

# The Value of Results

## Chicago trainers volunteer to create and deliver learning in East Africa.

By Donna Steffey

ALIGNING TRAINING to desired business results is a critical issue for every learning and performance specialist. The challenge is making sure the skills with the greatest organizational impact are the ones being learned.

Imagine taking that same challenge outside of the classroom, into a real life and death situation. The “value” of results-oriented training becomes much greater. Add volunteers to the mix and conduct it in a different country where 34 million people have been infected with HIV. Now there’s a test.

The Chicago Chapter of ASTD is doing its part to address that challenge. Earlier this year, Global Alliance for Africa contacted the chapter to collaborate on the design and delivery of some business and train-the-trainer courses for their partner organizations in Africa. GAA is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the care and education of HIV/AIDS widows and orphans in East Africa. It focuses on strengthening community and family capacities to provide education and care for children who have lost one or both of their parents to the disease.

Twenty chapter members volunteered to design the training, and six delivered it in Tanzania this past June. It was an 18-day adventure, and the lessons we learned about respect, empathy, gratefulness, humility, and identifying desired results have already helped us become better trainers.

### Desired success

Designing the content for an African audience was the project’s first test, so we were careful to ask the right questions during our assessment meetings with GAA. The answers we received, however, were different than what we were used to. When we inquired about how success would be demonstrated, GAA officials said they’d like to be able to support an additional 1,000 orphans and vulnerable children in their programs. They also

hoped that the widows could feed their children more than once per day.

The strategic business initiatives included coaching the partners (selected non-government organizations) to improve their own business operations in order to expand and support the growing numbers of children affected by HIV and AIDS, and training the partners to teach their clients, widows, and teen orphans to become self-sufficient through business development.

When asked if there would be sufficient management support or follow up, GAA assured us that there would be trained people in Africa to provide ongoing guidance. The key to this training initiative was to deliver the content in a way that honored the knowledge and experience of the partners, and to facilitate networking opportunities so that they would continue to learn from each other.

Identifying new knowledge, skills, and behaviors is always a challenge. Because GAA had conducted a needs assessment in Africa, we utilized subject matter experts who had lived and worked there. We refined the materials multiple times, including piloting the program in Chicago with a group of recent African immigrants. And while we were still a little fearful of creating an “international incident” with the content, we thought we had it right before we left.

### On-the-job training

Once we met our African partners for coaching, we quickly learned a lot about life and business in Africa, and we had to redesign our material again! For example, we learned that most organizations earned money and immediately spent it to pay bills or invest in client services. So, we needed to include a piece on saving to re-invest in the business in the accounting training. The coaching section needed a piece on getting coaching for yourself and taking care of yourself because people were so giving they were

exhausted. All the program times also were cut because we realized that people wanted to spend more time networking and talking about their successes.

Consequently, we spent 10 hours each day rewriting, practicing, and giving feedback, and our team was strained. To complicate matters, we were all on malaria prevention drugs, which have mood-altering side effects.

Working with our GAA partners, we were immersed in a world we did not understand. Many clients got by on less than \$1 per day. (The World Bank refers to this as extreme poverty.) They are chronically hungry, unable to get healthcare, and often lack safe drinking water. Yet, many partners are widows themselves. They often run these programs, provide home-based AIDS care, and support their own extended family members.

As team leader, I had to trust in the goodness of my teammates and their commitment to this cause, given the drastic cultural differences. As training leaders, we don't always paint the vision of the expected performance improvement results, so our teams can't grow to meet the expectations. But this team knew the difference that their individual efforts could make, and they gave their best to make that difference.

Janet, a trainer from Washington Mutual, taught basic accounting. She decided to structure her lesson around buying produce at market—a common practice for most people. But when she mentioned a produce not grown in the area, hands went up. Participants were eager to teach us about their culture. Even though she wasn't expecting to be corrected, Janet accepted the suggestions with a smile because we were there to learn from each other. "I believe more in myself as a trainer because of the feedback I received from our team and from our African partners," she said.

"As trainers, we can easily fall into the trap of developing content that's overly sophisticated and glossy," said another team member, Alice, who taught coaching skills. "What this experience taught me is that learning is ultimately about sharing with simple dialogue or a group discussion—anything that is real."

Loukia, a consultant and business owner, came prepared to teach marketing, but learned instead about diverse business needs. Her African partner barely spoke English. But when I saw her walking hand-in-hand with him from the slum area where he sells clean water to benefit the community and support the orphanage, I knew that she had bridged the communication gap. She said that any business challenges she faces in the United States will be simple in comparison to that experience.

Jennie, a diversity consultant, had a particularly profound experience. One day, as our group went to visit businesses, local people stopped to see us. Jennie, an African-American dressed in western clothing, was obviously part of the U.S. delegation. An elderly African woman approached her and whispered, "Welcome home!" Later, our team visited the Olduvai Gorge where, according to archaeologists, the human race began on this continent. Jennie realized that at some level, we all were home. She now reflects on that experience and the African woman's words while working on her diversity workshops back home.

GAA's reaction to our work has been positive. The Chicago chapter has been invited to sit on the GAA strategic planning team for a new project plan through 2006. Future programs will be about goal setting, action steps, and strategic planning. Several of the members also plan on returning to Africa within the next year to gather higher-level ROI data.

Seeing the learning making an immediate difference was inspiring. Participants who completed marketing phrases filled out job-aid business guidelines to use in their organizations, and a number of business partners opened savings accounts. And while the alliance still needs strengthening through ongoing efforts, our experiences in Africa taught us that learning enriches everyone who is involved in it.

**Donna Steffey** is president of Vital Signs Training, a past president of the Chicago Chapter of ASTD, and a National Advisor for Chapters until 2008; [itrainum@aol.com](mailto:itrainum@aol.com).