

TRAINING TRAINERS ON A TIGHT BUDGET

BY ROBERT L.
SCHOONMAKER

One of the ways in which I define the training person's role is as a "knowledge broker." It is a part of our business to put people in touch with information they need in order to conduct their corporate lives more effectively. Education means providing people with options.

Putting people in touch with information implies that the trainer would personally have some knowledge of that information. The growth of the whole discipline that we call training has been astronomical and keeping up with that growth a herculean task. How does a training manager assist the training staff to keep up with technology and grow, particularly during times when many training budgets are cut back very sharply?

Subscribing to the notion that roadblocks can also be opportunities, I decided to test this wisdom again. I, like many of my associates, was facing a difficult year with very limited resources: tight budgets and inadequate staff, with

heavy demands for our services.

Given limited resources, how could I develop my staff? Sending them to costly outside seminars was out of the picture. What other alternatives could I use that might accomplish the same objectives? Our training group put its collective head together and established some basic criteria which any development action would have to meet: (1) minimal cost, (2) minimal consumption of time, (3) convey a skill or concept. The following are some ideas which we have tested and which have served our purposes very well:

- *Demonstrators* — Periodically, training houses conduct half to one-day free demonstration programs focusing on their latest products. Since we are located in a major city, there are no transportation costs and minimal time required away from the job. In addition to providing us with new products, demonstrators provide exposure to new ideas, old ideas with new applications, training techniques, issues with which other companies are wrestling, and contacts in other local companies. We

always require an oral critique by the trainer upon return.

- *Salespeople* — Most trainers are bombarded with salespeople hawking their wares. I decided to devote one hour each week to talking with various salespeople about their training programs. All my trainers are invited to attend the sales meeting. One is assigned the responsibility of conducting our side of the meeting — introductions, setting time limits, directing questions, seeking additional information, providing necessary follow-up and terminating the meeting. The meeting itself keeps us abreast of new products. The assignment of responsibility adds the side benefit of on-the-job training in conducting a meeting, questioning, listening and analytical skills. Our discussions afterward include a critique of both the presentation and our own participation.

- *Mail orders* — Junk mail of enormous proportions finds its way to my "in box" every day, listing the latest fads via books, films, gadgets and training programs. It has proven worthwhile to wade through this mountain of material

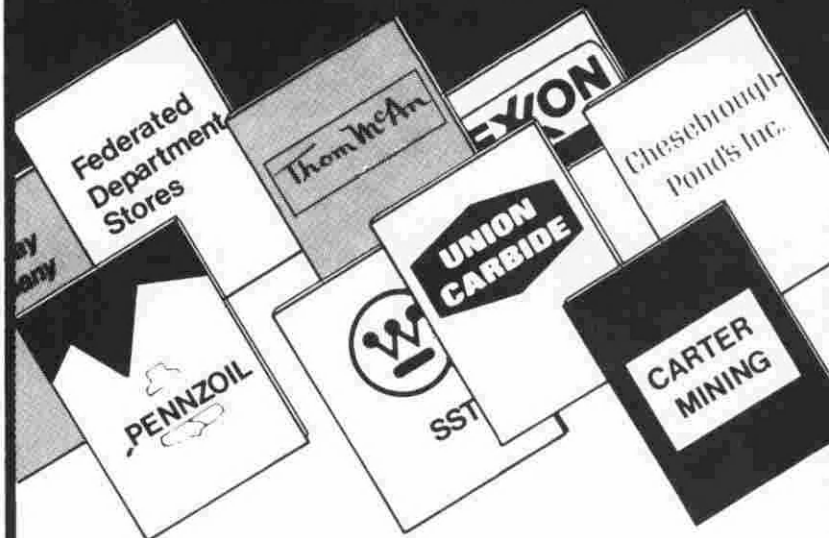
and on a selective basis order "for examination" material. Sometimes the materials are passed around and we all review, sometimes one person will critique and if worthwhile recommend to the rest of us, and sometimes the material is reviewed only by those working on a particular project and is reported to the rest. Other times our regular meetings are spent in discussing new ideas generated by such reviews. The key issue here is to select only that material that appears to have relevance to current or future projects.

• *Professional Groups* — Since we are located in a large metropolitan area, we have active chapters of a number of professional groups, e.g., American Society for Training and Development, OD Network, American Society for Personnel Administration, etc. I encourage my staff to participate in these societies because I feel the benefits are multiple in nature. Monthly meetings encourage exchange of information on new techniques and developments in our field. Additionally, the program content of the meetings is regularly informative and thought-provoking. Lastly, the meetings provide the opportunity to test and experiment with leadership skills since some of our trainers periodically hold office.

• *College and University Courses* — Our company has a liberal tuition-education plan which reimburses employees for up to six credit hours per semester for courses that are job-related or part of a job-related degree program. Since the tuition-aid program is part of our benefits program it is therefore outside of our regular budget system and is not so subject to the rise and fall of the economy. Trainers whose backgrounds are weak in business can "bone up" in this area or study in the organizational and behavioral sciences.

• *Co-Training* — Background, interest and work assignments naturally make some trainers more skilled in one area than another. We try to cotrain with each other, when time allows, to enable us to broaden our skills and knowledge. Cotraining is an excellent way to

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develop observation and feedback skills as well as improve the overall quality of our training. Also, when working alone, a trainer is often so preoccupied with content issues that he or she misses the subtle process issues which when addressed, make a more complete and professional program.

• *Mentors* — There is still much to be said for the apprenticeship programs of the past, in which a young person learned a trade by working under the tutelage of an experienced craftsperson. The key to the success of this approach is the nature of the relationship between the apprentice and the craftsperson. That concept can be expanded to encompass what can be called the "mentor relationship." The young trainer needs the nurturing and guidance of a more experienced professional who has a

personal interest in the development of that newer person. The mentor is role model, advocate, counselor, teacher and advisor. It is a task not suitable for all experienced professionals, but where such an individual exists, he or she can be a key element in the ongoing development of newer trainers.

• *Visitations* — Periodically, our trainers exchange visits with trainers in other companies (some in our business, some not). They compare notes on similar programs and gain exposure to new ones. Inevitably, these visits result in the incorporation of new techniques that enable us to do our job better. In the banking business, we tend to be very ingrown. By visiting companies engaged in a variety of businesses we are able to gain a better perspective of our own business as well as observing different applications for similar programs.

• *Special Assignments* — On-the-job training through the careful assignment of special tasks can be a reliable means of development. If projects are selected which require both new knowledge and skills and the stretching of old ones, then a new trainer can learn quickly. An example is a counseling skills program that we were asked to design for personnel representatives. The person I assigned to the project was a young trainer who had been a counselor in a drug-rehabilitation program. She knew the counseling skills, but had never taught them. The process of approaching a familiar subject from a new angle became a significant learning experience for her.

• *Show and Tell* — Our organization is large enough so that we have a group of staff trainers as well as division trainers. Staff trainers are responsible for companywide programs and division trainers conduct training that is unique to the business of their division (basically technical training).

Periodically, our trainers spend an afternoon together showing off the programs in which we are involved. It is both instructional and preventive: instructional in the sense of keeping us all abreast of our own internal training programs; preventive in the sense of eliminating the all too frequent duplication of effort that takes place even in small organizations.

Tight budgets have presented a considerable challenge to us and we feel we have been able to respond creatively. We have kept to our financial goals, our trainers have grown, and we have been able to respond to our organization's needs even better than anticipated.

A reader might legitimately raise issue with the amount of time we spend on these activities. Time is money, time is expensive, so we plan our time very carefully and we try to practice what we preach. Training is an investment, it is proactive. Wisely used, training can bring positive returns. We therefore make time for training. Training is not a luxury to be engaged in when there's nothing else to do; it is a necessary part of running a business. Training is re-investing our assets to multiply returns — and for us it works.

The manager of the group must be committed to the concept of development, must establish the structure, and monitor progress or it will not happen.

The simple message is, where there's a concern to train there is a way to train and our way, which is only one of many, has helped us through tight budget times.

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