;
- What the mission of the training department is;
- Where the training department will be in five years; and
- How well the training function is being managed.

2. *Survey important managers.* Managers included in the survey should come from various departments and levels within the organization. The more important they are within the organization, the more important their responses become to questions such as:

- What do they see as the mission of the training department?
- How do they regard the training department and its staff?
- How pleased have they been with training efforts in the past?
- How do they prefer to measure training program results?
- Have results from previous programs been sustained?
- Have the training needs of the manager's department been adequately considered?
- Under what circumstances would they turn to the training department for assistance?
- Would they rather send subordinates to outside seminars than use internal resources? If so, why?
- How does the training department's contribution to the organization compare with that of other departments?
- What changes would they like to see take place in the way training programs are designed or conducted?

Frank answers to questions such as those suggested for the two patterned interviews can add tremendously to the training manager's understanding of reasons behind lack of credibility. Because of this, interviews should be conducted face-to-face rather than through the use of questionnaires. Conducting the interviews in person assures opportunity to check for understanding, clarify meaning of responses, and probe for additional details.

Line managers and training department staff members are typically more than willing to provide the type of feedback requested in the questions suggested for the patterned interviews *if* they are asked. The structured approach will yield substantial data that would otherwise not have been available. Not to be overlooked is the fact that conducting such a survey with training department staff members and line managers will, in and of itself, start the ball rolling toward an increase in credibility.

What you do with data gathered through this survey must, of course, depend upon the types of problems it reveals. But assuming that managers are willing to share their opinions, you will at least have a fresh and data-based understanding of how severe the problem really is. Armed with this information, you can begin taking the necessary steps to remedy the situation.

Involve Managers in Training

One of the more common complaints of training professionals is lack of management support for training. Lack of management support often becomes a "Catch-22" or

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"self-fulfilling prophecy" situation. Lack of credibility makes it difficult for the training department to get management involved in training; therefore, training results suffer; therefore, training department credibility suffers further.

Something must be done to interrupt this cycle and get managers more involved in the training they would like their subordinates to have. Naturally, this is easier said than done. There are three principal ways the training department can help managers become more actively involved:

1. *Train managers as instructors.* Many organizations using an in-house behavior modeling training program for supervisors called Interaction Management[2] have experienced great success in training and certifying line managers as instructors who then train their own subordinates in the supervisory skills to be taught in the program. This approach, used by organizations such as Varian Associates, Westinghouse, Hoffmann-LaRoche, J.C. Penney, and Supermarkets General, has met with great success and produced much enthusiasm on the part of managers trained in instructor skills.

Some of the benefits derived by managers who are trained as instructors include development of coaching skills, building of the same skills being learned by their subordinate supervisors, acquisition of the skills required to be an effective classroom instructor, and the desire to provide long-term encouragement and support of the skills taught in the training program. Such instructor training duties are typically restricted in terms of both the amount of time invested and the number of supervisors trained by an individual manager due to pragmatic considerations involving the manager's normal responsibilities.

2. *Train managers as coaches, reinforcers and positive models.* Robinson and Robinson report that managers who have been specifically trained to fulfill these three roles in conjunction with any training effort greatly enhance the likelihood that skills taught in the program will be transferred to the job.[3] Of particular importance is the training of managers to become positive models. When managers are using skills similar to those being taught to their subordinates in the classroom, there is a high probability that those same skills will be imitated by their subordinates.

Specific training for management support and reinforcement has long been overlooked as a vehicle for developing management support and enthusiasm for training programs and as a method of assuring more complete transfer of training to the job. Another type of training program that is designed to teach supervisors to establish goals and standards and conduct more effective performance appraisals with subordinates, has management reinforcement training built in as an integral part of the training system. In a "Reinforcement Workshop" managers are trained to be good coaches. For example, they learn how to assist

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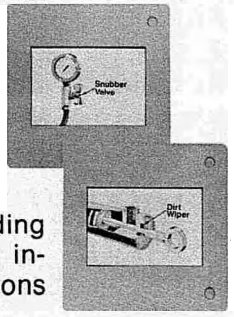

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Managers are amazingly receptive to this type of training when they realize it has been designed with their particular needs as managers in mind. They are typically impressed with a "systems approach" to training that provides for multiple exposure to concepts taught and well-thought-out means of coaching and support to augment classroom instruction.

3. *Keep management informed.* As a minimum goal for involving managers in training, the very least a training manager should strive to achieve is a detailed and complete explanation to managers about the training to be conducted, its objectives, methods, and how it will be determined if the objectives have been met. This type of management involvement requires little more than a thorough presentation of the training to be done.

Management must be prepared to accept and support each aspect of the training effort. If they cannot totally support it, renegotiation of training objectives or methods may be required. For example, if four major training objectives have been agreed upon, but management will not release trainees for periods long enough to accomplish them, something has to give. It may be necessary to alter the original objectives.

Involving managers directly in training efforts is an area in which trainers do not "bite the bullet" frequently enough and insist that management become more involved. Training that is considered important "for the people below — but not for me" is training that will never have sufficient payoff for either managers or their subordinates. There are times when the training manager may be justified in recommending that training not be conducted rather than go ahead with a program that is destined to mediocrity because of insufficient management support and involvement.

A crucial aspect of building credibility is the willingness to stand up and be counted on issues that really matter. Time after time training managers attempt to accomplish objectives that are unachievable, given the resources, training time and the support management is willing to commit.

Involve Managers in Evaluation

It is ironic that managers do not insist more often on evaluation of training. Managers have a greater stake in the outcome of training programs than does the training department. It is they who release their subordinates from normal responsibilities and temporarily entrust them to the training department. It makes sense, then, that managers should be as interested in the evaluation of training results as the training department. Unfortunately, without strong encouragement from the training manager to set up criteria for determining if training objectives have been met, the question of evaluation usually goes begging.

There is a misconception that training-program evaluation must be complicated, difficult, costly and time-consuming. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Often it is just a case of using several simple methods of evaluation which when combined produce more meaningful evaluation data than any one of them alone. The key is being as "up front" and pragmatic about training-program-results evaluation as possible. Two simple guidelines for working with management in the evaluation of training are suggested:

1. *Insist that management help you evaluate.* As a minimum you can formally interview managers to find out how they feel about the results of training that is in progress or has been completed. Again, a patterned interview is helpful: What kind of change has resulted? Were our expectations too high? What did the participants really think about the training? What is the manager going to do to ensure that subordinates keep using their new skills on the job? These are questions managers

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should be willing to answer for you.

In the August 1979 issue of the *Training and Development Journal*, Linn Coffman describes a method of involving managers in evaluation that is both easy to use and results in managers becoming better informed about how effective (or ineffective) a training program really is.[5] Oversimplified, this is accomplished by meeting with managers in small groups to identify and prioritize strengths and weaknesses of the training program. The small groups are then brought together in a larger group to integrate the data generated by the small groups.

The type of management opinion developed through these meetings depends on the quality and effectiveness of the program being evaluated. And there is an obvious risk for the training department that the program being discussed will not, on balance, be perceived positively. But the potential benefits to the training department that can result from a process such as the one described by Coffman are significant:

- Increased management awareness of the nature and importance of training being conducted;
- Better understanding by managers of the objectives to be accomplished through training;
- Opportunity to "problem solve" with management about aspects of training that are not succeeding;
- Independent measures of the impact of training as perceived by line management;
- Opportunity for managers to better communicate with each other about training issues, problems and objectives; and
- Increased exposure to line management for the training department and its staff.

When properly conducted, the fact that this type of activity has been initiated and is being coordinated by the training department has a rather immediate and positive effect on the department's credibility.

2. *Be your own worst critic.* Managers appreciate proactive, pragmatic evaluation of what has been accomplished as a result of any training program. It is the trainer's responsibility to help

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management decide "what we got for what we did."

As soon as a significant number of people have been trained and a sufficient amount of time has passed, a report (verbal or written) can be prepared by the training department for and in conjunction with management that speaks to the following questions:

- What was changed, accomplished, or saved?
- What is the value of what was changed, accomplished, or saved?
- How long will the change or improvement last?
- What is the total cost and the per participant cost of the program?
- What is the return on investment?
- What can be done to follow-up or to prevent regression?
- Would participants recommend the training to others or would they still participate knowing what they actually learned?
- Do you recommend continuing or expanding the program? If not, what alternatives should be considered?
- What other problems were discovered as a result of the training or needs analysis process and what, if anything, can be done about them?
- Were the program's original objectives and the organization's expectations realistic in light of what was actually accomplished by and what was invested in the training?

The answers to these questions may indicate the program is really a failure and should be discontinued. Or, they may tell you that you have an unqualified success on your hands and more resources should be put behind it. In either event, and even if the answers are inconclusive, you will have gained a great deal of respect in the eyes of management for thoroughly and objectively evaluating the cost/benefit relationship of your department's effort. Remember, the benefits must not necessarily be expressed in terms of dollars.

Train Yourself to Manage Training

There is little question that training technology is advancing more rapidly than ever before. Organizations are expecting more and more benefit from their training dollar. One of the challenges facing us is to ensure that management of the training and HRD function keeps pace with training technology itself. The training manager's ability to do so will directly influence his or her organizational credibility.

A "Training Professional Activities Inventory"[6] published by ASTD in May 1979, suggests that there are nine major areas of activity for training professionals:

1. Analyzing needs and evaluating results;
2. Designing and developing training programs and materials;
3. Delivering training and development programs and services;
4. Advising and counseling;
5. Managing training activities;
6. Maintaining organization relationships;
7. Conducting research to advance the training field;
8. Developing professional skills and expertise; and
9. Developing basic skills and knowledge.

Activities 1, 3, 5 and 6 are crucial in terms of maintenance or enhancement of training department credibility. Building credibility is understandably not mentioned as a major area of activity for training professionals. A case can be made, however, that it should be a tenth major area of activity to be accomplished intentionally and overtly by training professionals because it is such a common problem for training organizations.

Management skill for the trainer appears to be critical to training department credibility, yet the ASTD-funded *Study of Professional Training and Development Roles and Competencies* conducted by Pinto and Walker[7] suggests that less than seven percent of training professionals view management skill as "important for success as a training and development professional."

On the other side of the coin, when questioned about how the job of the training and development professional is changing, the largest number of professionals indicated that an "increase in time required for management duties" will be more significant than any other projected change in their jobs. This leads one rather quickly to conclude that the perceived importance of management skill by the training and development professional does not necessarily match the changing nature of the job.

Finally, when asked to indicate the most important "behavioral requirements" for success, training and development professionals responded as follows:

Response	Percentage
Credibility	40.2%
Flexibility	18.0%
Empathy	13.9%
Creativity	11.9%
Human Relations	4.9%
Other	11.1%
Total	100.0%

It is interesting to note the large margin by which credibility exceeds any of the other behavioral requirements mentioned. This is certainly indicative of the value today's trainer places upon credibility.

In the final analysis, credibility

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for the training department and its staff depends on two primary considerations. First, it requires effective management of the training function. Second, it presupposes positive relationships and interactions with line management. (Recommended readings: Geoff Bellman, "20 Thoughts on Dealing With Management," *Training and Development Journal*, April 1979, and "10 Management Musts For HRD Directors," *Training*, October 1979.)

Summary

Building credibility is best accomplished using a deliberate and organized process. The process comprises four basic steps:

1. Finding out where you are;
2. Involving managers in training;
3. Involving managers in evaluation; and
4. Training yourself to manage training.

The steps are not necessarily sequential, with the possible exception of the first, which by its nature should precede the others. They will build credibility when applied in any order. Step two is usually the most difficult, so there may be cases where it is impossible to use them all, or even to use them in the order suggested. The important thing is to begin — and to use the four fundamental steps for building credibility whenever and wherever appropriate. To be truly effective, the process must be ongoing and the four steps will probably benefit you most when they are all going on simultaneously in the organization.

Although training professionals consider credibility to be a "most important behavioral requirement," it is much like respect in that it cannot be displayed or demonstrated — it must be earned. A Scottish proverb expresses it another way: "What e'er thou art, act well thy part."

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