

TRAINING 101

The Speed of Business

New economy,
new methods
for training

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Scenario 1: A two-day training session on strategic planning and problem solving brings 17 executives together. During the lunch break, eight of them ask the regional group president to be excused. "I have urgent, pressing business piling up on my desk," one of them explains. "All we accomplished this morning was introducing ourselves and making lists on flipcharts." "I really don't have time for this," echoes another.

Scenario 2: A vice president of a major defense contracting company takes a call from one of his key directors who is attending a two-day leadership training session. "How's it going?" the VP asks. He listens, hangs up the phone, then turns to you and says, "He says it's a total waste of time. All they've done in the past five hours is set the agenda and played a few touchy-feely games. But I think he'll find some value in it tomorrow when they get down to the real stuff. He really needs to improve his leadership skills."

Do those scenarios sound familiar?

“Leadership and interpersonal skills are just as important to running a business as are technical skills,” you rationalize. True, but have you considered that maybe your treasured training design models don’t meet the needs of your clients?

Following are a few pointers that we’ve compiled over the years by talking with countless managers and executives. These tips can go a long way towards building credibility for training programs.

Trash outdated design methods. All training and development professionals learn the same process to start a class: Begin with an icebreaker; spend time on introductions, climate setting, and expectations; and then go into the agenda and objectives. Translation: two to three hours of wasted, fidget time—also known as “touch-feely trainer stuff”—for busy managers and executives. The business world is moving and changing too rapidly for that model to stick.

A new model should quickly address these questions:

- Why are we here today?
- What value will you get out of this session, and how will you be able to use what you learn immediately back on the job?
- What specifically will you learn, and what will we do in this session to help you apply it later?

Do away with old tools. Why do trainers write everything on a flipchart? Typical answer: So that they can refer to it later. But it’s an annoying and slow practice, and often participants don’t care whether the information is referred to later. Trainers don’t have to spoon-feed obvious points to managers. Flipcharts have their place in the training toolbox, but if you ask your customers what they think, they’ll most likely tell you that flipcharts are overused.

Another outdated tool is the pair up with a partner exercise. Most managers don’t want to participate in one-on-one discussions of concepts and theories. But trainers who adhere to the traditional

training world view insist that experiential activities be used to introduce new ideas in order to make training active. Time invested for that exercise: one hour. Advice: bad idea.

Ditch that model, too. If an activity doesn’t add absolute value to the session, don’t do it. A training session shouldn’t consist of only a lecture. But adding an activity just for the sake of variety isn’t effective. If it’s application you’re after (and you should be), have the group work on a real case study. Participants will be willing and eager to share real-world experiences.

Know your subject. You’re not there just to facilitate. The supposed cardinal sin for training professionals is to consider themselves experts. “We’re here to facilitate learning, you’re the experts,” they tell their leadership groups at the start of a session.

As a manager and executive, I don’t want to sit back and have you facilitate. I want you to know your stuff. If you’re to lead a class on leadership, coaching, or problem solving, you had better know a lot about the topic. I want to learn something new. I want you to answer my questions and know how to handle my objections. It’s OK if you don’t have all of the answers, but you must have some of them.

Keep it moving. Employees exchange vast amounts of information and make deals at a daunting pace. Learning also happens much faster than ever before. So when an executive attends a training session, he or she expects to find value quickly. Meet participants’ expectations by keeping the class moving at a crisp pace:

- Don’t spend two hours making the same point.
- Don’t use an activity when it isn’t absolutely necessary.
- Design the session so that the participants understand your points quickly and can learn how to hone their skills in the future.
- Apply the new information to their world.

- Don’t allow discussions to drift to other topics.

Understand business. You should understand your participants’ industry. Read business magazines and the *Wall Street Journal* to become a more knowledgeable trainer: What are the common trends in business? What are companies doing that is unique, interesting, or applicable to other companies? Who are the outstanding business leaders? What are their leadership styles? Understanding the business climate of your audience strengthens your session and establishes you as a credible resource.

Assume that business is the top priority. Most managers have demanding jobs. They’re juggling a million and one priorities, and your session is merely one of the balls they’re trying to keep in the air. When managers express their frustration about having to attend training, try not to feel defensive or cynical. Make the training worth their time by relating it to real business demands. Help managers see the relationship between training and ROI rather than thinking they’re not committed to the training.

Training and development professionals can have a powerful influence on the leadership of a business. By helping build and develop leadership and management skills, we help transform the business. Formal classroom training is but one of the methods by which we do this. It’s our responsibility to make it a business experience worth the time and money it costs for highly paid professionals to be sitting in that room.

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